

LEBANESE IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES

dapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety. Lebanon has been spared the kind of uprising seen in neighboring Syria. But economic conditions for young Lebanese are just as bleak as in many other Arab countries.

In Lebanon, a quarter of Gen Y is out of work, and more than a third of university graduates say that given the chance they would leave in search of greener pastures.

There is risk of 'brain drain' since young people, who aren't always eager to leave, see few other options when it comes to employment. As one young Lebanese put it, "It's hard to find a good job here in Lebanon. If I get a good opportunity in Europe, I wouldn't stay here at all."

Samir Makdisi, an economist at the American University of Beirut, says an anemic labor market, civil conflict and the lack of faith in the political system have pushed young people overseas in what's become a double-edged sword of immigration.

"Young people are anxious to assert themselves and if you cannot establish your foothold here financially, then you tend to seek it elsewhere. The positive side? The Lebanese economy does rely a lot on remittances from immigrants of billions of dollars annually. On other hand, of course, you're losing skills."

The mismatch between the number of qualified professionals and the opportunities afforded them pushes an estimated 20,000 highly skilled Lebanese overseas each year. Most look for alternatives in Gulf countries and some head to Europe. But longstanding family networks in the U.S. continue to draw young Lebanese looking for a new start. Today, nearly 40% of Arab Americans claim Lebanese ancestry.

Charlie Sahadi runs Sahadi Importing, a Middle Eastern grocery store on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. He works the register and chats with customers winding their way through the maze of shelves and display cases. They are packed to the brim within an almost endless variety of spices, nuts, candies, dry fruit and olives.

Sahadi's father immigrated to New York from Lebanon when he was 18 years old and he opened the store in 1948. Those old economic ties with family back home continue today. Sahadi's family in Lebanon contributes to the store's sales.

"Many of my family are still in the town of Zahle in Lebanon. They do some of the exports for us today. They make a commission on their sales which helps them continue living there. It's the right thing to do, and you know you are helping them over there where they don't have as much opportunity as we have here."

Madeleine Sumption, an analyst at the Migration Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., says each year the Lebanese community in the U.S. sends more than \$1.3 billion back home. The total amount of remittances flowing into Lebanon makes up a quarter of the economy.

"Lebanon is very reliant on remittances and the U.S. is a significant contributor to those remittances. This is a very deeply developed migration corridor between Lebanon and the United States and one that seems set to continue for some time."

The fourth Annual Bay Ridge Arab American Bazaar is a huge festival celebrating Arab culture. Linda Sarsour directs the Arab American Association of New York. The organization provides English classes and immigration services, and they help new immigrants find affordable housing and jobs.

For the city's Arab Heritage Week, Sarsour and her staff organize a festival in Shore Road Park in Southwest Brooklyn. The area is home to more than 35,000 Arabs. Sarsour explains that it isn't just nostalgia that immigrant families feel for their home countries, it's also a strong sense of obligation.

"People come and say, 'I am going to come to America because I am going to support my family in America but I am also going support my family back home.' Then their family members that are back home put a lot of responsibilities and burden on them because they say, 'Don't tell us that you are not making it in America. Everybody makes it in America.'"

While life can be difficult for new immigrants in America, many young Lebanese are finding better opportunities here.

At a restaurant in the shadow of the Verrazano Bridge, Ali Sahadi, 25, is attending a dinner celebrating Brooklyn's Arabic English newspaper *Aramica*.

"I completely understand why people, especially younger people, want to leave Lebanon. I know many friends who graduated a couple of years ago and they cannot find work. I traveled for basically the same reasons."

But the difference is that after he finishes his grad school, Sahadi plans to return home to Lebanon. His goal is to start a social networking site based in Beirut. He says he wants to prove a point to those who say there aren't any opportunities in Lebanon.

"If everyone wants to leave, then definitely there is not going to be any opportunities. You cannot leave and expect opportunities to be there. It's a continuous circle. It needs to stop somewhere. Smart people with good ideas should at one point decide, 'Why do I want to go to the USA to start my company?' Someone should stop and start building their dreams in Lebanon. So this whole 'brain drain' circular phenomenon will stop."

– Reported by Monica Bushman for *America Abroad*