Bye Bye Brazil! Syrian and Lebanese immigrants and the expulsion of foreigners in the beginning of 20th century

Julio Bittencourt Francisco
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul
(UFRGS) in Porto Alegre, Brazil

Abstract

This paper shows, through the presentation and analysis of the expulsion processes of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants from Brazil, the private lives of some members of the this community in the country in the early decades of the twentieth century. It can be seen how family intrigues, conflicts, and divisions within the group contributed to the expulsion decrees. It also showcases evolution of laws, decrees and bills the Executive power maneuver in order to detour from social problems and get rid of undesirable aliens in emerging cities of the country.

Key words: Immigration, Syrian and Lebanese, Brazil, expulsion
1. Introduction

Between 1884 and 1939 entered nearly 4,160,000 immigrants in Brazil, of which over 60% were Italian and Portuguese. The immigration of Syrians and Lebanese contributed with about 100,000 people, and gained momentum in the decade preceding the First World War (1914-1918), when it was recorded the entry of 45,803 individuals. Over the decades 1914-1923 and 1924-1933, the numbers of entrances were more modest, recorded respectively 20,400 and 24,491 immigrants. According to the 1920 national census, of the 50,337 Syrians and Lebanese living in Brazil that year, about 19,000 were established in São Paulo, 9,300 in Distrito Federal/ State of Rio de Janeiro and 8,700 in Minas Gerais State.

2. Syrian and Lebanese immigration to Brazil

The Syrians and Lebanese who arrived in Brazil were, in its great majority, Christians, especially young and single, semi-literate, men from small villages. There they practiced a subsistence rural economy, based on small family farms where very little money were involved in commercial transactions. Unlike other ethnic groups that came to Brazil, which were subsidized by the authorities, this migratory flow has borne all the expenses of the trip from their villages to the Mediterranean ports of Alexandria, Genoa or Marseilles, where they embarked to South America. About 90% of Syrians and Lebanese who entered the country landed at Santos and Rio de Janeiro’s ports. Despite the previous experience in small proprieties agricultural practices in the land of origin, haberdashery door-to-door sales were the dominant initial activity of these immigrants, for the same pattern is observed throughout Latin America. Although usually set in urban environment, Syrians and Lebanese immigrants found a significant market potential in the vast rural interior of Brazil, much more populated than the urban area of the country in the beginning of the 20th century. They distributed several products – but mainly thread for sewing, needles, thimbles, eyelets, lace, fabric and buttons – transported in boxes (that could be tied over the back like a backpack) by train to small towns, and then on the backs of mules or even walking to the distant farms. According Oswaldo Truzzi, hawkers "were well received by the settlers, who preferred to negotiate with them" because "the terms of payment were more tolerant, and purchases off the shop of the farm decreased the dependence of the colonists towards farmers" (Truzzi, 1999:321)

The existence of a network of relationships between Arab immigrants, linking Brazilian backlands to their homeland in the Middle East, built such a net of information where a cousin or a neighbor could have known the possibility of working in the land of emigration. This scheme guarantees a constant replenishment of manpower, ensuring work to newcomers. The goods were made available on consignment to the new coming peddlers from the already established business owners, giving the conditions for the new immigrant initiate his own business, or opening his first "little shop", usually in the business of trimmings, fabrics and haberdashery. Business growth attracted relatives and other newcomers, feeding the migratory flow from small Christian villages of Syria and Lebanon to the land of promise.
This type of primitive accumulation was a result of "self-effort of the individual peddler, working hard and spending the minimum to survive, was a quite sure way to the possibility of making a certain capital" (Truzzi, 1999:322). The creators of the "popular trading" in Brazil, Syrians and Lebanese departed from retail to wholesale trade and later to the industry, especially textiles (Truzzi, 2005).

3. The immigration policy of the Brazilian government and the expulsion of foreigners

With the worsening of the crisis of the slavery system, based on black worker, the immigration issue was gaining the limelight in Brazil during the second half of the nineteenth century. Seen as a solution to the problem of the coffee crop, expanded at the time by the lack the labor force, the hands of immigrant workers also feed the incipient process of industrialization and urbanization undergoing in the country.

Although the arrival of Europeans to work in agriculture was stimulated since the beginning of the Brazilian Empire (1822-1889) especially to occupied lands in Southern Brazil or in coffee farms in São Paulo, with the Proclamation of the Republic in 1889, immigration began to receive more public founding. In 1890, it was authorized free entry into Brazil of all fit for work, exception made explicitly for blacks and gypsies. Although it was attenuated by the Constitution text of 1891, which declared the legal equality of all citizens, such discrimination was, in practical terms, emphasized by the acceptance of racist ideas of biological inequality, based on the called "miscegenation issue." It was believed that European immigration would solve the "problem" of the ethnic composition of the country, ensuring the "whitening" of the population (Lamas, 2004).

The political project of the young Brazilian Republic looked both ways: “formal democratic elements”, aimed at bringing the country closer to Western liberal values, and "arbitrary instruments", such as the restriction to social rights. Everything that was not matched with "the policy made from the top" was interpreted as encouragement to (...) riot and should be dislodged from the panorama of modernization. “This concept of modernity included some and excluded others” (Ribeiro, 2010:142). The truth is that the republican social arrangement, repressive and exclusionary, foresaw no room for unemployed and habitual troublemakers. “The treatment given to foreigners involved in strikes or those who were engaged in suspicious activities such as pimping was the summary expulsion from the country” (Francisco, 2007:52). But what was the legal basis for this drastic decision?

To answer this question we must return to the 1891’s Constitution, which in its Article 72, guarantees "to Brazilians and foreigners living in the country the inviolability of their freedom rights, personal security and guaranty of property ownership." Paragraph 20 of this article called for the abolition of judicial banishment, both for domestic and foreign residents. However, because the Constitution text was not clear who was, or what does it means resident alien, and also what would it be to reside in the country, the imprecision opened space for the police to define them. This freedom
of action represented an extra legal instrument of action from the Executive power to control the society, especially against the challengers of the status quo (anarchists, communists, and strikers in general), but also beggars, vagabonds, pimps, gamblers and thieves. Thus, throughout the First Republic (1889-1930) that heterogeneous contingent of "undesirables" would be banned illegally from Brazil, without often have had the chance, or the right, of going to court (Bonfa, 2008).

In 1902, Congress began to discuss a bill to regulate and discipline the expulsion of foreigners. The debate lasted until the release of the Decree No. 1.641, of January 7th, 1907, based in a project of Adolfo Gordo, a São Paulo’s congressman. The bill set conditions for expulsion of Brazil when the foreign alien threat national security or public order (art. 1), had been convicted or prosecuted by courts outside Brazil for crimes or offenses of common nature, or have had at least two convictions by Brazilian courts for any crime of common nature, practice vagrancy, begging and pimping. (art.2).

The issue of residency, of crucial importance, was treated in art.3, which determined to be free of expelling the foreigner resident in Brazil for two consecutive years, or less time if married or widowed of Brazilian with Brazilian child. From then on, a legal concept residency started to exist meaning that it should be respected by judges, by the police and also by the Executive power (Bonfa, 2008). Decree no. 1.641 from 1907, justified the spelling of foreigners. In that year alone, 132 foreigners (mainly Portuguese Spanish and Italian union leaders) have been spelled from the country. However, as Bonfa emphasizes, the Executive has lost its autonomy to arbitrate freely about who would be expelled from Brazil, opening some legal loopholes that could be triggered.

New wave of expulsions of foreigners took place in the 1910s, backed by Decree n.º 2.741, of January 8th, 1913. This decree removed the limit on time of residence in the country and prohibited court appeals to the sentence of expulsion. Still, some judges and ministers began to grant habeas corpus, thus the 1913 law emptied the legal concept of residence, which thereby became conceived broadly, to reach all foreigners wishing to remain in the country on a non-transitory way.

The end of the 1910s, in particular the years 1917 and 1919, was marked by a progression of workers’ strikes in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, putting on the agenda the discussion of bills that could speed the rite of banishment for those involved in disturbing the order. In the office of President Epitácio Pessoa (1919-1922) more than 150 workers were driven out of the country, especially because since 1917 authorities had already accumulated experience in forwarding summary proceedings (Foster Dulles, 1977). It was during this period that became effective Decree n.º 4.247, of January 6th, 1921. It was a more accurate bill from the 1907 one. This new law was focused once again on the issue of residency, determining that only foreigners residing for more than five consecutive years in the country would be safe from eviction. Thus, the judiciary could only grant habeas corpus to those who could prove their stay beyond
this period of time, which further reduced the legal guarantees to that portion of the population (Bonfa, 2008).

However, Decree n.º 4.247 have not solved the fundamental problem of the Executive, since it protected immigrants who had long settled in the country (as those arrived in Brazil young or as child who have become anarchist militants in the labor movement), preventing then to be legally banned. There was always the possibility, guaranteed by the 1891 Constitution, of a further appeal to the Judiciary. Moved by these and other issues, the government began working on the reform of the constitutional text (Bonfa, 2008), adopted in 1926\(^4\). Regarding the banning of foreigners, Article 72 was amended, turning to be expressed on paragraph 33 that disciplined the matter: “it is allowed to expel dangerous foreigners to the public order or the ones harming the interests of the Republic” (Ribeiro, 2010:147), covering thus all foreigners, residents or not.

4. The cases of expulsion of Syrian and Lebanese

Research conducted at the Ministry of Justice and Internal Affairs documentation file, deposited at the National Archives of Rio de Janeiro (ANRJ), found only six cases involving expulsion of Syrian and Lebanese alongside hundreds of Italians, Portuguese and Spaniards. The selection criterion was searching individual files by last names. They were analyzed one by one, about two thousand records and selected those that had Arabic surname more clearly. In case of doubt, the process was consulted and doubt resolved. It is possible, though unlikely, that one or other name has escaped this selection.

Following a chronological order, the first identified case scenario happened in the city of Rio de Janeiro in the early twentieth century involved the Syrian Gamar Badi, born in Damascus in 1893\(^5\). In testimony at the 2nd Precinct Auxiliary in August 3rd, 1914, his wife, Emilia Gamar - "Turkish 16 years old," whose residence at 57, Mem de Sá Boulevard, married in his homeland had seven months - accused him of refusing "to accept honest work" and make her "a prostitute". According to the complainant, the accused often forced her to sleep on the street, demanding that she hand over the money earned in prostitution under the threat of a knife. Emilia's testimony was reinforced by the whores Maria Pimentel and Rita Dolores, who said Badi pimp his own wife, and that the poor girl have no jewels or "good toilets", and she was obliged to give him all the money earned in the prostitution. Claiming to be a tailor, the accused did not deny the charges, except in regard to assaulting his partner. On September 8th, 1914, Badi served his sentence of expulsion, departing to Buenos Aires on board the Spanish steamer "Leon XIII”.

The following case relates to the complaint filed in the 2nd Precinct Police of São Paulo by "a group of Syrians," in October 1919, against the Lebanese journalist Nagib Constantine Haddad\(^6\). Living in Brazil since 1913 and based in São Paulo, Haddad was the editor of Al Raed newspaper (The Reporter), published in Arabic language. He positioned himself in favor of a Westernized Syria under French
protectorate. He frontally opposed to the idea of a broad Arabia, encompassing all Arab countries in the Middle East, under the leadership of Saudi Sheikh Faisal, position supported by many immigrants who saw in it the only possibility of unity of the Arab people. Twenty signatures from members of the community and five testimonies of prostitutes were attached to his expulsion process, denouncing the accused of sexual exploitation. Taken to prison on charges of being an anarchist and practice of pimping, Haddad’s expulsion decree was issued on March 3rd, 1920. He was saved by a writ of habeas corpus, filed the next day by his lawyer, Avelino Andrade, to the Federal Supreme Court. In his argument, Andrade claimed that the investigation was criminally engendered by the intervention of 20 "Syrians" enemies of the patient, for reasons that the Syrian community in Brazil is politically divided since the conflagration of the European conflict.

According to the defense, "Haddad being favorable to the Westernization of the Lebanese and Syrian mountains, aroused the hatred of a group of Syrians, led by Sued and Hassib Gebara", "supporters of the complete independence of all people of Arab origin (Christians and Muslims) under the command of the King of Hejaz, the direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad." The Gebara brothers asked Haddad expulsion, in a "flawed legal rite" because the defendant "wasn’t [even] subpoena, having its rights of defense hamstrung by criminal police action in São Paulo” Referring to the Gebara’s newspaper A Rua (The Street), Avelino drops more arguments in his reasoning, hinting that the Gebaras’ tried to attract the Brazilian President himself, Epitácio Pessoa, to his cause. He said the brothers, "through their sales representative in New York City, decided to honor the President during his passage through the city", offering tours and banquets. Their aim was to show "gratitude to the country that hosted the Syrians so well". The defense also lodged a report, translated into Portuguese under the title "The big party", reporting that opponents of Haddad, "all driven by the Gebaras’ money", had celebrated in anticipation the journalist expulsion,” proving bad faith and malice in the depositions made against the patient." Avelino warns: “Pessoa must be alerted to the fact that his name is serving to coercion and abuse of power.”

Haddad's attorney attached, along with the defense instrument 130 plus signatures from Syrian and Lebanese marketers from Rio and Sao Paulo in support of the journalist, and a statement of the French consul on behalf of his client. The Supreme Court decision was handed down on June 14th, 1920, giving Haddad guarantee of freedom and revoking his expulsion from Brazil.
In September 1927 the 4th Precinct Auxiliary in Rio de Janeiro, filed suit against the Syrian Jacob Safady, accused of "not engage in lawful profession and of be harmful to the interests of the Republic". Safady, of 33 years old, born in Damascus and since 1914 in Brazil, already had criminal records in his two arrests: the first in July 1922, for vagrancy, and the second in August 1925, per game. In 1927, he was arrested again, this time accused of exploiting the prostitute Beka Hemelnian. His accusers, two police investigators, were, according to Safady’s attorney, his "free enemies" and they didn't even know him. Defending himself from the charges, the Syrian stated that in the first arrest "nothing has been proved against him, and the second time was arrested for being in the vicinity where the forbidden game was being practiced, therefore having nothing do with that offense." The two police officers as witnesses in the investigation of deportation proceedings attended the inquest that followed his second imprisonment.

The defense states that the accused is "honest businessman" and that he only goes to Beka’s brothel, located on 23, Pinto de Azevedo Street, to sell clothes to the prostitutes, and that specific whore "is a complete deaf and elder lady with scarce resource (...), so that she makes her purchases from the accused on layaways. Still declares he is greatly aided by his brother, Joseph Elías Safady, dealer well established at 141, Tomé de Souza Avenue 2nd floor, downtown Rio. On October 31st, 1927, the police chief ordered the investigation of the statements of the defense, in order to ascertain whether that whore had more than 40 years and the situation of his brother. The detectives responded by letter enclosed, that the prostitute was actually deaf and had over 40 years of age. As to the defendant’s brother, letter of November 5th confirms that José Elías indeed is the brother of the accused and that he is an established trader. However, it is said to have broken off relations with Jacob since nearly three years "because of his irregular way of life.”

The investigation ends with the testimony of these two police, who claim to have known Jacob for a long time, and that he is vacated and harmful to the interests of the Republic. By order of the Minister of Justice, Augusto Viana do Castelo, of November 11th, 1927, reads as follows:

> Whereas, according to the lush evidences gathered in the process (...) the Syrian Jacob Safady does not exercise any lawful profession and has constituted in harmful element to the interests of the Republic, resolves, in accordance with Article 72 paragraph 33 of the Federal Constitution, expel the said foreign from the national territory.
After his conviction, Safady left the jail and boarded the steam "Desirade", bound for Beirut on November 28th, 1927.

An unusual case is of the Syrian João José Bacos, happened in 1927 in São João do Meriti, a small town in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. Arrested as a stray, Bacos, 37 years old, was taken to the police station, reported to the authorities that he was a Chaldean priest and who was the victim of denunciation "of a group of Syrians," as being a fake priest, explorer of public credulity. In confidential document from the Department of Police of Rio de Janeiro, dated September 21st, 1927, the Criminal Justice Attorney Heraclitus Sobral Pinto, filed a complaint to the Minister of Justice Viana do Castelo aiming to expel Bacos from Brazil:

"Profiteer of the public credulity, [Bacos] asked alms for "orphans" in Mesopotamia (...), dressed as a priest and showing fake documents. By denounce of some Syrians the police came up to him, and it's known that he has already been expelled from France and the United States as member of a gang of fake priests.

The complaint also stated that "João Bacos declared himself married, going against his condition of priest of the Holy Church, because, as we all know, priests cannot marry". Bacos, through his lawyer, in the writ of habeas corpus, presented evidence of good record and a statement of the Metropolitan Curia, according to which, in spite of the Chaldean Syrian Church merged with the Roman Catholic Church, its own hierarchy and rites were kept, and therefore, the fact that Bacos is married was perfectly normal. It was also presented by the defendant one certificate of ownership of a small farm in the county of Meriti, purchased on January 10th, 1922. On October 6th, 1927, after weeks in custody, Bacos was released. In the order, signed by Luiz Bordini, officer of the 1st police district, it read as follows: "Put in freedom not the fake priest, but the Orthodox priest."

Another case, reported on April 2nd 1928 happened in Sao Paulo involving Jorge Bechara, Syrian born in Palmira in 1896. In the occasion attended the Police district of Surveillance, Customs and Games of the city, the Syrian Francis Maluf, born in Kafarak, aged 49, owner and resident at São Miguel Road. In his testimony, Maluf
accused the son-in-law, Jorge Bechara of extorting him money to gamble, and that "lately under threat of death ( ... ), also reported that Jorge Bechara imply all means of pimping his own wife Lamia Maluf, 25 years old, with the sole purpose of obtaining money for his addiction. "Maluf also said that Bechara had married his daughter in Syria about ten years ago and that the couple came to this capital around two years. During this time, the accused did nothing, "but drink and gamble"

In his testimony, the defendant denied any threat attitude towards his father in law or to his wife, although admitted he likes to drink and gamble, "without hurting anyone." In the justice final report, the officer said the defendant was a "professional bum, [that has] never dedicated to honest work, and cared not to live a dignified and honorable life." Married with honest and good woman, daughter of an industrious family friend of the hard labor, sought to take advantage of this situation, living off the expenses of his wife's father ( ... ) Not content with that, he wanted to throw the wife in prostitution ( ... ) "As the woman "reacted strongly", he started to "beat her constantly. (...) The father came to the rescue and caught her daughter, (...) preventing him to corrupt her. And so finished off:

Expelling him from the country is an act of social defense and prevention of future crimes because Jorge Bechara is pernicious to our country and unable to produce any useful element.

On May 5th, 1928, the President of the São Paulo State, Júlio Prestes, issued a copy of the ordinance, expelling Bechara of the country. Also in 1928, on the 28th of January, the peddler Abraham Ary, 65, a native of Zarler, Lebanon, living at 46, Senador Queiroz St, in São Paulo, accused his own son, Manoel, or Melhen, Ary, 1136 years old, of being a cocaine dealer. From five years from now, [he] has been demanding money to expand its business and does so under threat of death and beating his own father and mother. “I have tolerated my son, despite the addiction (...), but he did not want to subject to any honest work. Always arrive home making disorder and beating his brothers. Prefers offensive words morals and became involved in the gamble and snorting cocaine, saying it is the best business in the world”. Beside the father five witnesses were enrolled, all Brazilians, who ratified the unfavorable statements against the accused. The writ of habeas corpus presented by his lawyer, containing ten declarations of commercial firms in São Paulo, confirms the statements of Melhen, claiming he was an honest salesman. The police investigation was conducted by Luiz Bordini, of the 1st Justice officer section, which stated his opinion in a report dated April 2nd, 1929, that says:

As it was investigated, the Syrian Melhen or Manoel Ary, exerts no lawful profession, indulging in the criminal trade of selling cocaine. Presented 10 certificates of commercial firms in São Paulo with claims the accused is hardworking and honest. However, it does not inhibit, unlike, disguises, even if exact the information of being the accused tradesman, its main activity is the one of selling of toxic and narcotic. All of this together with the defendant way of life makes my opinion be for the expulsion of the Syrian.
In the habeas corpus petition, the attorney of Melhen drew attention to the arbitrariness with which the process had been conducted, and declared it was unconstitutional to expel someone through a simple administrative procedure. However, his argument proved useless and the expulsion of the defendant, under Article 72, paragraph 33 of the Constitution, was enacted and enforced.

Last case found was of the Lebanese Abdulla Capaz\textsuperscript{12}, who immigrated to Brazil in 1898 with 18 years of age. Born in Beirut, he has declared profession of shoemaker, worked in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, before traveling to Argentina, where he remained for 15 years. Throughout this period amassed a criminal record with 19 occurrences - for vagrancy, gambling, assault, theft and robbery - before being expelled from that country.

The annotations in the police records were sent from Buenos Aires and became part of the expulsion evidences that instructed Abdulla’s process that has been already stuck in Sao Paulo. On inquiry, opened in July 24\textsuperscript{th}, 1928, investigators do not skimp adjectives to describe the defendant: “Thief, bandit and vagabond, he was expelled from Argentina, also taking various prisons in Sao Paulo for theft, injury and vagrancy”. Capaz was expelled from the country with 48 years of age, after 30 years of a hard life in America.

5. Conclusion

The laws of banning foreigners caused a reduced impact on the Syrian and Lebanese community living in Brazil. Indeed, the number of nationals banished from the country was low. In an attempt to explain the slim numbers of Syrians and Lebanese expelled towards other ethnic groups, economic activity to which the Arabs devoted appear first. Unlike the Latino immigrants, Syrians and Lebanese were unrelated to union struggle that drove hundreds of foreigners out of Brazil in the early twentieth century. Busy with trading activities and concerned about climbing the rungs of the social ladder, they had experienced no social problems such as unemployment and low wages, which directly affected the daily lives of Italians, Portuguese, and Spanish workers.

Thus, is not surprising the fact that the small universe delimited in the survey did not include any case of expulsion for political motivation. The problems were inside home, involving parents, siblings and wives who denounce misfits’ sons, husbands and relatives to the police, political conflicts within the community that refer to situations that are beyond the national orbit, complaint of "misrepresentation", or the government using social cleansing practice to get rid of foreigners vulnerable to police action. The article recovered fragments of the history of immigration, focusing an unusual bias. We do not speak here of how immigrants found the promised land or how they managed to achieve their life goals. By the contrary, the cases that were presented made clear how the Brazilian State enforced its authoritarian summary laws made specially to fit momentary problems and also taking advantage to cleaning up the emerging cities from
troublemakers. The policy was in practical terms a detour from facing social problems and after all translated the false morality of an era. Each case represented a problem within the private sphere of one’s life and also a case of deviance from the desired ideal immigrant. By applying the laws for banning those that didn't fit the system, the executive overwhelmed the judiciary and also the human rights by interpreting the laws as for its own convenience, portraying the model of the ideal citizen to be followed, respectful of the established norms. Moreover, these narratives endorse and extend the knowledge already available on the Syrian and Lebanese immigration to Brazil, revealing the administrative documents as a rich new field of research to the scholars.
Notes

1 According to Knowlton (1960), although until 1892 all immigrants from the Middle East - at the time under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish hegemonies - were classified as Turks upon entrance in the country they were, mostly, Syrians and Lebanese. From that year on, the Syrians began to be counted separately to the records. Given that up to World War I, Lebanon was part of Syria, Lebanese and Syrians were considered Syrians, only after 1926, year of Lebanon’s independence, Lebanese nationals started to be recorded separately in the ports of entrances.


3 Legally expulsion was a political-administrative act by which the alien is compelled to leave the country and banned from returning. It was a measure of police order, expressing a political necessity or convenience of the administration.

4 BRASIL. Amendment to the 1891 Constitution available at: http://www2.camara.leg.br/legin/fed/emecon_sn/1920-1929/emendaconstitucional-35085-3-setembro-1926-532729-publicacaooriginal-15088-pl.html

5 Record file IJJ7139 ANRJ – 1914.

6 Record file IJJ7149 ANRJ – 1919.

7 Record file IJJ7164, ANRJ – 1927.

8 Record file IJJ7167 ANRJ – 1928.

9 Sobral Pinto was to become a prominent Brazilian jurist, advocate for human rights, especially during the Estado Novo dictatorship (1937 – 1945) and military dictatorship established in 1964.

10 Record file IJJ7169 ANRJ – 1928.

11 Record file IJJ7176 ANRJ – 1928.

12 Record file IJJ7186 ANRJ – 1928.
References


-Brasil. Anais da Câmara dos Deputados (1890-1926).


