

# LEBANESE EMIGRANTS: CROSS-CULTURAL VECTORS

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## Abstract

*Lebanese Emigrants: Cross-cultural Vectors*

Unlimited technological discoveries and innovations, globalization, cross-cultural paradigms, wars, international communication and interdependency have contributed to unprecedented worldwide human mobility through emigration. Lebanon was highly affected, for the number of its emigrant citizens to foreign countries exceeds 3 times those still residing in the home country. The 14 million Lebanese emigrants are settled all over the world in search of economic, health and personal security. The official Lebanese policy today focuses upon establishing bonds with the emigrants, based on the importance of having them liaise with their country of origin on the socio-economic and political levels. These emigrants acted as transporters of Lebanese culture into the world and in return carry foreign culture into Lebanon. The research concentrates upon the role of international cultural trends over the Lebanese youth. It also offers recommendations to effectively deal with this issue for the mutual benefits of both the resident and emigrant Lebanon.

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**Keywords:** Human mobility, economic security, emigrant, culture, transporters

## Introduction

Cross cultural exchange, adaptation to different values, and readjustment to cultural conflicts emerged from the globalization trends in the twentieth century; particularly following the fall of communism in 1990. The East-West conflict that dominated international affairs, for over seventy years, ended leaving many demographic changes, through fluxes of refugees and emigrants from Asia, The Middle East, Africa and even Latin America, in search of freedom and economic prosperity. Soon, the ideological-political conflict began taking different forms and dimensions, leading to cultural paradigm. Samuel Huntington<sup>1</sup>, supported by Thomas Freedman's "Lexus and the Olive Tree"<sup>2</sup>, followed by Benjamin Barber's quotation "Jihad vs. McWorlds," launched the theory of "Clash of Civilizations" which revolves around cultural conflicts.

The East-West conflict, accordingly, is presently rooted in cultural differences, stereotyping of nations, and uncontrolled concept of freedom, that glorifies individualistic tendencies and objectives. Most dangerous are the waves of terrorism that feed upon religious fundamentalism.

The objective of this research is not to venture into futile debate relating to "divine culture," or "who is right or wrong?"; rather to concentrate on those Lebanese citizens, who emigrated to various parts of the world, fleeing from slavery, abuse, terror, and poverty. They sought freedom, self-esteem, economic wealth and personal safety.

The research question revolves around those emigrants who were transplanted from an unnatural anthropological, socio-political environment into a foreign one that, often, caused, for the first and to a lesser extent the second generation, cultural conflict paradigm. As results, some of those emigrants faded in their new environment, and severed ties with their ancestral home; others were unable to overcome some romantic nostalgia in their hearts and minds, to

return to their home of origin and relive the old customs, values and traditions of their childhood.

This research is concerned with this group of emigrants and the cultures, values, customs, ethics, moral conducts, and other cultural matters they imported.

The objective is to highlight the problems, impact, influence and change, they exert through cultural diversity, partially effectuating the present national environment

The authors rely in this paper upon data from primary sources based on personal contact with some of the returnees, and on secondary literature to provide some historical facts and possibly meaningful statistics. The encountered barriers, in this research, were mainly the lack of clear information in the Lebanese governmental archives and records.

Samuel Huntington, 1996, *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order* ( New York : Simon and Schuster,)

Thomas L. Friedman,1999, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*( New York:Farrar, Strauss, Giroux); Benjamin R. Barber, 2001, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Ballantine Books,2001

## **Main Text**

### **The Lebanese emigrants: an overview**

Accurate estimates about the Lebanese diaspora are hard to collect and validate due to poor, limited and archaic information. It is, however, declared, with optimism or perhaps some exaggeration, that around fourteen to sixteen million individuals of Lebanese decent are scattered all over the globe, while the national residents number about 4.5 million inhabitants. Here also, there is a question mark about whether three to five percent of those residents are legal national Lebanese or illegally nationalized with falsified documents? Among those Lebanese residents it is also estimated that several hundred thousands reside and work in the Gulf countries and Africa.

The author chose to cluster the Lebanese emigrants into three different time-periods.

The first began in the mid nineteenth century, in particular, following the local Mount of Lebanon wars of 1840, 1860 till 1914.

Those emigrants fled Turkish tyranny, fundamental sectarianism and religious persecution. Some moved into Egypt and became instrumental in launching Arab Renaissance, while the majority sailed to North, South America, and Europe.

The second wave started with World War I till 1960. These emigrants were motivated by developing economic wealth and security. A small group was drawn to the Gulf region that was much in need of skilled labor; others left to Africa and Europe.

The third wave started in 1960 till the present time. It reached its height between 1975 and 2005 due to the civil - sectarian war. The number of emigrants in that exodus bypassed the eight hundred thousands. It was a tragic brain-drain process. It is fair, however, to acknowledge the economic assistance those emigrants provided to their families during the fifteen years of war. Their economic role is highly laudable.

Presently the trend of immigration continues, whereby a large number of Lebanese citizens leave their country in desperation. Unfortunately, they are, sometimes, replaced by an equal number of nationalized foreigners and refugees. Yet, no clear policy has been proposed by any of the “great” “zouama” (leaders) to tackle and resolve this deadly demographic and cultural trend.

### **The causes of this perpetuated Diaspora**

Before addressing the core of this issue of Lebanese emigrants and re-emigrants, several questions must be clearly and transparently examined and answered.

Why do Lebanese emigrate in such large numbers when their country is considered “the Swiss of the orient” or “tourism heaven”? Have the emigration grounds that existed in the last centuries disappeared or intensified?

Does the government possess reliable statistics to help formulate a clear policy to retain the young talents in this country?

Do Lebanese consulates and embassies abroad effectively relate to the emigrant’s needs and wellbeing?

What are the major benefits Lebanon would glean and realize from the return of those emigrants? Should they return or not?

What is being earnestly and effectively done to facilitate their return?

Assuming they would return, what then does this country offer them?

If the answers to these questions are sensitive and complicated, one should then, in depth, reexamine the whole issue and specifically the reasons that drove citizens to emigration?

### **The main reasons behind emigration**

Assuming that the objective is to deal with these issues, in a truthful and transparent manner, one would have, then, to analyze the reasons behind emigration, in order to stop or reduce its trend and negative impact; rather than spending much energy and time to bring back 14 million emigrants back to their country of origin.

The most important reasons may be summarized in the following:

A corrupt political system, ruled by a political-economic mafia, feudal lords, and family clans, who monopolize the national and political powers. Lack of equality, transparency, and integrity vs. divinization of crimes, theft, bribery, and “wasta”. A system ruled by several mini-states, each heavily armed, defying all kinds of laws and covenants; a system formed of several mini Lebanons: that of the resistance, the armed Palestinians, the armed parties, religious groups as well as regional military intelligence organizations.

Blind sectarianism and fundamentalism based on stereotyping, ignorance, hypocrisy, and betrayal of the continually preached divine virtues of tolerance, love and peace. One wonders whose god is the most powerful in the battlefield wanting us humans to torture, kill and destroy each other.

Personal insecurity in a lawless society, whereby might justifies the ends, freedom and democracy are used to perpetuate the powers of the ruling elite; a society that, instead of attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), encourages wealthy Lebanese businesses to flee in search for overseas opportunities and safety.

An archaic educational system tailored to satisfy certain elites, individuals, religious groups and introvert bureaucrats, who promote ignorance; rather than prepare and mentor future leaders and men of science.

An economic system, lacking planning and leadership where the ambitious youth is paid six hundred dollars per month, a salary that is clearly below poverty level. Worse, a centralized administrative system whereby the citizens’ basic necessities are not met; rather confiscated by the few. Urbanization processes that destroy the ecosystem and quality of life. Amidst all these ailments, Lebanese officials excel in making verbal promises and, misrepresentations, along with inequitable taxation laws leading to the ultimate tragedy of high unemployment.

A silent majority ruled by fear, indifference, and apathy, that is unwilling to stand up and fight for what is right.

## **Lebanese public management**

Normally, responsible and ethical officials, in the civilized world, are requested to organize their departments, formulate plans, coordinate policies and activities, implement laws and review the results.

In the Lebanese case, the *laissez-faire* style of governance applies, leading to many questions to be raised in relation to the emigrants. Who are those public managers? What are they doing regarding emigration trends? Do they love themselves or their country? Why can't Lebanese missions abroad follow the examples of missions of other countries and register their emigrants?

The answers reached by the author to these questions are very simple:

The Lebanese officials, pressured by sectarian affiliations and sometimes personal biases are incompetent and uninterested in caring for the emigrants.

There is an evident lack of qualified bureaucrats starting from the top to the bottom, who can handle the problems.

Inefficient Foreign Ministry due to an acute shortage of qualified and well trained public officials at all levels.

The common belief among sectarian groups that these emigrants may affect their powers and cause change in the religio-demographic status quo, consequently they should remain where they are in foreign countries as long as they stay outside.

Simultaneously, the irony lies in the virtual race by public officials, when the emigrants 'issue is raised, to verbally express their sympathy and philosophical support to promote the return of the diaspora.

## **The actual Lebanese socio-economic-political environment**

The citizens of Lebanon, although generally silent, are aware of the abuses and exploitations they are subjected to by their self-appointed leaders. They understand that power is monopolized, but do not know, nor dare face the problems, fearing painful retributions.

The real facts, however, lie in the absence of an independent Judicial Branch; worse, the legislative control of the Executive Branch. This awkward and unhealthy political system, forces the educated free souls to search for distant opportunities. Local crimes, of all kinds, are continually committed in a variety of ingenious ways, yet few arrests are made and no justice served. The people's food is poisoned; the medicine is spoiled, in addition to no electrical power, no clean water, nor proper roads or highways to drive on... Those are few of the real facts of Lebanese life.

As for the economic issues, the story is even more desperate. The *laissez-faire* system drives each citizen to care for oneself, and all for the boss.

Young graduates are made to believe that opportunities of success are within their reach; instead, and in a short time, they are shocked by unemployment and poverty leading them to despair leaving the country. The choices, at their disposal, are limited to few: live in poverty, be patient and keep hoping for "godot" to come and save the situation, join the wagon of corruption, or last, emigrate.

If they decide to start a family and purchase an apartment, they have to work two jobs. Consequently, the couple would go to work leaving the children to their parents or to a house helper. Others choose to delay or give up on the marriage institution.

## **A ruling bureaucracy in a centralized system**

To topple these deficiencies, Lebanon is ruled by a bureaucracy that lacks proper training, education, and administrative ethics. Public jobs are considered a financial security for non-ambitious, lazy and greedy individuals. Those bureaucrats have been described as "midgets" managing the public sector.

All those many factors and many more drove ambitious and intelligent Lebanese to leave their country.

### **The Lebanese Presence Abroad**

The majority of Lebanese emigrants are concentrated in North and Latin America, Europe, Africa, and the Arabian Gulf countries.

The Lebanese emigrants, regardless of the new home choose and acquire its nationality, and work very hard, as a minority, to succeed; consequently, the only option they had was to fully blend with their new environment, acquainting themselves with new cultures, values, customs and languages. They had to apply the adage stating “when in Rome, act as a Roman”. Their children had to attend local schools, and adapt to local culture and behavior.

### **Lebanese emigrants: cross cultural vectors**

The main concerns of those emigrants revolved around accumulating wealth and fame to safely raise and protect their families in a prosperous surrounding. Subsequently, the great majorities forgot their ancestral home, or were no more interested into returning to settle in an underdeveloped and corrupt environment.

Presently there are many talks, in political circles, about encouraging and facilitating their return, but the speeches remain ink on paper or pep talks. What is then the main reason for such public outcry by public officials? What is being camouflaged? Is it truly to attract FDI through the diaspora, or the truth revolves around gaining demographic numbers to boost sectarianism for the benefit of one group over the others?

Assuming that the intentions are noble as claimed, what then can those officials offer to the returnees? Does the attraction consist of having them participate in parliamentary elections, or run for public office, enough to draw them?

Assuming they returned and were represented in the parliament, will their voices be heard in this dark jungle? Aren't they being misled through virtual dreams of glory and happiness? How many did already venture and return, then, re-emigrated after a short time? Is this the strategy to liaise between the diaspora and the local Lebanese communities?

### **The returnees multiple cultural faces**

A number of returnees, while living in foreign countries, kept alive the romantic dream about their country of origin embodied in their subconscious; namely the beautiful, clean, green, hospitable, and virtuous Lebanon, the pure villages' water fountains, the scenic roads, the beautiful and righteous girls, handsome and noble men, a true paradise that fills the heart with happiness, love, and prosperity. It is an exquisite rustic painting that time abroad was unable to erase from the first emigrant generations' conscience.

But now as they return, those dreams are shattered and replaced by a devastating reality of shocks. They return with loads of ideas and values, acquired in the West, such as democracy, human rights, equality and justice, freedom of worship and expression, energy to lead and battle against corruption and violence. What they truly experience is quite disappointing that they began regretting their decision.

### **The returnees cultural influence upon the Lebanese society**

The few re-migrants who opted to return, were mainly driven by a combination of factors:

The religious-cultural factor. They ran away from the Western sexual promiscuity their children were exposed to in foreign cultures. This involved customs, behaviors, laws and religious practices. Some were anxious to search and select spouses for their children.

The socio-political factor. The older generations feel more comfortable among their local peers in Lebanon, instead of being victimized by certain stereotyping declarations in foreign countries.

Economic factor that includes opening business of imports, real-estate, retailing, manufacturing etc.

Romantic factor that encompasses personal dreams and objectives.

The peculiar general trend among the returnees has shown that most of the Christian returnees, after spending a short time, fail to acculturate, and with great disappointment, bitterly opt to re-emigrate.

As for those who remained, they are usually classified into three groups.

The elderly generation, over sixty years of age, prefer to live with their families amongst their clans in Lebanon. They rely on the financial savings they accumulated while abroad, in addition to benefits they would collect from Social Security, life insurance policies, and possible investment and retirement plans. Consequently, they can live quite comfortably.

The middle aged generation, open usually a small business and reintegrate themselves into the Lebanese setting. This group is usually unattached, nor willing to permanently settle abroad for legal, social, financial, personal and other reasons.

The third group encompasses the children and the youth who often had no choice but to follow what their parents prescribe. This is the group which exerts much cultural influence, transplanting foreign ideas and concepts to their Lebanese counter parts.

Since there is no accurate count about either of these groups, the author did acquire some primary information from some embassies based upon the number of registered Lebanese having dual nationalities. The U.S Embassy, for example estimates the number of Americans of Lebanese descent, presently living in Lebanon is beyond 100.000. The French embassy, the Canadian, Australian and others have also important numbers. The figures may only provide a shy reflection of the reality. Emigrants to Africa and the Gulf countries are excluded.

There is no doubt that due to the sectarian division of the Lebanese society, and the importance of head counting in each faction, the returnees may play an important role in public elections in favor of a specific group.

It is also becoming evident that the general idea behind welcoming the return of the diaspora are demographic reasons, namely to increase the number and power of a specific religious group over the others.

In spite of these undeclared objectives, the returnees do greatly influence the Lebanese socio-cultural and political environment, specifically in schools, universities, clubs, and political parties.

In general, the young men and women returnees were able to indoctrinate their native Lebanese counter parts with important socio-cultural and ideological concepts. In the schools and universities, a cultural revolution is being fomented to reject taboos about certain old values, sexual behaviors, civil marriages, and expanded amoral space. Western technology, pop music, and a teenager's culture are being disseminated within specific circles.

The main question in this research does revolve around the benefits as well as the negative impacts the returnees have impacted upon the socio-cultural life in Lebanon.

As for the expats, who chose to emigrate to Arab countries or Africa in search of fortune, the issues differ. They had to pay a dear price, mainly the split of the family, whereby the wife is left behind, victim too many types of problems. The children are raised by either a single parent or a housekeeper.

Although those expats did repatriate funds into Lebanon to support their families and construct luxury homes, they, often, discover that their decision to return was not too sound.

Lebanon, in turn, continues, through the brain drain process, to lose its talented citizens, and above all, the real Lebanese cultural personality.

### **The Lebanese culture**

Every country or society displays and lives cultural peculiarities that form its unique national or international personality.

Some countries, due to the pluralistic structure of their societies display multiple cultural characteristics as in the case of the US, Canada, Australia, and many others.

Each country enjoys a unique culture that differentiates it from others.

The Lebanese culture, if it still exists, is one of those exceptions, for being based on values by eighteen distinct religious groups and a multiplicity in ethnic background.

Throughout history, Lebanon has been partially subjected, although, to foreign invaders, conquerors, and occupiers of all kinds who left certain scars or influence upon the Lebanon of today e.g... Ninety years have elapsed since its independence, yet the Lebanese society continues to exhibit certain cultural behaviors that Turkey itself had abandoned, such as the nobility titles, dresses, and food. The author distributed a questionnaire to fifty Lebanese university students, half males and half females to find out what their thoughts would be on Lebanese culture.

### **Samples of reaction by Lebanese university students**

A mini sample of questions was asked to 50 Lebanese university students mixed from graduates and undergraduates. The results may be, a priori, disappointing to readers or uninteresting. The questions aimed at determining the level of awareness young Lebanese possess about the diaspora issue and the Lebanese culture. Five questions were selected and analyzed.

Is there a Lebanese culture, what is it, what does it mean to you?

What differentiates this culture from others?

Should cultural values be taught in the Lebanese educational system beginning with the first grade till graduation from the university?

Do you favor the return of Lebanese emigrants as carriers and promoters of foreign culture?

What do you expect from those returnees?

The answers to these questions are summarized without using graphs or mathematical statistical format.

Question 1:

Eighty percent of the respondents were unable to define “Lebanese culture”. They simply declared that there was none to “brag about”.

Twenty percent mentioned arak, tabbouleh, and plenty of vices such as greed, corruption, theft etc. Some insinuated that Lebanese culture is slowly becoming a global copy of others without peculiarities.

Question 2:

According to a minority of thirty percent amongst the respondents, the Lebanese culture before 1970 was based on family unity, strict moral standards, collectivism, transparency, integrity, and visible hospitality... now however, they added; it is based on power, violence, family disunity, and many vices not to be named...

Question 3:

Twenty five percent responded that some kinds of civic education are being taught in schools. The remaining seventy five percent expressed negative views about the entire educational system as miserably failing to contribute in laying the foundation for developing

Lebanese citizenship, national identity, and the building of an educated and civilized Lebanese citizen. Some even stated that the Lebanese identity is lost.

**Question 4:**

Fifty percent opted for silence, not knowing what to say. The other half expressed without enthusiasm support, claiming that the returnees might bring with them some improvements in the badly needed socio-economic and political system.

Most expressed strong skepticism about the effectiveness of the returnees in generating change, and added that they don't expect them to stay for too long in Lebanon amidst its highly corrupt setting.

**Question 5:**

The answers to this question displayed much discrepancy among the respondents. Some hoped that the returnees would promote new ideas and changes relating to human rights, education, public management and the national economy in general. Others were not as hopeful and optimistic; rather skeptical about the effectuation of any positive changes. They did however express a note of hope for an evasive improved future.

The objectives behind asking those five questions were to find out the level of awareness Lebanese future leaders do have about their country and the millions of emigrants who abandoned it.

## **Conclusion**

This research attempted to shed light, in a transparent, objective and educated manner upon the Lebanese diaspora starting with the causes, the achievements, and future policies to establish and sustain a bridge between the country of origin and the diaspora. The stress was upon the re-emigrants possible roles and contributions, as well as the cultural imports they injected into their ancestral socio-political and economic environment. The author aimed, as a whole, to release and possibly free the Lebanese people from the old romantic, somewhat utopic dreams about the particular issue of emigrants. The study proposes to espouse more pragmatic means and ways in dealing with the Lebanese diaspora. Perhaps the moment of the truth and integrity has come. Consequently, the following steps are proposed to deal with emigration and the loss of Lebanese talents to foreign countries.

Restore the special Ministry to deal with emigrants and emigration. Furnish it with adequate electronic equipment and personnel to maintain accurate statistics and archiving.

Have this Ministry coordinate its efforts with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to register all Lebanese living abroad, and reintroduce them to the culture of their ancestors.

Encourage wealthy emigrants to return and invest into vital economic projects in Lebanon, whether private or public, enjoying special facilities and tax reduction.

Encourage emigrants to import into their chosen countries of residence, Lebanese goods and produce.

Grant every qualifying emigrant the right to participate in local public elections at all levels, and be represented through a number of public seats. (The US is a good example)

Instead of giving Arab and non-Arab tourists, fifty percent discount on airlines tickets, hotels, and restaurants, it is more beneficial to grant those privileges to the Lebanese emigrants themselves, enticing them to visit their ancestral country.

Revise and restructure the educational curricula in schools and universities to include required courses on Lebanese culture, political system, and other general education subjects.

Most pressing is to modernize and decentralize Lebanon's socio-economic and political system, to reduce and even stop the Lebanese emigration of the youth and skilled labor.

The attraction for emigrants' return does not consist of natural wonders and skyscrapers; rather a culture of transparency and peace, whereby the reasons that drove them



to emigrate would stand no more. This means that, if they return, they would enjoy freedom, security, and peace.

Solicit the aid and support of foreign governments to collect and complete statistical data about the emigrants economic, cultural, scientific, political achievements and status abroad.

Encourage through a variety of programs an exchange of talents, skills and expertise in both the public and private sectors whereby both sides would benefit from each other.

Have the government of Lebanon reexamine and reconstruct its archaic system by taking full control of the Lebanese territories to include: internationally recognized borders, strict implementation of laws with no more exceptions, search for the right talents to employ, take full control of what is known as public property such as seashores, forests, mountains, lakes, rivers etc. to be developed for touristic attraction. It is important to stress the concept of administrative decentralization and electronic government even if this requires a change in the system to a federal one.

Effective partnership between the public and private sector to reorganize the economic sector, create more jobs with fair and equitable labor laws, under an independent and competent judicial process.

Secularize the laws and life of Lebanese by applying full separation between religion and politics.

These are few items from a long list of suggestions requiring urgent and immediate priority in handling matters related to the Lebanese diaspora. The focus ought to be upon first reducing or even preventing future emigration by eliminating the causes; second, devising a clear, effective and reasonable strategy to efficiently liaise between the resident and emigrant Lebanon.

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