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Fayola KJ Fraser

Trinity College, fayolafraser1@gmail.com

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JEWS AND ARABS IN ARGENTINA:
A STUDY OF THE INTEGRATION, INTERACTIONS AND
ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION OF ARGENTINA'S MIGRANT
GROUPS

Fayola Fraser

Submitted to the International Studies Program, Trinity
College

Supervised by Dr. Anne Lambright

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Abstract

This study will focus on the Jewish and Arab migrant groups in Argentina. By honing in on specifically (exclusively) Jewish and Arab barrios in Argentina, numerous questions will be raised on both populations' identity in society and relationship to each other and their relative "homelands".

Firstly, the thesis will examine the historic migration of both the Jewish and Arab populations to Argentina. Jews comprise approximately 250,000 of those Argentina's population, and boast one of the largest diasporic Jewish populations in the world. Arab Argentines are one of the biggest Arab ethnic groups in Latin America and in the world.

The thesis will have three main focuses of study- the integration of each group in the wider Argentinian population, the interactions between the two groups and the relationship between these groups (and Argentina) and their countries of historic ethnic origin. Each interaction will be studied on a scale; for example, how much more one group has integrated than the other, (and why) and which group feels more intimately connected with and responsible to either Argentina or Israel/Palestine (and the conflict).

This thesis will use many methods of research. I will use specific frameworks that deal with both identity theory and assimilation theory to assess how these two groups see themselves within a wider context and how they have meshed into Argentinian culture. Using the media, such as newspaper articles and scholarly articles discussing Argentina, I can study the contemporary tensions that exist. Additionally, different social movements will be a point of interest, as there are

groups such who pledge very strong allegiance to Jews or Arabs in Israel and Palestine, respectively. The policy of the Argentinian government is also important to this study, as the Argentine National Congress has taken very strong stances on the conflict abroad.

Chapter 1: Framing Theory and Migrant History

Migrant History

Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff introduce the theory that suggests two ways to conceptualize ethnicity- one being primordialism and the other being constructivism. Primordialism holds that because human relations are imbued with the undercurrent of ethnic identification, it must be recognized as an inescapable, unshakeable part of a human being. Alternatively, constructivism suggests that, in fact, ethnicity is not a “historical given,”¹ but rather fickle and malleable, and is used by state interest groups to promote state security using the ideology of patriotism and nationalism. Constructivism further implies that ethnic identity may be discarded when a new ethnic affiliation holds promise of a better lifestyle. Both these concepts of ethnic identity are crucial when discussing Arabs and Jews in Argentina, because primordialism explains why these migrant groups retain cultural traditions, religion, and strong ties to their respective “motherlands”, while constructivism explains why some members of these groups have chosen to fully assimilate and accept an Argentinian identity while discarding either a Jewish or Arab one. This thesis will seek to identify whether ethnic primordialism or ethnic constructivism is more relevant in Jewish migrant identity and Arab migrant identity, how these identities have assimilated into the greater Argentine identity and whether the primordial ties are so strong that they promote a true connection to their historic motherlands in Israel and the Arab world. Connection to their

¹ Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff, *Ethnic Conflict: Causes, Consequences and Responses*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 15.

historic motherlands entails not only the migrant groups' connection to these homelands, but Argentina's connection to and stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

To understand each group's identity formation, it is important to create a map of Jewish and Arab migration to Argentina. Argentina is home to the largest Jewish community in Latin America, and one of the largest in the world outside of Israel and the United States. Jews immigrated to Argentina from Eastern Europe, the Middle East and the Balkans during the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Why did they leave? Jews who left Eastern Europe felt an urge to leave Europe because of "physical harassment, social pressures and economic hardship".² Jews were seeking a homeland, and in the pamphlet "Der Judenstaat" (The Jewish State), which was published in 1896 and highly regarded as one of the cornerstone texts of early Zionism, Theodor Herzl suggested that there was a possibility of a Jewish homeland to be formed in Argentina.³ Many Jews settled in Buenos Aires, but a large number also settled in rural areas, doing agricultural work. European Jewish migration began, en masse, during the 1930's, as Jews fled Nazi persecution, and further escalated during and after World War II (see Table 1 for a brief overview). Within a short period, Jewish schools and community institutions sprung up throughout the city and what emerged, as Ranaan Rein points out, was "a rich mosaic of social cultural, political and ideological life...communists and Zionists, Orthodox and secular, those who emphasized their Jewishness and others who

² Ranaan Rein, *Argentine Jews or Jewish Argentines? Essays on Ethnicity, Identity and Diaspora* (Leiden: BRILL Publishers, 2010), 26.

³ Theodore Herzl, *Der Judenstaat* (Tredition Classics, 2012)

preferred to stress their Argentine identity.”⁴ However, there is also evidence to the Jewish community being somewhat clannish; during the period of Juan Perón’s first presidency (1946-1952), his immigration director, Juan Peralta, spoke about the Jewish community, saying that “Jews are proud; they believe themselves to be God’s chosen people and live in isolation from among those amidst whom they settled”.⁵

Table 1: The Jewish Population in Argentina, 1895–1965

<i>Year</i>	<i>Census Data</i>	<i>Rosenswaike</i>	<i>Schmelz and DellaPergola</i>
1895	6,085		
1900			14,700
1905			24,700
1910			68,100
1915			115,600
1920		120,000	126,700
1925		160,400	162,300
1930		200,200	191,400
1935		226,400	218,000
1940			254,400
1945			273,400
1947	249,326	265,000–275,000	285,800
1950			294,000
1955			305,900
1960	291,877		310,000
1965			296,600

Source: Sergio DellaPergola, “Demographic Trends of Latin American Jewry,” in *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, ed. Judith Laikin Elkin and Gilbert W. Merks (Boston, 1987), p. 92; and Ira Rosenswaike, “The Jewish Population of Argentina: Census and Estimate, 1887–1947,” *Jewish Social Studies*, XXII, No. 4 (Oct. 1960): 195–214.

Source: Ranaan Rein, “The Jewish Population in Argentina, 1895-1965,” *Argentine Jews or Jewish Argentines: Essays on Ethnicity, Identity and Diaspora*, 2010, 31.

Conversely, in discussing Arab migrants, Peralta described them as “the lesser of the two evils because they assimilate and look more like us... The Arab lives in the country as in his own land and sets aside his religion and dogma in order to

⁴ Rein, *Argentine Jews or Jewish Argentines*, 28.

⁵ Theresa Alfaro Velcamp, *Immigrants and Minorities: Historical Studies in Ethnicity Migration and Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 1997), 229.

live life as it is lived here.”⁶ This thesis will seek to discover if his comment is accurate, and how the Arabs have integrated in Argentina, especially as compared to the Jewish community. In 1860’s, there was a huge influx of migrants from the Arab world to the Americas- with Latin American countries and the United States flooded with immigrants. The reasons for this migration are many, but the biggest one was the religious and political persecution that haunted the Ottoman Empire in the 1800’s. According to Cristina Civantos, approximately 131,000 Arabs arrived in Argentina in a 25-year period, from 1887 to 1913.⁷ This thesis is based on these two migrant groups because of their sheer numbers and proximity to one another in Argentina, as well as their obvious contentious history outside Argentina.

Marta Saleh de Canuto describes Arab immigration based on different groups of Arabs. She says the Lebanese immigration started around 1871 and the huge influx of Syrians began in 1880, citing the reason as “the spirit of adventure and religion”.⁸ She suggests a couple of reasons that Arabs left their homeland- overpopulation, oppression of Arab Christians, mandatory military service for Christians and famine in 1915. Remittances from relatives already in Argentina spoke to the opportunities that existed there and encouraged more and more people to migrate.

For the purpose of this study, it is important to identify who qualifies as an Arab immigrant. Gladys Jozami describes “Arabs as a group that shares a common

⁶ Velcamp, *Immigrants and Minorities*, 229.

⁷ Christina Civantos, *Between Argentines and Arabs: Argentine Orientalism, Arab Immigrants and the Writing of Identity* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 7.

⁸ Velcamp, *Immigrants and Minorities*, 233.

language [Arabic] and other cultural traits.”⁹ Therefore, one could argue that being an Arab and a Jew are not mutually exclusive, which is valid, but for the purpose of this study, Arabs are those who immigrated from Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Turkey, and includes both Christian and Muslim Arabs.

Theories and Frameworks

After framing the self-identification of these migrant groups, the thesis will seek to theorize the levels of assimilation and reasons for disparate levels between the two communities. In order to do so, it will be useful to use Yang’s theory of assimilation put forward in “Ethnic Studies: Issues and Approaches.” Assimilation theory suggests that, after many generations, immigrant ethnic groups will inevitably assimilate into dominant culture, tangibly shown by their learning of the host language and full participation in the host traditions, at the detriment of their primordial identity. Yang’s assimilation theory proposes that there are four stages of assimilation- contact, competition, accommodation and assimilation. Although this theory will be the primary framework for my analysis, another will be equally important in examining assimilation and interaction. Zacchaeus Ogunika’s book discusses the theory put forward by Robert Park, which says that there are three stages in assimilation. The first is conflict between multiple migrant groups in a host country for resources; the second is accommodation by the host culture of migrant groups, and the final stage is assimilation, where society, driven by national sentiment, becomes homogenous in their identification. These first two theories

⁹ Velcamp, *Immigrants and Minorities*, 228.

coincide with a constructivist theory of humankind, that identity is fluid and over time can be malleable, especially to align with national sentiment.

In describing the Jewish community in Argentina, Peralta said that their assimilation was not as notable and fluid as the Arab communities... how can that be explained using theory? Van den Berghe is one of the few scholars who theorizes primordial identity, believing that ethnic groups are more closely bound and related to each other than their closest neighbors. Constructivist theory says that ethnicity is a social construct and indeed a product of human interaction, rather than a biological, genetic impenetrable tie as primordialism posits. Primordialism is what causes members of the same ethnic group to congregate together in cities and form city enclaves whether consciously or unconsciously. Primordialism, therefore, presents a barrier for cultural assimilation, because as the theory suggests, individuals from the same ethnic group come together and stay together because of their emotional ethnic bonds.

Primordialism, constructivism, and assimilation are the three most important theories in understanding Jewish and Arab communities in Argentina. These not only help achieve clarity on settlement patterns and interactions between the groups and host country, but also help understand why or why not either group has been politically active, especially in efforts to influence Argentina's policy towards their respective "mother lands." For the purpose of this study, it is important to question how strong ties of primordialism are, how inclusive the forces of assimilation are, and whether if those forces are particularly strong, they result in

an influence on Argentina's policy to respective homelands- especially Israel and Palestine.

Chapter 2: Arab and Jewish Assimilation in Argentina

Assimilation Theory and Immigration & Nationalism in Argentina

There are many theories that attempt to decipher the idea of assimilation, but the one most pertinent to this study is Robert Park's theory of the four-stage race-relations cycle. The first stage is contact- where different groups, through migration, come into contact. Post-contact, the relationship gives way to competition, which happens between different groups for resources. At that point, there comes temporary accommodation, where conflict subsides and two groups, one dominant and one secondary emerge. The final stage is assimilation, where the smaller ethnic group is eventually absorbed by the larger one. An opposing theory to assimilation is the "melting pot theory" proposed by Israel Zangwill which puts forward that both host and immigrant groups blend and morph into a new culture, representing an equal relationship between the two groups. In discussing Arab and Jewish communities in Argentina, Park's theory seems most relevant, as although there have been barriers in the immigrant groups' integration into Argentina, they have mostly assimilated, but maintained certain elements of their own.

Aline Helg theorized the relationship between immigrant groups and Argentina and says that because of the surge of Argentinian nationalism in the 1900's, there has been a devaluing of the immigrant versus the native. How did Argentina devalue the immigrant? Helg says the two major ways were through development of a nationalist education, to condition an Argentine mentality, and

through xenophobic behavior, to encourage immigrants to suppress their heritage.¹⁰

Other devices used to encourage national adherence were works of art and literature, which Helg said were mediated by clerical and Catholic writers who defined that Argentine values as “Catholicism, Latinity, paternalism, family and order. These values clearly excluded Jews and prima facie non-Christian Arabs.”¹¹

In the 1800’s, Article 25 of the Constitution of Argentina stated that “The Federal Government will promote European immigration”¹² which was a clear indication of the intents of the immigration project in Argentina. In 1824, the province of Buenos Aires created an immigration commission, to encourage the intake of Northern Europeans. The reasoning behind this move to encourage immigration was that an improvement in the racial stock of the country was equated with progress. This meant that by the late 1800’s, when the government realized that the people immigrating to Argentina were not of the ethnic stock it desired, the government and many Argentines became disenchanted. This disenchantment manifested itself in an aversion towards immigrants, which was exemplified in the creation of organizations like the Liga Patriótica Argentina and in laws like the Ley de Residencia.

The Liga Patriótica Argentina was a military group created in Buenos Aires that attacked working class immigrant neighborhoods, such as the Jewish neighborhood Once, in Buenos Aires. The Liga was not a random group among Argentines; it was supported by the church, and its members were trained by the

¹⁰ Velcamp, *Immigrants and Minorities*, 231.

¹¹ Velcamp, *Immigrants and Minorities*, 231.

¹² Velcamp, *Immigrants and Minorities*, 232.

Argentine Armed Forces, a clear showing of support for xenophobic and prejudiced behavior from the top of society. The Residence Act, sanctioned by the Argentine Congress (1902) allowed the government to deport immigrants without trial. This law was used to control and threaten immigrant groups, especially from unionizing and demanding more benefits in the workplace.

It is crucial to understand the nature of Argentina before and during the time period of mass immigration, because the nature of the government and other institutions and the attitude of the people show why immigrants found it hard to keep strong identities upon arrival in Argentina. Because of Article 25 of the constitution and the military groups, and laws created during this period, the hostile environment is clearly visible and, along with other reasons that shall be mentioned, shows why Arab and Jewish assimilation was not smooth.

Arab Assimilation in Argentina

Based on economic, political and social factors, the Arab community has not had the easiest assimilation process into Argentine culture. Using Park's theory, after the initial contact, there was a serious competition phase, especially in the economic sector. Levantine (Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian) immigrants achieved high economic success after immigration, due largely to their opening of small businesses in urban areas. This success caused the competition phase in the race relations cycle, because the Argentine elite saw this creation of a merchant middle class as a direct threat to their position in society. According to Theresa Velcamp, this competition was expressed in discrimination against those of Arab descent and

excluding Arabs from benefits such as worker benefits and provisions that were accorded to the more desirable (white European immigrants) in society. This “elite disillusionment with the immigration of undesirables”¹³ led to a difficult assimilation process.

The xenophobia of Argentina during this period of mass immigration was eventually institutionalized, as in 1928, the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Relations sought to control and end Arab entry into the country, and Argentine health inspectors began denying Arab immigrants’ entry under the claim that they were infected with an Egyptian disease, trachoma. Trachoma is an infectious disease that can ultimately lead to blindness. During the same time period, countries like Uruguay were allowing entry to the same Arab immigrants, which suggests that trachoma could not have been a real concern. Furthermore, in the same year, foreign ministers spoke to the Argentine consulate in Beirut, issuing new policies on granting visas, to restrict immigration that was deemed dissolute or useless (a very vague policy) thus making it much harder for Arab nationals to attain visas to travel to Argentina.

Once settled in Argentina, Arab immigrants were not allowed equal protection under the law, as evidenced by a series of murders of Arabs, which were never thoroughly investigated, especially since the Arabs felt they could not accuse Argentine nationals because their “turco identity would result-if it had not already done so-in discrimination against them, whether by the police or judiciary.”¹⁴

According to Christina Civantos, Arab immigrants throughout a four year period

¹³ Velcamp, *Immigrants and Minorities*, 232.

¹⁴ Civantos, *Between Argentines and Arabs*, 11.

(1910-1914) were hacked to death and buried in a forest. The penance for such murders was met usually with a couple weeks at the penitentiary, and then being set free. Although there has been a clear progression through the stages of race relations, certain instances, such as the bombing of a the Shi'ite Islamic Mosque in Buenos Aires in 2001 suggests that there are still glimpses of the competition phase with regards to the Arab community.

The atmosphere of Argentina during the period of mass immigration (early 20th century) was described as xenophobic, and such xenophobia pushed Arabs into the fourth phase of Park's cycle- assimilation. However, the dominant Argentine pressure was not the only force; as Christine Civantos says, "the outside pressure and inner drive to assimilate has been very strong."¹⁵ What did assimilation mean for the Arab Argentine community? First, it meant the construction of a particularly Argentine understanding of Arab identity, which in some cases is based on self-orientalization. On the other hand, it could mean outright rejection of certain aspects of Arab culture. As will be discussed below, many converted to Catholicism, as the Catholic religion was, and still is, one of the most important parts of the European-driven Argentine culture, and the aversion to Islam was a key component of anti-Arab sentiment. Some Arab Argentines also changed their names into more normative, mainstream European names, as more European meant more Argentine.

There is popular Argentine literature that deals with this understanding of Arab identity among Arab Argentines. If we choose to study Arabic literature to measure integration, it is important to assess both first and second generation Arab

¹⁵ Civantos, *Between Argentines and Arabs*, 15.

Argentine novels and novels in both Spanish and Arabic. According to Christine Civantos, the Spanish novels do not refer to Arab issues nor outline the struggles of Arab life, but depict manners of assimilation. However, in Arabic novels there is little reference to Argentina, and they wrote “as if they had never left home.”¹⁶ Jorge Asis is an Argentine Arab writer, the son of Syrian immigrants who wrote commentary in the 1970’s about Arab reception in Argentine society. One of Asis’s works, “La Manifestación” is about the experience of a young Arab Argentine, Rodolfo. Rodolfo, whose father’s name is Abdel, does not speak Arabic, eat Middle Eastern food or participate in any traditional Arab cultural activity. Civantos describes it as a partly autobiographical novel, as Rodolfo’s character is a reflection of Asis himself and the way he and his family ended up blending into Argentine culture. Asis’s character shows that by second or third generation immigrants, assimilation has become the natural state and the Arab heritage is almost something foreign and “exotic”. This process, where one’s heritage becomes exotic, is a process described as “self-orientalization” (which will be discussed further) where children and grandchildren of immigrants reconstruct their heritage.

Self-orientalization is very important in understanding the construction and reconstruction of immigrant identity in Argentina. After the Second World War, a phenomenon emerged in Japan, a phenomenon described by Chikako Nihei in which the Japanese began to Orientalize themselves.¹⁷ This theory is divergent from classic orientalism, as in classic orientalism, it would be the dominant communities in

¹⁶ Civantos, *Between Argentines and Arabs*, 19.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Marino and Tanfer Emin, *The West in Asia and Asia in the West: Essays on Transnational Interactions* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2015), 166.

Argentina classifying the Arabs and Jews as the exotic other, but with self-orientalization, these second and third generation communities used their identity to make themselves unique. Marie-Paule Ha goes a step further in discussing self-orientalization by saying that this process involved an internalization of the dominant culture's perception of the immigrant community, and following this internalization, the immigrant community reproduces these perceptions in their own reproduction of their culture.¹⁸ It is important to note that self-orientalization is not necessarily a negative phenomenon, but it just can be rather inauthentic. To the Arabs of the Middle East, this reconstruction of Arab identity in Argentina cannot be equated to a genuine Arab identity because there have been so many outside forces that have reshaped the Argentine Arab identity, for example, manners of dress. In Argentina, because the country prides itself on having a strong European connection, it is valued among women to dress in very Europeanized styles. However, in the Arab world, modesty is valued among women more than European elegance, and therein is a split among the New World Arabs and the Middle Eastern Arabs.

Arab Integration into Argentina and Sustaining of Culture

An important way to study the Arab community's integration is through language and religion. Islam is one of Latin America's largest Muslim minorities. The King Fahd Islamic Cultural Center is a mosque and gathering center for Muslims located in Buenos Aires and the largest mosque in Latin America. During President

¹⁸ Marie Paule Ha, *Figuring the East: Segalen, Malraux, Duras and Barthes* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), xi.

Carlos Menem's reign (1989-1999), he granted land to the Muslim community to build the mosque, and the center also houses a primary and secondary school with a dormitory. This cultural center boasts a substantial presence of Muslims in Argentina. Since the 1960's, Islamic organizations, such as the Arab Argentinian Islamic Association, have been established by Argentinian Muslims. Outside of Buenos Aires, these cultural centers and organizations are not heavily religious as they lack trained imams to lead religious instruction. Additionally, there is a dearth of religious materials translated to Spanish for Argentinian Arab Muslims, so this also affects the spread and sustenance of Islam. Thus, because of the lack of formal religious organization outside of the capital, and the inability to read and understand Arabic, being swept in the assimilation process becomes that much more likely. The power of the assimilation process, and the dominance of the Christian religion, according to Ingvar Svanburg, means "Muslims in Argentina suffer the humiliation of having to have Christian names...in addition, Islamic marriages are not recognized by the government and as a result, Muslims are forced to marry in Catholic churches or in civil ceremonies."¹⁹ This example shows why the melting pot theory, although very ideal is not a reality, because although the religions coexist, these laws are put in place to assert a national Christian identity at the expense of Islam, because at a certain point it becomes not only inconvenient, but almost impossible to be Muslim.

What about their language? According to Pedro Brieger "By the time of the second generation of Muslims in the country, over 60% no longer spoke Arabic

¹⁹ David Westerlund and Ingvar Svanberg, *Islam Outside the Arab World* (Oxon: Routledge, 1999), 458.

fluently, and by the third generation, only about a tenth of the population could speak it at all.”²⁰ This is partly because of a simple lack of available material in Arabic for them to read and write and learn from. In Pedro Brieger’s commentary on Arabs and Muslims in Argentina, he indicated that Argentina offered a lot of social mobility and economic progress, but not for the Arabic-speaking Muslim, which is why the Arab cultural identity was generally confined to the home.

However, there were ways that Arabs managed to maintain certain culture and traditions. To sustain Arabic culture, El Centro Islámico de la República Argentina (CIRA) was created as a central place for Muslims to gather for social and cultural activity such as Arabic language classes and courses on the Islamic faith, among others. One of the leaders of this center, Imam Omar Abboud expressed views which run counter to Park’s theory on race relations, as he says most attendees have a fundamentally Islamic identity with sprinklings of Argentine characteristics. This means that those who attend the center follow Islam and can likely recite prayers and communicate in Arabic, but maintain Argentinian Spanish outside of settings which are solely Muslim/Arab. It must be noted that this phenomenon is, however, very contemporary. The first two generations of immigrants, notes Pedro Brieger, “were more interested in assimilation and integration than in maintaining the elements of the faith that would distinguish them from the rest of the population.”²¹ In the words of Imam Mahmoud Hussein,

²⁰ Pedro Brieger and Enrique Herszkowich , “Muslims in Argentina” *Isim Newsletter* (2000): 2, accessed April 17th 2015, https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/17433/ISIM_6_Muslims_in_Argentina.pdf?sequence=1

²¹ Brieger, *Muslims in Argentina*, 4.

this third generation who was “profoundly Argentine” made a conscious decision to return to things Arabic and Islamic, a clear example of self-orientalization and reconstructing of an exotic heritage past.

Another way that Arabs preserved their identity in Argentine culture was the spread of Mahjar literature. Mahjar literature was established in the late 19th, early 20th century by Arab writers who emigrated to North and South America. It was described by Vilayat Jafarov and Saadat Ibrahimova as a coping mechanism for Arabs in the New World. According to Jafarov and Ibrahimova, these works “glorified the homesickness, the freedom of human, his inner world,” with the main objective to preserve the Arabic language and literature in Argentina and the rest of the Americas. Different literary societies were formed, such as “The Literature Society” (Ar-Rabitat ul-Adabiya) in Buenos Aires and the literature exemplifies the struggle between the new and old spirit. Additionally, immigrant writers hoped to preserve their language, customs, and national ideology and be aware of the political and cultural processes occurring in their homelands.²²

It is impossible to discuss Arabs in Argentina without mention of the first Argentinian president of Arab origin, Carlos Menem. A great deal changed in terms of Arab and Muslim culture during the presidency of Carlos Saul Menem. Menem’s parents were of Syrian origin and his presidency was a hallmark as he was the first president of Arab origin in Argentina. Although Menem was a Catholic (as is required for the Argentinian presidency), he proclaimed in public forums that he

²² Saadat Ibrahimova and Vilayat Jafarov, “Literary Societies that Played an Important Role in the Development of Arabic Mahjar Literature,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Vol 3*. (2013): 4, accessed April 26th, 2015, http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_3_No_14_Special_Issue_July_2013/24.pdf

was still truly a Muslim, and was also married to a Muslim; therefore, his sympathies and loyalties remained with the Muslim community. According to Pedro Brieger, Menem's ties with the Syro-Lebanese community were so strong that Muammar Gaddafi (president of Syria at the time) contributed four million dollars to Menem's campaign. Menem went as far as to claim that he was a descendent of Mohammed. One can imagine that Menem, with his pro-Arab sentiment, was not popular amongst all sectors in Argentina; in fact, there were even street demonstrations with those who opposed the government chanting, "Bring the Muslim gorilla so he can see that this city is not changing its ideas, but still fighting with the flags of Evita and Perón."²³ This resistance signified that Menem's presidency was almost harmful to Muslims, rather than being a strong assimilating force.

Jewish Assimilation in Argentina

Why have Argentinian Jews suffered? According to an American scholar in a Jewish publication in the 1970's, "Argentine Jews have found adjustment to their new land a difficult, often traumatic experience."²⁴ The Jewish experience was somewhat similar to that of Arabs, yet also different, as many Jews came from Eastern Europe, and from cultures not as far removed from Argentinian culture as Arab culture. Jews were pushed into the public education system, which was the institutional presence that created and maintained national cultural homogeneity in Argentina. For the Argentine government, one way to maintain this cultural identity

²³ Brieger, *Muslims in Argentina*, 5.

²⁴ Robert Murciano and Robert Weisbrot, *The Jews of Argentina: from the Inquisition to Peron* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 5.

was banning Yiddish in public in 1939. The government banned the publication of Yiddish newspapers in 1943. Hebrew, however, is the language of the Jewish leadership used in Jewish community centers and religious institutions. The government further banned Jewish publications and meetings (during Perón's presidency, 1946—1952), and meetings organized by Zionists were eventually cancelled by the government. The Federal Police had a special section with fluent Yiddish speakers so that if these meetings did in fact persist, the authorities were informed what was said during public assemblies.

Assimilation of Jewish peoples has been studied thoroughly in the context of Argentina, as there has been a marked difference in the topic of assimilation between first and second generations Jews in Argentina. The first wave of Jewish immigrants, unlike the first wave of Arab immigrants who were eager to fit in to accept their opportunity for social mobility, saw it important to cling to Jewish traditions. Arab Argentines were easily drawn to intermarriages, but the first generation of Jewish migrants saw it as a threat to the continuation of the Jewish peoples. In terms of religion, more so than Islam, Judaism has survived the assimilation of Argentine culture as there are more than 55 synagogues in Argentina, with Jewish organizations, sports clubs, restaurants and theaters. Jewish culture has avoided complete assimilation and has maintained its cultural values more so than Arab culture for a variety of reasons. A testament to the ability of the Jewish culture to survive assimilation has been the distinctly Jewish contributions to Argentine culture. For example, Jewish literature and art has been proliferated through Argentine popular culture. For example, Hector Babenco, whose both

parents were Jewish, was an Argentine film director, who produced films in Brazil and Argentina, based on society's outsiders, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica. Juan Gelman, a very important Jewish Argentine translator and writer, wrote many poems about the Jewish-Argentine experience, especially under the military junta in the 1970's.

Another famous Argentine Jewish artist is Marcelo Birmajer, an author, who is very important in Argentinian Jewry and through his works shows that some Argentine Jews have not truly resisted assimilation. Birmajer describes struggles and traumas experienced by Jewish immigrants to Latin America in a number of his books, such as *No tan distinto*. *No tan distinto* tells a story of a "well integrated Jew...who feels Argentinian above all."²⁵ The book follows him as he looks for books in Spanish in an Israeli bookstore, he feels homesick for Argentina in Israel, and after eating baklava in Israel, according to Marcelo "le gustaban más las baklavas de la confitería turca an Tucumán y Paso, en Buenos Aires."²⁶ These examples show that, in this particular case, the protagonist felt more Argentinian than Jewish. However, this particular "argentinidad" that Saul (the protagonist) feels, is only upon departure from Argentina and arrival in Israel. This connects with the theory of "self-orientalization" that was put forth in the previous section on the Arabs, because although Saul is a Jew, he feels completely out of place in Israel as his reconstruction of Jewishness is not the same as in the historic homeland.

²⁵ Debra Cordeiro, *Trauma, Memory and Identity in Five Jewish Novels from the Southern Cone* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012), 145.

²⁶ Cordeiro, *Trauma, Memory and Identity in Five Jewish Novels from the Southern Cone*, 161.

Saul says that although he feels very uncomfortable in Israel, he is not completely comfortable in Argentina, as “Jews are a minority ... they are never recognized...the only country where Jews can live confident that the state will do everything possible to guarantee that they won’t die for being Jewish is Israel.”²⁷ Therefore, it is easy to understand that the reception of Jews in society has not always been simple and smooth, and as in Park’s race relation cycle, although there has been accommodation of Jewish culture, there have still been instances of Argentines establishing dominance.

In July 1994, one of such instances was the bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA). Following this incident, non-Jewish groups began to call for Jewish schools and businesses to be separated and moved to a specific area of Buenos Aires so they would not be a threat to the rest of the city. This attempt to “ghettoize” the Jewish community, as had happened in Europe during the Second World War, was a prime example of the anti-Semitism in Argentinian society. Years after the bombing happened, there were no convictions or conclusive evidence to place responsibility, and Raul Kollman, an Argentinian journalist even stated, “The real problem is that the Argentine government was never interested in solving the case.”²⁸ More recent developments have pointed to the possibility that the Argentine government was not interested in the case because there is a possibility that government representatives could have been involved. A prosecutor, Alberto Nisman filed charges against the Argentine president, Cristina Kirchner (in 2014)

²⁷ Cordeiro, *Trauma, Memory and Identity in Five Jewish Novels from the Southern Cone*, 163.

²⁸ Kristin Ruggiero, *The Jewish Diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean: Fragments of Memory* (Great Britain: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 96.

claiming that she was involved in an international conspiracy in the bombing of AMIA buildings. Just hours before Nisman was set to testify against Kirchner, he was found dead in his home in Buenos Aires, allegedly as a result of suicide.

Another theorist on ethnic nationalism, Ludwig Lewisohn, described the Jewish situation in Argentina in completely opposite terms from Park, as he says that Jews globally, and more specifically in Argentina, go through a process of “de-assimilation” rather than assimilation, as they seek to truly retain their identity and create a Judeo-Argentine identity. Why do Jews in Argentina do this? Primarily, he says, because they are excluded from the mainstream Argentinean society, and then because of this exclusion, they choose their Judeo-Argentine identity. To fully discuss this exclusion, the rampant anti-Semitism is of crucial importance. In a poll conducted in 2011 by the University of Buenos Aires, it was shown that a grand majority agreed with anti-Semitic statements such as “Jews are preoccupied with making money” or “Jews killed Jesus” or “they talk too much about what happened to them in the Holocaust.”²⁹ According to the survey, anti-Semitic attitudes are deeply ingrained in Argentina which has contributed to persecution of Jewish people.

During the dictatorship in the 1970’s, Jews were targeted as they were considered funders of the anti-government terror movements. Jacobo Timerman was an outspoken opponent of the military regime, publishing his opinion and those of opposition in his newspaper, *La Opinión*. Timerman was a Jewish Argentine

²⁹ Gil Shefler, “Study Reveals anti-Semitic Sentiment in Argentine Society” *The Jerusalem Post*, October 9th, 2011, accessed April 20th, 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-Features/Study-reveals-anti-Semitic-sentiment-in-Argentine-society>

journalist who was imprisoned and tortured by the Argentine government because, in his opinion, he was Jewish and they believed he was part of the communist conspiracy for the international Zionist movement. This sort of reaction by both the general population and by the Argentine government, for many Jews means that they either try to maintain their faith and practices under pressure, marry and convert to Catholicism or just cut ties with religion altogether.

Religion also plays an important part in the assimilation debate. In 1943, the military government in Buenos Aires published a decree instating Catholic education in all state schools, intimately linking Catholicism with Argentine statehood. The non-Catholic communities, especially Jews and Protestants, felt marginalized, and although the decree was such that, if a student's parents expressly identified strongly with another religion the student could be exempt from religious classes, the Jewish communities did not capitalize on that loophole. Parents were seeking to avoid conflict with schools in the hopes that their children could have easier assimilation processes and not be isolated. During President Juan Perón's rule (1946-1952), he sought to continue Catholic education in schools, saying that "it is impossible to speak of an Argentine home that is not a Christian home...Everything distinctive in our habits is Christian and Catholic."³⁰ Declarations like these essentially shut the Jewish communities out of mainstream education.

How do Jews in Argentina try to maintain their practices? The Latin American Rabbinical Seminary in Argentina is attempting to stop the decline of Jewish tradition and thought in the region. They were founded in 1962 and operate

³⁰ Rein, *Argentine Jews or Jewish Argentines*, 96.

under the Conservative Judaism Movement. The group has used language as a tool, by translating Jewish literature (including the Torah) into Spanish in order to reach out to Spanish-speaking Jews and keep them attached to Jewish culture. They use language by training different Jewish institutes in Latin America to prepare scribes to write religious documents in Spanish, documents such as Torah scrolls and parchments. Furthermore, the seminary boasts an enormous library, which has the most complete collection of Jewish studies materials in Latin America, with 50,000 volumes in English, Hebrew, French, Spanish and Yiddish. The seminary also hosts discussions and encourages young people to attend to form a better grasp on their dual Jewish and Argentine identity. The group also tries to encourage young students to join the rabbinical tradition as because of assimilation, there have been fewer and fewer rabbis for the same number of synagogues in Argentina.

According to Rein, "Jews have integrated very well into Argentine society, economy and culture, often without rejecting the Jewish component of their individual or collective identity."³¹ He argues this based on films made about Argentine Jews who capitalized on aliyah (return to Israel), but then decided to return to Argentina, because the Argentinian element in their identity pulled them back to the country. To better understand the numbers that do make aliyah, Rein presents the figures that 11,200 Argentines relocated to Israel between 2000 and 2006; out of that number, only 20 percent returned to Argentina. There have been quite a number of films made about the Jewish identity formation in Argentina. One called "Un Abrazo Partido" (A Lost Embrace) follows a Jewish family in Buenos

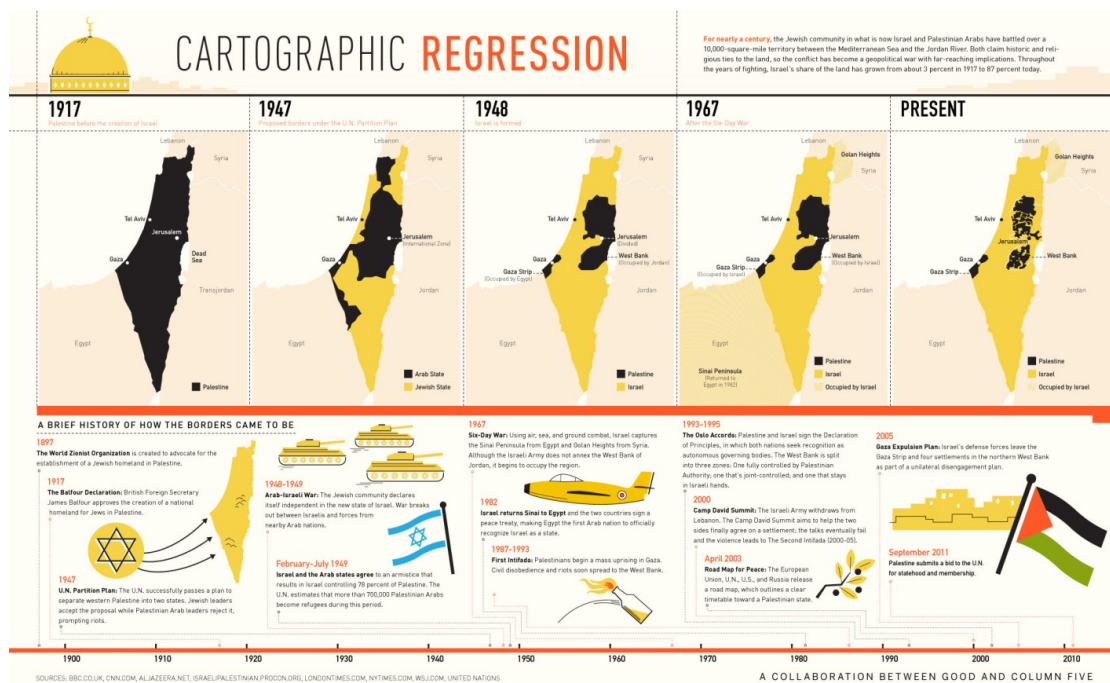
³¹ Rein, *Argentine Jews or Jewish Argentines*, 23.

Aires, whose father leaves Argentina for Israel in the 1970's. The movie depicts the way the community was formed in middle class working neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, with Jews, Italians, Asians and all ethnic groups cohabitating. In the film, Argentina is shown as a very tolerant "melting pot", with all the different cultures coming together to form a collective Argentinian identity. This overarching culture that Argentina was seeking to create through forced assimilation was almost threatening to the Jews, as coming from persecution in Europe, being pushed to relinquish their cultural connections seemed almost reminiscent of the conditions they were forced to endure.

Chapter 3: Arab and Jewish Communities' Interaction in Argentina

Background on Arab-Jew Relations

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 was a landmark event in Jewish-Arab relations all over the world, as it called the establishment of a national home for the Jews in Palestine. There was a strong outcry from the Arab community of Palestine, as although they sympathized with the persecution that the Jews had to suffer, they did not see the takeover of their land as the solution. In the 1940's, following the British withdrawal from Palestine, the Jewish Council proclaimed the State of Israel and the Arab-Jewish wars began. These wars led to both Palestinian (and Arab League) and Israelis to seek support from diasporic communities abroad. The importance of these events halfway across the world, trickled down to Argentina, and caused tension between the two communities



Source: Von Paarka, "History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict" *Information Visualized*, 2012.
<https://informationvisualized.wordpress.com/2012/11/21/history-of-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict/>

Settlement Patterns in Argentina

In studying the interactions between the two communities, it is firstly important to understand where they settled in proximity to one another to see if this played a part in their relationships. The Jews settled initially in places where agriculture was flourishing, in the cities of Buenos Aires, Entre Rios, and Santa Fe. Pre-World War II, there was an influx of Jews fleeing Nazi persecution, and by 1939, in Buenos Aires, a large number of the owners and laborers in manufacturing plants were Jewish refugees. Because of this influx, there was a boom of Jewish cultural and religious organizations. Within Buenos Aires, approximately 62 percent³² of the Jews lived near Plaza Lavalle, and a smaller percentage lived west of that area. There was huge pull factor of an established Jewish community there for newly arrived Jews, as immediately upon arrival to Argentina they proceeded to LaValle. This is a phenomenon described by historian Eugene Sofer as "ghettoization,"³³ where immigrants form communities with fellow immigrants from their homelands so they can feel comfortable perpetuating their language, culture and religion. The rising costs of the city center caused a relocation of Jews to "Once" which is where there are a huge number of community organizations, sports clubs, Yiddish newspapers and temples.

³² Ranaan Rein, *Futbol, Jews and the Making of Argentina* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015), 28.

³³ Rein, *Futbol, Jews and the Making of Argentina*, 27.

The Arab settlement, on the other hand, was more dispersed than the urban, coastal Jewish settlers, and includes settlement in Buenos Aires, Cordoba, and the Cuyo region. The reason for a higher level of dispersion of the Arabs was that they adapted most to the climates of the remote provinces so many Arab merchants settled in the North Western provinces of Argentina. The focus of this chapter will be on the urban communities of the Arabs and Jews and the fruits of their interactions.

There is an important distinction that is relevant to the relationships between the Arab and Jewish communities. Arab Jews, such as Jews from Syria and Lebanon, were part of the immigration to Argentina, and they played in part as a link between both communities. In fact, according to Ignacio Klich, "Arabic-speaking Jews felt themselves to have a lot in common with those sharing the same place of birth and culture, not less than what bound them to the Yiddish-speakers praying to the same deity."³⁴ This brings into play the concept of primordialism versus constructivism once again. The Syrian or Lebanese Jewish community contained people torn between their historic, primordial identity, and an identity that was created by the community and culture by which they were surrounded for the majority of their lives. For the purpose of this study, we will consider the Syro-Lebanese, other Arab populations, and the Jews to understand Jewish and Arab interaction.

³⁴ Ignacio Klich and Jeffrey Lesser, *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America: Images and Realities* (Oxon, Routledge, 1998), 20.

Relations between Arabs & Jews in early 1900's

Pre-1948, Argentinian Arabs and Jews had very cordial and collaborative relationships. Indicative of these relationships is the example of the Banco Sirio-Libanes del Rio de la Plata established in Argentina, which was considered one of the world's first Arab banks. Many Jews were the bank's founding members or directors, even taking up leadership as vice-president.³⁵ Many Jews were also among the bank's clientele (up until the first Arab-Israeli war). In 1929, the Syro-Lebanese Chamber of Commerce was established, and like the Bank, included prominent Jews among its shareholders, clients and managers. It is important to note that these positions were not an anomaly, as Klich suggests, "the Jews in positions of authority among Buenos Aires-based Syro Lebanese bodies" were "far from unique."³⁶

However, even before these business relationships were formed, Arabs and Jews had a connection based in their immigrant status. During the mass immigration period of the 1930's, Arabs and Jewish were equally and similarly undesirable in the eyes of the Argentine elites. The government had sponsored European immigration to Argentina in the late 19th century to improve the so-called ethnic stock of the country, so the influx of these Jews and Arabs seemed counterintuitive in the opinion of the elites. Faustino Sarmiento theorized that distinct races had developed at different rates, the whites being the fastest developing race. He hoped that Anglo-

³⁵ Klich, *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America*, 8.

³⁶ Klich, *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America*, 6.

Saxon immigration and education of Anglo-Saxons would transform Argentina.³⁷

The Argentinian white elites also saw the Jews as not valuably contributing economically, as most of them participated in peddling and storekeeping, which was not considered an economic asset. Therefore, they were lumped into one group as, according to Klich, “Jews like the Syrians, confine themselves almost exclusively to the trade in silk and other textiles.”³⁸

In Yang’s theory of ethnic relations, he projects that one of the phases of immigrant migration and assimilation includes the stage of competition. However, during this mass immigration period, this phase was not problematic between the two communities. Argentina boasts great territorial vastness, and as noted before, the Jews and Arabs settled in different areas, because the Arabs were more able to acclimatize in harsher climates. This meant that these ugly issues of competition were easily avoidable. A question that could be raised is whether the events of the events of the Arab-Israeli conflict drove a wedge between the two groups. At this particular point, the majority of immigrants were Syrian or Lebanese, who were somewhat less integrated into the conflict as Palestinians, and the Jewish community was notably not politically Zionist.

In 1947, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported deterioration between Jewish and Arab relationships in Argentina on account of the Palestine situation. There was a deterioration of relations between the groups, somewhat spurred by an overseas encouragement, but the relationships did not disappear. There were no

³⁷ Richard Graham, *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 40.

³⁸ Klich, *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America*, 15.

steps taken in this particularly hostile environment both during and after 1947 to create an organization that supported and symbolized Arab-Jewish friendship. However, in 1956, because of the conflict in the Middle East rising about the Suez Canal, there began to be some unrest between the communities in Argentina. According to the Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas, in October 1956, there were openly anti-Jewish street demonstrations in Buenos Aires, which included offensive graffiti painting of walls of Jewish organizations, hostile, tense statements released in the Arab newspapers, and a general sentiment of hostility.³⁹ There were organizations, such as the Argentine-Arab Committee for Aid to the Arab peoples, which strongly opposed the establishment of Israel. Other bodies, which supported Egypt's stake in the Suez Canal, were also established because of the general anti-Semitic fervor that existed within Argentina.

Relations between Arabs and Jews from 1990-present

There have been various cases of specific anti-Semitism in Argentina, many of which have ended up straining the relations between the Arab and Jewish communities, not because these cases are tied back to Arabs, but because if society puts down one immigrant group, the other is given room to flourish. In 1994, the Asociación Mutua Israelita Argentina (AMIA) was bombed, and the investigations continued for over a decade following. The bombing resulted in 86 deaths and was considered a direct assault on a Jewish diasporic community, and an obvious marker in the Jewish-Arab relationships. The main suspect for the bombing was the

³⁹ Delegacion de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas, *Anti-Jewish Activities of the Arabs in Argentina*, (Argentina: La Delegacion, 1958), 10.

Iranian government, because Argentina refused to assist in their nuclear weapons programs. This created a lot of anti-Arab sentiment among the Jewish population, as the association with Iran was an immediate association with the Arab community within the country.

Upon migration to Argentina, both groups had to suffer the transitional phases in the same way, and were discriminated against by the Argentine elite, forming solidarity and camaraderie between the two groups. However, upon the heightened conflict between the groups in the Middle East with the formation of the State of Israel, the relationships morphed from peaceful and collaborative into suspicious and tense, fomented by outside forces, which will be further discussed in the chapter on their relationship with their homelands. The relationship was not bettered by the bombing of the AMIA headquarters a few decades later, as the reasoning for the bombing was pinned on anti-Semitism by Arab communities.

Contemporary reality of Arab Jewish relationships still can change in a moment. Especially with changing nature of Israeli-Palestine relations, the relations are very fickle as there was a surge of anti-semitism in Argentina in 2009 following the Israeli military operation in Gaza in December of 2008. According to CNN in 2009, at a rally in Buenos Aires, marking the 61st anniversary of the creation of Israel, five people were arrested by the Argentine police for waving anti-Semitic signs, and then proceeding to attack Jews with clubs and knives. In the center of Buenos Aires, next to Estroil Youth Hostel, highly popular among Israelis travelling through Argentina, there is a mass of graffiti targeting Israel and Jews. These graffiti sprayed signs near the hostel had messages like “the third bomb is coming”- a

reference to the AMIA bombing and the bombing of the Israeli embassy in the 1990's.⁴⁰ Those responsible for the attacks were allegedly members of the "Quebracho" group, that has been known for its cooperation with the Argentine-Arab community.

⁴⁰ Javier Doberti , "Anti-Semitic Violence Stirs Concern in Argentina" *CNN*, May 18th, 2009.

Chapter 4: Argentina's Migrant Communities and their Relations to Homelands

Argentina's relationship with Historic Homelands of Immigrant Groups

The term "equidistance" refers to the distance of maritime boundaries in international law. More specifically to the case of Argentina, says Ranaan Rein, equidistance "described an approach to policy in the Middle East that placed Argentina at a middle point between Arab and Israeli interests."⁴¹ During the Cold War period, Argentine policy makers believed in the equal value of both Jewish and Argentine Arabs, and enforced a policy of not favoring one group over the other.⁴² This policy, discussed by David Sheinin, was a diplomatic strategy to maintain equidistance from their countries of origin and become part of Argentina. The goal of this chapter is to assess whether this policy of impartiality by the Argentine government was maintained, and whether either community influenced the policy based on each group's association with its motherland.

Historically, Israel has held close ties with Argentina. During the Peron government, two ministers--the first speaker of the Israeli Knesset and the Israeli foreign minister--, visited Argentina, with the goal of opening the United Jewish appeal.⁴³ During the visit of the foreign minister in the 1950's, there was the inauguration of the Israeli Cultural Institute. The overall sentiment of the people

⁴¹ Adriana Brodsky and Ranaan Rein, *The New Jewish Argentina: Facets of Jewish Experiences in the Southern Cone* (Leiden: BRILL, 2014), 116.

⁴² David Sheinin, *Argentina and the United States: An Alliance Contained* (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2006), 26.

⁴³ The United Jewish appeal was a Jewish umbrella organization established to collect funds to support Jews in Europe and Palestine

towards the Perón government was that there were many marks of friendship between Israel and Argentina, as both states sought “friends and sympathizers in the international sphere.”⁴⁴ In 1953, according to Eliezer Ben Rafael & Yosef Gorni, Perón speculated that there existed a “triangular” harmony, shared between the Argentine government and its Jewish Argentines, with Argentine Jews and Israel and ultimately between the two state governments.⁴⁵ Although Perón created good relations with the Israeli government, the Argentinian Jews themselves were extremely anti-Perón.

Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann was kidnapped by the Argentinian government in 1960 on behalf of the Israelis, causing international upheaval, and a stir among Argentinian Jews. Many news publications put the blame for the kidnapping on the Jewish community. People considered the Jews were so disconnected from Argentina, that they had no reason to feel pained for the country being politically shamed in the international arena for a violation of international human rights law. This secretive abduction and operation orchestrated by Israel was a violation of Argentina’s national sovereignty. These newspapers asserted “their divided loyalties prompted them to support Israel at moments of crisis instead of remaining faithful to the Argentinean Republic.”⁴⁶ The Jewish newspaper, Ha’aretz commented on this occurrence, saying that this was on one hand a demonstration of friendship and on another, a violation of state sovereignty. This suggests the struggle between primordialism and constructivism. The way that the

⁴⁴ Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Yaacov Ro’I and Yosef Gorni. *Contemporary Jewries, Convergence and Divergence* (Leiden: BRILL, 2003), 308.

⁴⁵ Ben-Rafael, Ro’I and Gorni, *Contemporary Jewries*, 308.

⁴⁶ Ben-Rafael, Ro’I and Gorni, *Contemporary Jewries*, 28.

wider society perceived the Jewish community supports the claim of theorist Van Den Berghe, who believes that ethnic groups are more intimately intertwined than even their closest neighbors. Because the Argentinian community was so sure that the Jewish community was behind it, believing that their primordial ties to Israel made them less interested in Argentina's international political well-being, accounted for their so-called divided loyalties.

Diasporic Communities

The relationship between Israel and Argentina has been discussed, but to hone in further, the question that arises is, what is the relationship of Israel to the diasporic community? Israeli policy makers are somewhat insensitive to the needs and desires of the diasporic community in Latin America. As stated previously, the Israeli government sees its priorities in maintaining good relations with the government more so than the community of Jews. This was shown when during the Argentinian dictatorship (1976-1983), the Israeli government limited the help given to Jewish Argentine victims of the government with the motive of staying in good standing with the ruling junta. During this period, the Jewish community suffered significantly, as they were 1 percent of the population, but 10 percent of the disappeared peoples.⁴⁷ There is a strain of thought in the Zionist community often referred to as "negation of the diaspora." This idea carries that assimilation of Jewish diasporic communities into others is dangerous and that the only integration that should happen is for Jews to return to Israel, or wholeheartedly support the

⁴⁷Rein, *Argentine Jews or Jewish Argentines*, 36.

Israeli state. This means that those who believe in this train of thought are less inclined to seek to support for Jews outside the motherland, including those in Argentina.

Israel and the Jewish Community in Argentina

This rise of anti-Semitism was very prominent among the wider Jewish community which divided not only the Jews from other migrant minority groups, but pitted them against the government and rest of the population, further ostracizing their formation of an Argentine identity. The height of anti-Semitism in Argentina followed the kidnapping of Eichmann (1960), broadcast all over the world, encouraging a general sentiment of anti-Semitism, and Argentina's nationalist groups capitalized on this opportune period to attack Jews. This was expressed for example, when students confronted one another at the faculty of medicine at the University of Buenos Aires with shouts of "We want Eichmann back," or "Death to Jews" or "Jews go to Israel." In Sarmiento High School in Buenos Aires, Jewish pupils were attacked, one being shot. Jews were accused of having loyalty outside of Argentina, namely, loyalty to Israel, and all Jews were targeted in this wave of anti-Semitism for it.

There was an attempt to diplomatically resolve the concerns of Jewish persecution in Argentina. In 1963, an Israeli diplomat was invited to discuss matters concerning relations between Israel and Argentina with Antonio Kristoffersen (an Argentine foreign official). Kristofferson reported that there was an underground movement that trained young Jews in Buenos Aires in military tactics in preparation for emigration to Israel; basically he brought forward the concern that there was an

Israeli underground in Argentina. In these camps, they would only be allowed to speak Hebrew instead of Spanish, and they were trained in self defense, intelligence and arm usage.

However, as time has progressed, there has been a significant disconnect between Israelis and the Jewish community in Argentina. As Ranaan Rein comments, "Israel and the diaspora have different priorities."⁴⁸ During the great Argentine economic crisis in the late 20th and early 21st century, Israel's efforts in helping the Argentine Jewish community were very few and limited. Because of this, Jewish Argentines often do not feel a very strong, close committed tie to their motherland, an opposition to their primordial ethnic identity. The Israelis attempted to "help" (in some opinions, abuse the distress of) the Jewish community by encouraging aliya (Jewish repatriation to Israel).

Ranaan Rein studies this phenomenon of a torn identity in terms of Jews in Latin America, with his primary question being where Israel constitutes an important element in the identity of Latin American Jews, and if they identify Israel as their historic homeland. He says that for most Jews, their agenda was to become Argentine while remaining Jewish, as part of being Argentine was having a "Madre Patria" (motherland) like the Italian and Spanish immigrants to Argentina. Sociologist, Arnd Schneider claims that having roots (or citizenship) somewhere outside of Argentina was a popular element in middle class Argentinian culture.

Ultimately, it is clear through these different situations in Jewish Argentine history that the relationship between Israel and the Argentine state government has

⁴⁸ Rein, *Argentine Jews or Jewish Argentines*, 306.

not been reflective of the relationship between Israel and the Jewish community within the Argentinian state. Although for the most part of the mid-late 20th century, the Argentine and Israeli government were on very good terms, with high levels of international cooperation, the Jewish community's relationship with Israel, although very strong at first, began to weaken, especially with the economic crisis of the 20th century.

Argentina and the Arab World

How did the Arabs fare? According the Klich, "after the Second World War, both Argentina and the Arab world were in need of friends in order to gain international legitimacy."⁴⁹ One of the biggest concerns of Argentine foreign relations has always been to stay in good standing with the superpowers of the world, thus the relationship to the Arab world has been forever in limbo. Upon arrival in Argentina, the Arab population was treated like "second-class residents whose lives and deaths were really matters of indifference to the police and judiciary,"⁵⁰ and this treatment soured the relationship. Many Latin American countries in fact banned Arabs entering their countries, but Argentina never took such a step in fear of souring relations to a point of no return.

⁴⁹ Ignacio Klich, "Towards an Arab-Latin American Bloc? The Genesis of Argentine-Middle East Relations" *Middle Eastern Studies Vol 3*. (1995): 550.

⁵⁰ Civantos, *Between Argentines and Arabs*, 11.

Syro-Lebanese Community and Politics

Klich suggests that the political concerns of the Syro-Lebanese elite were two fold, “first to consolidate their position as an immigrant group in Argentina; second to react to developments in the Middle East, especially in their countries of birth.”⁵¹ Thus, one of the big priorities of the community that achieved both of those aims of fitting in, but still having a connection to their homelands, was achieving political influence. The established group of Syro-Lebanese immigrants say this also as a way to “neutralize the anti-Arab atmosphere”⁵² that came as a result of xenophobia in Argentina. How did they get involved? Many supported policy makers, made contributions to politicians’ electoral campaigns and wooed journalists and media. Did this involvement help their countries of origin? In 1941, France was stalling to respect Syrian and Lebanese independence, and stalling in withdrawing from the countries. This led to military conflict between the French and Syrian/ Lebanese government. The Syro-Lebanese in Argentina called for recognition of Syrian and Lebanese independence and organized a Central Aid Committee for Syria and Lebanon. The *Diario Sirio Libanés* reported that the French government’s mistreatment of Syria and Lebanon was “met with intense patriotic fervor among all Syrians and Lebanese in Argentina.”⁵³

Fast forwarding to contemporary culture and crises, there is heavy support for Arab nations, from Syrian communities in Argentina. According to the *Diario Sirio Libanés*, there was a collective ceremony in front of the Syrian Embassy of

⁵¹ Klich, *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America*, 8.

⁵² Klich, *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America*, 8.

⁵³ Klich, *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America*, 9.

Buenos Aires in March 2015, with members of the local government in attendance. The ceremony included the singing of the Syrian and Argentinian anthems to express solidarity. Essentially, it is a movement, spurred by the Syrian community in Argentina, annually since the beginning of the conflicts of 2011, to call for the upholding of national sovereignty in the country, and for a return to peace.



Source: "Marcha por Siria en Buenos Aires" *AnnurTv*, 2015
<http://annurtv.com/sitio/marcha-por-siria-en-buenos-aires-2>

It is therefore clear that the Syrian (Arab) community in Argentina has an ample effect on the government and its foreign policy to the Middle East as there were members of the government present and speaking out against foreign intervention in Syria. Moreover, the Argentine government's support for Syria is apparent in its creation of a "Syria Program" in 2014 which allowed Syrian refugees fleeing armed conflict to seek refuge in Argentina through a humanitarian visa.

In terms of the very prominent Israeli-Palestinian conflict, communities in Argentina have taken particularly strong stances. In 2014, the Chamber of Deputies

was where a campaign called “Palestine endures, Argentina rises” was launched, with the aim of collecting aid for the communities affected by the Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip of the summer of 2014. The event consisted of a screening of a movie, and commentary by the President of the Chamber, the Ambassador to Palestine and the President of the Palestinian Friendship Group. They called not only for the support of the Palestinians, but also the condemning of the actions perpetrated by the State of Israel. The Argentinian President, Cristina Fernández has continuously expressed solidarity with Palestine, describing Argentina’s solidarity with Gaza as “immense”, and urging for peace in the region.

Argentina and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

In 1947, the United Nations formed a Special Committee to prepare a report on recommendations for Palestine. Dr. José Arce led the Argentine delegation to the UN, and Argentina stood against the partition of Palestine, in favor of the Arabs. According to the Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas, this led to “a great wave of friendship towards the Argentine government on the part of the Arab communities in the country”⁵⁴ and an instant bond with Palestine. During the 1940’s and 50’s, the Middle East was plagued by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and in this period, the Central Arab Committee for Help to Palestine was formed in Argentina. This group, according to the D.A.I.A, did not limit its help to only giving aid, but played an active role politically. In November 1947, this group spoke at a public meeting in San Martin Square, which was attended by government officials, one

⁵⁴ Delegacion de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas, *Anti-Jewish Activities of the Arabs in Argentina*, (Argentina: La Delegacion, 1958), 16.

being Mr. Ibrahim Hallar, who spoke about the horror caused by the Balfour Declaration⁵⁵ and the way Palestine suffered, calling the State of Israel “artificial,” offering obvious sympathy.

The Arab League came into contact with Argentina in 1954, when the Argentine Ambassador in Cairo invited the Secretary-General of the Arab League to visit Argentina. Although this visit never managed to happen, it was still a showing of friendship between the league and Argentine State. Issa Nakhle, who came to Argentina from the Egyptian Embassy, published a magazine in the 1950’s called *America y Oriente* which had wide circulation in Argentina. The magazine put forward the ideas that there should be a connection between Arab countries and Latin America because of “common longings of liberation from the imperialist yoke and the flowering of nationalist movements for freedom and progress.”⁵⁶

Even in contemporary society, the Argentine Committee of Solidarity with the Palestinian People is still pressing the government for support of Palestine. In 2012, President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner announced at the presidential palace in Buenos Aires (according to news source Haaretz) that Argentina intends to spearhead the increased involvement of Latin American countries in peace in the Middle East. She met with an Israeli-Palestinian delegation of the Peace NGO Forum (who also met with Jewish and Arab community leaders in Argentina) who asked Kirchner to assist in renewing international talks to achieve a two-state solution. In July 2014, the committee convened to repudiate the “inhuman aggression by Israel

⁵⁵ The Balfour Declaration was a letter written by the United Kingdom’s Foreign Secretary, calling for an establishment of a national Jewish home in Palestine.

⁵⁶ Delegacion de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas, *Anti-Jewish Activities of the Arabs in Argentina*, (Argentina: La Delegacion, 1958), 14.

against the population of the Gaza Strip” and asked the Argentinian government to condemn the attacks.

Argentina’s Lower House of Congress held a Day for Peace for Palestine in 2014, inaugurated by the President of Chamber of Deputies, who spoke to “the commitment of this Parliament to convene peace in relation to the attacks against the people of Gaza and the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian State.”⁵⁷ Lower House Representative, Leandro Grosso reiterated President Fernandez’ comments in her speeches at the United Nations and diplomats’ comments at the Organization of American States, that the Argentine state encourages peace in Palestine.

⁵⁷ Leonel Poblette, “Palestine Endures, Argentina Rises” *Telesur* (2014), accessed November 29th, 2014. <http://www.telesur.tv/english/news/Palestine-Endures-Argentina-Rises-20141003-0037.html>

CONCLUSION

The main elements of this study were to examine Jewish and Arab migrant identity, figure out whether those identities align with theories of constructivism and primordialism, to compare both groups' processes of assimilation, and to seek to understand the nature of their connection to their historic homelands. Jewish and Arab migrants had many similar issues that did not allow the easy formation of identity in Argentina- such as discrimination, because they were not the idealized Northern European immigrants that the country desired. However, their responses and the ways they have formed migrant identity have emerged differently.

Jewish immigrants clung to their traditions, and have not acculturated as smoothly as the Arabs, which is evidenced in their clinging to religion, and their creation of very specifically Jewish neighborhoods, such as Once. On the other hand, there are not named Arab enclaves, as their settlement was more widespread, because they were more able to handle extreme climates in agricultural settings. As has been evidenced in this study, another cause of Jewish inability to really integrate in Argentine society is the rampant anti-Semitism that has plagued Argentine Jews in instances such as the AMIA bombing and the 2009 anti-Semitic attacks. Arabs have also been the victims of xenophobia and discrimination, but as shown, the cases of violent attacks against Arabs have not been as numerous or significant as those against Jews, thus allowing them to assimilate more easily into Argentina. There is evidence that Arab Argentines, especially first and second generation, tried to assimilate by abandoning their language and cultural traditions (as is shown in

Jorge Asis's *La Manifestación*), while the third generation has become more concerned with self-orientalization. Islam has also not flourished in Argentina the way Judaism has, as there is a lack of religious materials translated to Spanish from Arabic and few trained imams. Based on these factors, it is possible to say that Jewish identity in Argentina can be considered as more primordial as they were able to retain a large amount of their original identity, while Arabs who have not (especially through intermarriage) are more on the side of constructivism, as they have truly become very much Argentinian.

Their relationships to their historic homelands also differ as well. Most people of Jewish descent in Argentina are descended from Eastern European Jews rather than Israelis. However, because of the creation of the State of Israel as a homeland for the Jews, and the concept of *aaliya* (return), Israel is now more relevant in terms of discussing homelands. In the novel of Birnajer about the Argentine Jew who "returned" to Israel, he did not feel any strong connection with the culture. Arabs in Argentina are mainly from Syria and Lebanon, with a minority from Palestine, Egypt and Morocco. Arab Argentines are more active in politics, especially in their consistent agitations for helping Syrians, which can be accounted for because their ancestors came from that country. In terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the many pro-Palestine Arab groups in Argentina, such as Committee of Solidarity with Palestinian people clearly have a more potent effect on the government, as the government's policy since 1947 has continuously supported Palestine.

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