CONCLUSION

Make America Exceptional Again?

Arabs animate and abide in an American hemisphere where US power was once considered a “manifest destiny.” In 2019, a Brazilian colleague of Lebanese origin, who I call Guilherme here, provided a telling instance that took place in the US Immigration and Customs Area of the Miami International Airport, infamous for the profiling of Arabs from South America discussed in the fourth chapter.1 Guilherme handed over his Brazilian passport with the appropriate visa. The visibly nervous US immigration and customs official inquired about his ostensibly Arabic-sounding last name. Though not surprised by this particular line of questioning, Guilherme grew perplexed when asked if he lived in Foz do Iguaçu or near the “waterfalls.” In response, Guilherme explained that he was from Brasília, the capital of Brazil. The border official promptly stamped his passport and bid him entry to the US. At American border-crossings in Foz do Iguaçu, Ciudad del Este, or even Miami, Arabs grew accustomed to not democratic due process but rather the state exception denying or granting it. Their decades-long accommodation reveals a hemispheric history of making America exceptional again.

In what I have called a “manifold destiny,” Arabs came to terms with exceptional rule, connecting and connected by a hemispheric America. From the 1960s to the 1990s, Arabs helped the
authoritarian and post-authoritarian rise of Brazil over historically US- and Argentina-dominated Paraguay. Their trade and activism lent greater autonomy in a semiperipheral America, bore the limits to liberation in a Third World America, and tested faith in an Ummah America. Subsequently, from the 1990s to the 2010s, Arabs negotiated the counterterrorist reach of Mercosur and the US. Their trade and activism paid a high price for a free trade America, negotiated peace but also profited in a war-torn America, as well as dramatized a speculative America. Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians were constrained, enabled, and came to terms with authoritarian and counterterrorist powers. Though spurious security studies allege their border presence contravenes the hemisphere, my work contends that Arabs drew and were drawn into this American crossroads of exceptional rule.

Attentive to this folding, the account here extended the transnational turn of Middle East studies into American studies, Brazilian studies, and Latin American and Latino studies. I inserted a mobile Middle East into what Juan Poblete called the “unmarked center” of area and ethnic studies once inhabited by the US.² By redrawing fields with hemispheric proportions through a Middle Eastern border presence, the aim was to achieve a more “fully globalized study of the Americas,” to again paraphrase José David Saldívar.³ At the border, Arabs’ transnational projects draw upon and are drawn into a hemispheric America. Instead of beginning or ending in Euro-American metropoles, Arabs at the border bring the “trans-” of a transnational Middle East into the “trans-” of a transamerican hemisphere. Though not questioning the categories of coloniality that created this hemisphere,⁴ they are hardly bearers of a false consciousness, acknowledging their own relative accommodation of extraordinary measures in Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, Mercosur, and the US.

Arabs at the border are circumstantial protagonists in nothing less than a novel understanding of the contemporary American hemisphere. They bore witness to the past decades of authoritarian rule that did not simply culminate in liberal democracy, but rather presaged present-day counterterrorist controls, involving militarized forces that never entirely returned to the barracks but instead
took up positions in domestic security and intelligence operations. Heretofore presumed as separate subjects, authoritarian and counterterrorist politics constitute the crossroads where Arabs have lived and worked in Brazilian and Paraguayan states, under the watch of Argentina, Mercosur, and the US. Accordingly, the first part of this book, set between the 1960s and the 1990s, explored Arab trade and activism under authoritarian and post-authoritarian governments that made liberal exceptions to an illiberal status quo, and illiberal exceptions in a liberalizing transition. The second part of this book looked at Arab trade and activism in Mercosur and the US war on terror, which made mostly illiberal exceptions to liberal market and democratic norms. During the second half of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century, Arabs experienced not democratic fulfillment but rather exceptional measures in this hemispheric America.

In contrast to books titled “before and after 9/11” that emphasize September 11, 2001,5 my work centers around the 1990s as the key decade of change and continuity. While the book’s first half culminates in the aftermath of the still unresolved bombing of AMIA in Buenos Aires in 1994, the second half takes off with the Mercosur accords that had been signed previously but went into effect in 1995. Military rulers had been replaced by, or reinvented themselves as, civilian successors, but states continued making exceptions in trade and diplomacy. Arabs at the border accommodated extraordinary measures, but shifted from semiperipheral to free trade, from Third World to war-torn advocacy, as well as from Ummah to more speculative ventures. Attentive to such changes at the border, this study has put greater emphasis on the degree of continuity that Arabs have experienced under varying forms of exceptional rule. Under circumstances not entirely of their own choosing, Arabs at the border have come to terms with authoritarian legacies as well as counterterrorist liaisons.

Arabs’ accommodation, and not rejection, of state powers took shape under seemingly “strange” authoritarian norms and continue today under more “familiar” counterterrorist intrusions. Indeed, anthropology’s old tenet, “to make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange” guided my approach to hemispheric formation.
Rather than relativize the boundaries between “us” and “them” originally indexed by the expression, I blurred those categories by projecting the “strange” and “familiar” onto a hemispheric field of exceptional rule. I sought to make familiar the authoritarian and post-authoritarian governments whose strange exceptions enabled semiperipheral commerce, Third World activism, and Ummah organization. I likewise endeavored to make strange democratic regimes that oversee counterterrorist controls whose familiar exceptions authorized free trade security, war with neither a beginning nor an end, as well as dramatic and economic speculation. This anthropological approach to the hemisphere relativizes authoritarian and counterterrorist rule in “our America.” It critically redirects attention from what Arabs at the border did, and didn’t do, to what sorts of state exceptions they and others came to terms with, in a process not yet over.

At a crossroads of exceptional rule, Arabs renewed what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam called the “struggle over representation,” mentioned earlier. In 2016, on the Brazilian side of the border, some of the traders and activists from the Barakat, Ghazzaoui, Hassan, Hijazi, Osman, and Rahal families participated in the documentary Árabes no Paraná. Sponsored by Itaipu, with support from the Foz do Iguaçu city government, Arabs told their own stories within the matrix of modernity/coloniality that decolonial critics Aníbal Quijano and Walter Mignolo theorized. The documentary opened with black and white images of Guaraní Indians and a quote from the Spanish explorer Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, the first European chronicler of the Iguaçu/Iguazú falls, introducing Arabs as one of the more recent groups that settled at this crossroads. On the Paraguayan side, Said Taijen, Khaled Ghotme, and others in the city’s newly constructed Mezquita del Este and the older Centro Educacional Libanés collaborated in “Migración Árabe en Paraguay,” an episode of the Invisibles program of RPC (Red Paraguaya de Comunicación, Paraguayan Network of Communication). Also within the modernity/coloniality matrix, this program referenced both the Guaraní and Spanish languages in the “cosmopolitan spirit”
of Ciudad del Este where Arabs “don’t feel like strangers.” Taijen expressed his “sincere thanks to successive government administrations, not only the present-day one” (in 2016), carefully acknowledging both the Paraguayan military regime’s political party that monopolized power for some six decades as well as the only elected president not from that party, Fernando Lugo, under whose mandate the Mezquita del Este began to be built, noted last chapter. Without the “epistemic difference” of “border thinking,” Arabs sought accommodation, not “radical exteriority,” to the status quo in an exceptional order not yet over.

Folding into the hemisphere, their transnational ties varied in respective national settings. On the one hand, Arabs in Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este had a long-standing interplay with national metropoles in Brazil and Paraguay. As noted, Arabs on the Brazilian side of the border engaged in commercial and civic exchanges with suppliers and community associations in São Paulo while Arabs on the Paraguayan side did so with Asunción. Today, some of their children and grandchildren, born and raised at the border, now pursue undergraduate and graduate study or work opportunities in São Paulo, Asunción, or elsewhere. On the other hand, however, Arabs at the border occupy distinct positions in respective national public spheres. In Foz do Iguaçu, Arabs speak or are spoken about as “a segunda maior comunidade árabe do Brasil” (the second largest Arab community in Brazil), after São Paulo. Once a colleague remarked that Foz do Iguaçu would become the largest because “a colônia em São Paulo está morrendo,” (the community in São Paulo is dying), allegedly.¹⁰ But I never heard Arabs in Ciudad del Este represented in such ways. As discussed, many who operate stores on the Paraguayan side actually reside on the Brazilian side of the border, but even those who both live and work in Ciudad del Este prefer to keep a lower profile. Indeed, José Daniel Nasta’s moving documentary Árabes en el Paraguay: Migrantes y descendientes mentioned Ciudad del Este only once in passing, attending to early and mid-twentieth-century Lebanese and Syrian migrants and their descendants in Asunción, Encarnación, and Villa Rica, before the Paraguayan border town was even built.¹¹ However, these national comparisons and contrasts, of which there are many, must
not distract from the hemispheric scale of analysis that I emphasized in this book.

Whatever the national context, Arabs at the border, like everyone else, witnessed the rise and fall of the hemispheric “pink tide” of progressive rule. In Brazil, Arabs and others leveraged the market- and Global South–friendly policies of Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2011), though less so under Dilma Rousseff before her aforementioned impeachment (2012–2016). In Paraguay, some viewed Fernando Lugo (2008–2012) as standing up to Brazil and the US before Lugo’s own forced removal from office. In Argentina, Arabs at the border continued to be suspected of some sort of collusion in the still unresolved 1992 and 1994 bombings in Buenos Aires during the mandates of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015). But Arabs at the border expressed more frustration with the US, even under Barack Obama (2009–2017). On the eve of the latter’s election, one elderly Lebanese gentleman at the border remarked that “US Americans say that there is terrorism here . . . because Arabs did well in business here . . . and the US Americans don’t like it.” With their criticism directed at “the [US] government” and “not the people,” Arabs at the border saw themselves being vilified as an “enemy” in order to influence “public opinion in the United States.” But it was not uncommon for some to personalize the “US government,” having grown accustomed to visits from US officials and reporters. One member of the Rahal family, for instance, recalled his own encounter with an unnamed US politician visiting the border as part of an official delegation. At the border, Arabs tended to accommodate the US government, from Bush through Obama, faring neither better nor worse in this hemisphere’s seemingly progressive wave.

Arabs now tried to keep a measured distance from revanchist efforts that “make America exceptional again.” They neither condemned nor condoned the Cúpula Conservadora das Américas (Conservative Summit of the Americas, in Portuguese), originally slated for July 2018 and later held on the Brazilian side of the border. In the middle of his underestimated presidential bid, then candidate Bolsonaro organized the summit as his “most ambitious initiative in foreign policy,” which would declare the hemisphere’s
conservative era after decades of progressive rule. 16 Erroneously, Veja reported that Bolsonaro would “participate in an event of the Arab community . . . in Foz do Iguaçu.” 17 In response, Arab and Muslim institutions at the border issued a carta aberta (open letter) on social media. 18 Muslim Arabs wrote that they held nothing against then candidate Bolsonaro, but felt a public statement was necessary after Veja’s mistaken news reporting, given their past experience of “xenophobia and Islamophobia” spread by “big commercial media” and “echoed” by unnamed “politicians.” Neither declaring support for nor opposition against Bolsonaro, the letter was signed by the Islamic Benevolent Society, the Islamic Benevolent Cultural Center, the Arab-Palestinian Brazilian Society, as well as the Arab Palestinian Federation. Whether or not due to this letter, the conservative summit with hemispheric pretensions was postponed. It took place after Bolsonaro was sworn in as president. The summit’s headliner ended up being Jair Bolsonaro’s son Eduardo, then a Federal Deputy who had just returned from Washington, DC, where he met with White House officials, attended Steve Bannon’s birthday party, and sported a “Trump 2020” baseball cap. 19 Though Bolsonaro’s stated aim to “fazer o Brasil grande” (make Brazil great, in Portuguese) borrowed from the Trump campaign and administration’s slogan “Make America Great Again,” this Conservative Summit of the Americas failed to shore up otherwise disparate right-wing exceptional movements that call for an allegedly “new course in the world.” 20 Their goal to make America exceptional, again, has a much longer history.

Arabs at the border avoided wholesale alignments in American politics, but they continued to express solidarity with Palestinian self-determination, as they had done for decades. On the Brazilian side of the border, they disapproved of the Bolsonaro administration’s stated goal to move the Brazilian embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which would defy not only the UN but also decades of Brazil’s own foreign policy. 21 On the Paraguayan side, Arabs at the border backed “Marito,” Mario Abdo Benítez, who promised to “stop the blackmailing in Ciudad del Este,” though he was the son of dictator’s fixer and defended the Paraguayan dictatorship throughout his career. 22 In a reversal of his predecessor’s decision, Marito
moved the Paraguayan embassy in Israel from Jerusalem back to Tel Aviv. Meanwhile, on the Argentine side of the border, Mauricio Macri (2015–2019) renewed the militarization of Puerto Iguazú with Israeli technology, and his successor, Alberto Fernández (2019–present) embarked on his first foreign trip to Israel. In response to Donald Trump’s declaration of Jerusalem as “the capital of Israel,” Palestinians, Lebanese, and others organized an event in the Foz do Iguaçu city council chambers that called for the “peaceful coexistence” among all peoples and a more inclusive recognition of Jerusalem. As Argentine, Brazilian, Paraguayan, and US administrations now leaned toward Israel, Arabs took collective stands at the border for causes and homelands farther afield.

Exceptional rule continues in the increasing ordinariness of extraordinary legal enactments or suspensions. As the hemisphere’s so-called “pink tide” neared a crescendo in 2007, Argentina’s president added an article to the penal code that punished terrorist finance, and four years later, his successor and spouse revised the code to include any “illicit association with terrorist ends.” In 2011, the aforementioned Fernando Lugo signed Paraguayan Law 4024 that made “terrorism,” “terrorist association,” and “terrorist finance” into punishable offenses. In 2016, Dilma Rousseff approved Brazil’s Law 13,260 that defined terrorism in terms of “xenophobia, discrimination, or prejudice . . . with the goal of causing widespread or social terror.” Across hemispheric American metropoli, progressive activists and organizations made the most vocal critiques of such legislation, fearing that such a broad legal definition of terrorism could criminalize any civic dissent as had been the case under authoritarian regimes. With consequences for and far beyond Arabs at the border, state powers now exercised authoritarian discretion through counterterrorist oversight.

An increasing array of authorities became what philosopher Judith Butler calls “petty sovereigns . . . delegated with the power to render unilateral decisions, accountable to no law and without any legitimate authority.” As such, US Treasury Department officials and proxies renewed accusations that Arabs at the border financed
Hizbullah, using Obama-era regulations after Trump became president. In the US House of Representatives in 2018, experts recycled inflammatory claims about Arabs at the border and concurrently tried to justify Treasury Department budget increases. As the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence conducted a hearing on Iran’s Global Terrorism Network, a “witness” from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), gave testimony on “Iran’s proxy terror networks in Latin America,” headed by Hizbullah operatives allegedly in “Foz do Iguassu [sic]” as well as “Ciudad Del Este [sic],” naming Assad Ahmad Barakat among others referenced in this book. Citing a narrow selection of media articles and government press releases, the witness noted that despite “corrupt” local officials susceptible to terrorist financiers, “the governments of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay are more receptive than at any time in the past 10 years to US leadership in the fight against terror.” His written testimony concluded by asking the US congress to “provide additional resources to treasury,” requesting an increase of more than 10 percent for the upcoming year, noting the more than 10 percent increase authorized the previous year. Echoed in conservative and right-wing media, and exerting pressure on South American states, this non-governmental authority justified ever-increasing counterterrorist government spending by representing Arabs at the border as a threat to the hemisphere. His narrative ignores the nearly three decades that Arabs at the border have been recurrently investigated and the many extraordinary measures that states took to do so.

His alarmist tone was echoed by Argentina’s Financial Intelligence Unit (UIF) in a press release about “suspected financiers of Hizbullah” supposedly in the “tri-border area.” With newfound clout under the aforementioned legislation in Argentina, the UIF head also garnered praise from the director of the US Treasury Department’s Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (known by the acronym FinCEN). The FinCEN director had been just appointed by the Trump administration. The FinCEN head expressed pride in “the role that FinCEN played” in “recent anti-terrorism financing actions by Argentina’s Financial Intelligence Unit.” Not long afterward, these Argentine and US bureaucrats co-wrote newspaper
articles that were simultaneously published in Argentina and the US, congratulating their “fact-finding mission” that assessed “the money laundering and terrorist finance threats in the Tri-Border Area between Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil.”

These Argentine and U.S. officials exercised what Butler called “spectral sovereignty.” They came to “deem’ as dangerous” none other than Assad Ahmad Barakat for having carried out suspicious million-dollar transactions in a casino in Puerto Iguazú on the Argentine side of the border. As already examined in this book, around the time of the 9/11 attacks, Barakat was accused of laundering money with alleged terrorist ends by a Lebanese business rival, leading to Barakat’s conviction for tax evasion in Paraguay. After serving his sentence, Barakat returned to live with his Brazilian wife and children on the Brazilian side of the border. But with the new round of accusations, it was Paraguay, not Brazil, that was pressured by neither Argentine nor US officials but rather the FDD witness who had previously testified to the US House of Representatives. The FDD witness stated that Paraguay is a “fiscal paradise for terrorism” due to “the very low level of public integrity among those who govern in Paraguay.” This “FDD member,” as characterized in Paraguayan media, lacked the legal authority that he effectively exercised by claiming such lawlessness at the border.

His “exaggerated” and “catastrophic” allegations of terrorism elicited critical responses from the Paraguayan foreign minister, finance minister, interior minister, and vice-president. But Paraguayan judges filed arrest warrants for Barakat, alleging not financial crimes with purportedly terrorist ends but rather the irregular acquisition of a Paraguayan passport despite having been stripped of Paraguayan nationality. The right-wing Paraguayan president called for an investigation into the irregular emission of passports while his ministers held meetings with US diplomats who praised the Paraguayan state for cooperating on matters of money laundering. As “law is either used tactically or suspended,” writes Judith Butler, “populations are monitored, detained, regulated, inspected, interrogated, rendered uniform in their actions, fully ritualized and exposed to control and regulation in their daily lives.” This “indefinite” status of Arabs at the border, to again cite Butler, “does
not signify an exceptional circumstance, but, rather, the means by which the exceptional become established as a naturalized norm.”

Arabs on the Paraguayan side of the border attested to this ordinariness of extraordinary rule. Ali Farhat, cited in the third chapter, surmised that “every year or two we are confronted by a wave of allegations about Hizbullah and the terrorist threat in the region.” Jihad Aoun, with his business in the Galeria Zuni in Ciudad del Este, echoed, “it is an account that no one ever buys” at the border, explaining that “tax-evasive smuggling, money laundering, arms and drugs trafficking” exist but not “terrorist cells” or “traders . . . giving away their money to extremist groups.” “Alwie Moustaff Hijazi [sic]” affirmed that Lebanese “came to this area because they are tired of terrorist attacks that only cause pain and war, they want peace, and to say that they are encouraging violence and hatred is something that does not enter anyone’s head. . . . We do not understand this.”

Farhat, Aoun, Hijazi, and others grew accustomed to being denied the rule of law through what Butler called “the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not.”

Under such circumstances, Barakat applied for asylum from Paraguay and turned himself into Brazil’s Federal Police in Foz do Iguaçu. His appeal for accommodation drew support from Gazeta Diário (formerly A Gazeta do Iguaçu), whose editorial column declared that whatever financial irregularity Barakat may have engaged in, “it doesn’t have anything to do with terrorism.” The (non-Arab) Brazilian editorial writer called for mobilization among Lebanese “countrymen” and “we Brazilians” as well as vigilance against using “an isolated case . . . to denigrate the Lebanese community of the border.” Meanwhile, Barakat’s family led a protest of “at least 100 people,” in front of Brazil’s Federal Police headquarters in Foz do Iguaçu. Barakat’s son declared, “We are not terrorists. We are here asking for support from the Lebanese Embassy in Brasília and even [former Brazilian] President Michel Temer who is a Lebanese descendant and whose father also came from Lebanon as a refugee.” Supreme Court judge Raquel Dodge declared that Barakat would remain in “preventive detention” in Brazil until the “National Committee for Refugees of the Ministry of Foreign
Relations” evaluated his request for asylum, after Argentine and US allegations provoked Paraguayan officials to issue a warrant for his arrest, neither for financial infringements nor alleged ties to Hizbullah.54 Since “to seek asylum is precisely to seek legal status,” wrote Butler, states can scrutinize cases by fiat in an actual suspension of international law.55 After nearly two years, the Brazilian state extradited Barakat to Paraguay where he now again stands trial, this time for the irregular possession of a Paraguayan passport, and not for financial transactions in Puerto Iguazú alleged by Argentine and US authorities.56 In this “manifold destiny,” Arabs still await a final verdict in the more than sixty-year history of exceptional rule at an American crossroads.