

Turcos

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TURCOS: *A derogatory misnomer applied to Arab, Armenian, Jewish, and other Middle Eastern immigrants arriving in Latin America from the 1880s onward, whose Ottoman travel documents led host societies to conflate vastly different ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds under a single racialising label. Far from a mere linguistic error, turco encodes a history of orientalisation, commercial exclusion, and political weaponisation directed at diasporic communities across the region. Its meanings have never been fixed: simultaneously an insult, a term of endearment, a political slur, and a marker of diasporic identity, turco illuminates how mislabelling functions as a form of social differentiation—and how racialised communities negotiate, appropriate, and contest imposed identities across generations.*

Keywords: migration; *turcos*; Arabs; Middle East; integration; Latin America

“Turco”¹ is a term that encompasses a range of meanings and interpretations. It has historical links to the Ottoman Empire; has appeared in literature, as well as in political and social contexts; and it can conjure a variety of feelings, including connections to both discrimination and belonging for Arab and Middle Eastern immigrants and their descendants in Latin America. This entry provides a brief historical explanation of the use of the term, its connection to discourses of discrimination from the host societies, its varied usage both within host societies and within diasporic communities, and its overall role in creating a sense of belonging or rejection for individuals.

Historical Origins and Labels

The most common argument about the origin of the term is that it comes from the 1880s and 1890s, when migrants from the Middle East, mostly Christians, started arriving in

¹ The literal translation of “*turco*” would be Turk or Turkish, and it can be used both formally and informally depending on the context.

Latin America² with travel documents from the Ottoman Empire³. The reasons for migrating were varied. The most common reasons cited by authors include fear of forced military service (often seen as a form of Ottoman oppression by the migrants), the influence of foreign religious missionaries, visits by political leaders from abroad, and an economic crisis affecting the region, among others (Khater 2001; Moore and Mathewson 2013; Devis-Amaya 2014).⁴

These individuals were lumped into groups with labels such as “turcos,” Ottomans, or Syrian-Lebanese (for example, Vilorio de la Hoz 2003; Karam 2007; Gualtieri 2009). For many years, the “turco” term was the most popular amongst them, and was used to label ethnic Arabs, Turks, Armenians, Persians, and even Jewish people—and no real differentiation was made between them⁵. As Klich and Lesser (1996, 4) argue, the term “turco” is “a reflection of an irritating Latin American penchant to oversimplify by way of grouping together under a single rubric immigrants from various, even conflicting, regional, national, and/or ethnoreligious backgrounds.” This generic term, and others such as “chino,”⁶ encompassed different groups of people and were imposed by the local societies, rather than self-constructed by the migrant communities.

The term has been widely used in society and popular culture. Several literary texts used the term “turco,” most of them as a negative qualifier of difference.⁷ These occurrences,

² See, for example Klich and Lesser (1996) about Latin America in general; Vargas and Souza 2007 about Colombia; Alfaro-Velcamp 2007 and Taboada 2023 about Mexico; Karam 2007 about Brazil; El-Attar 2013 about Chile; Petit 2022 about Mexico/Argentina.

³ It is important to note that many texts claim these migrants carried Ottoman passports, which is unlikely as the modern passport came into existence during World War One (Dias-Abey 2025) and it was not widely used until the 1920s. Moreover, the Ottoman Empire did not have the resources to produce such documents. Still, other forms of travel documents are likely to have been produced by either the local authorities or the boat companies taking them across the Atlantic. Klich (1993) also places importance on the role of the Ottoman Empire wanting to claim these migrants during the early 20th century, and this may have also played a part for the increased use of the “turco” label.

⁴ Some authors, such as Naff (1985) and Khater (2001) have demonstrated that economic hardship is likely to have been the most significant reason for the migration. Nevertheless, other factors probably also contributed, even if to a lesser degree.

⁵ Khater (2005), Karam (2007) and Gualtieri (2009) also offer discussions of the racial connotations of the term ‘turco’.

⁶ “Chino” is an all-encompassing term to refer to Asians in Latin America, including Chinese, Japanese, and other East Asians migrants (Hu-DeHart 2009). In a way, it emulates the generic imposition of Turco, however, the ‘turco’ label also carries, without the colonial sentiments connected to the Ottoman Empire, but perhaps with an even greater sense of ignorance.

⁷ See, for example, “*Los Turcos*” by Roberto Sarah published in 1961 about Arab descendants in Chile; or Santiago Nasar in “*Crónica de una Muerte Anunciada*”, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez published in 1981, and Nomar Mahid in “*Los parientes de Ester*” by Luis Fayad published in 1978—both set in Colombia and the characters referred to as *turcos*.

whether constant or sporadic, focused on its use as a dismissive differentiator to discriminate against particular characters.⁸ At the same time, other texts took a more comprehensive approach, discussing the term or showing the characters' positioning toward it. Its use was so widespread that even the *Real Academia Española* (RAE)⁹ has one entry in its dictionary that reads "Arab of any origin."¹⁰

Over time, this widespread use of the term began to fade. First, after the different European powers occupied these territories, following the end of World War One, the travel documents changed and no longer included references to the Ottoman Empire. Then, in the 1930s several Latin American governments began to differentiate these migrants by individual ethnicity/region, including the terms Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian, among others (Vargas and Suaza 2007). Finally, there was a drive from authors as early as the 1940s that highlighted the importance of separating the term "turco" from the Arab communities (Pastor de Maria 2014) and, more recently, several others who have criticised its use (Moore and Mathewson 2013; Balloffet 2019). For example, Fahrenthold (2019) critiques the label as superficial and contradictory to the agency of many migrants who, at the time, actively promoted Syrian or Lebanese nationalism against the Ottoman "Turk" rule.¹¹

However, the term remains present in local Latin American societies, and continues to be used in different ways, for a variety of reasons.

Discrimination

The most common explanation in academic texts of the use of the term is discrimination. For example, Vallejo (2009) argues that the term carries an "immigrant shadow" and that "turcos" are seen differently from the rest of the population. Alfaro-Velcamp (2007, 25) states that, in Mexico, the term "carries negative connotations." Hernández (1994, 250) argues that the term "turco" was used purposely to discriminate:

⁸ For example, one of Jorge Amado's characters in "*Gabriela, Cravo e Canela*" (published in 1958) is a Middle Eastern migrant in Brazil who despises being called "turco" and has a lively exchange explaining why he does not like it. Similarly, in Amado's book "*A descoberta da América pelos Turcos*" (published in 1994) about two Arab immigrants in Brazil, Amado briefly notes the irony of the use of the term, stressing the characters were in fact not Turks. This is also present in Luis Fayad "*La caída de los puntos cardinales*" (published in 2000), about the history of migration to Colombia, and it includes an interesting dialogue in which one Arab character seems confused when being referred to as 'turco', so another must explain that "here, we are 'turcos'".

⁹ The Real Academia Española is an institution based in Spain whose goal is to ensure the stability of the Spanish language, and its consistency across the different Spanish speaking countries.

¹⁰ "*Árabe de cualquier procedencia*". The dictionary notes its use applies to the Americas.

¹¹ Fahrenthold (2014, 15) also discusses the interplay between these labels and their socioeconomic significance, noting that a "common joke" in Brazil—"Turks are poor, Syrians middling, and Lebanese rich"—links the terms to socioeconomic status.

“being a ‘Turk’ was enough of a ‘record’ to be automatically rejected, without any further consideration—as if it meant an incurable disease.” Some scholars have even described the discrimination received by these migrants in Latin America as “turcophobia (orientalisation and vilification of Arab communities) and turcophilia (exoticisation and fetishisation of Arab communities)” (El-Attar 2013, 253; see also Hernández 1994; Taboada 2023).¹²

Examples from newspapers, public speeches, and graffiti are given in these accounts. For example, Díaz Rico (2025, 30) found several archived newspaper articles in Colombia which referred to “turcos” negatively, with the earliest entry in 1904 from *El Colombiano*: “The Turk Abraham Fayad and his mischievousness.”¹³ Racism was most noticeable in political rhetoric and the press in the 1920s and 1930s. Newspapers such as *El Diario* and *La Nación* in Argentina (Klich 1993), and *El Espectador* and *El Periscopio* in Colombia, sometimes carried xenophobic remarks against Arabs with insults such as “disgusting turcos” (*asquerosos turcos*) (Vargas and Suaza 2007), although it rarely escalated beyond words (Devis-Amaya 2014).

This negativity was also found more recently, for example in Honduras where graffiti appeared during the 2009 anti-coup protests calling for “slavedriver turcos” (*turcos esclavistas*) to leave Honduras (Pastor de Maria 2014, 29).¹⁴ At the same time, these attacks have not gone unnoticed, and some newspapers and politicians complained about them, refuted them, and defended the Arab communities. Such is the case of Senator González of Argentina and of the Lebanese-Argentinean newspaper *Assalam* (Klich 1993), and of Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo* (Vargas and Suaza 2007), which published articles and editorials defending the community.¹⁵

As might be expected, this perceived negativity was also felt by many Arab immigrants themselves and passed down to their descendants. This was found during my research in Bogotá, Colombia, between 2007 and 2013 (Devis-Amaya 2014).¹⁶ For example,

¹² El-Attar (2013) argues that “turcophobia” still exists in Chile.

¹³ Díaz (2025) found many other articles, including at least eight publications in the early 1930s with phrases such as “...when [the ‘turcos’] don’t burn it up, they scam”, or “the ‘turcos’ are the enemies of national businesses and the cause of so much tuberculosis in our women” both from the newspaper *Fuego* in 1932.

¹⁴ This graffiti, written in Spanish, demands the departure from Honduras of “*árabes, palestinos y judíos*” (“Arabs, Palestinians and Jews”) (Pastor de Maria 2014, 29). In doing so, it conflates several distinct ethnic groups, revealing both the confusion and the all-encompassing reach of the term.

¹⁵ It must be noted that Fawcett de Posada and Posada-Carbo (1992) argue that the attacks against the Lebanese were not widespread and that many “antiturco” newspapers had low circulation.

¹⁶ I interviewed more than 50 Arab immigrants and their descendants, from different generations, of a variety of ages, genders, and backgrounds, as well as extensive participant observation at events and activities. I used semi-structured ethnographic interviewing and snowballing techniques as part of the methodology. The words

one of my participants during this study, “Ana,” stressed that she was taught as a child that being called “turco” was offensive, as their ancestors had migrated “fleeing the Ottoman Empire.” Similarly, “Cristina,” another one of my participants, told me that her grandmother “always insisted that we should never let anyone call us ‘turcos’... it was hammered into us: ‘we are not Turks.’” This rejection of the “turco” label was socialised within family groups, conditioning the younger children to distance themselves from it.

There were also negative stories of labelling within my research. My participant “Lucia” argued that her father and uncle were denied entry to a party at a local social club because they were “turcos,” so they decided to create their own social club. She believed her parents did not teach her Arabic to minimise the chances of discrimination (a point also noted by Vargas and Suaza 2007). This negativity towards the term is explained by Bahajin (2008, 755) as follows:

What hurt the dignity of the immigrants the most, and what most hurt their reputation, was calling them “turcos”—something that haunted them for many years, just because they migrated from areas controlled by them—a connection to that persecution some seem to have felt prior to their departure.

The discriminatory use of the term was also present in other areas of society, including education and politics. Karam (2007) recounts how several of his older participants recalled memories of being taunted at school with the “turco” label by schoolmates and sometimes even teachers. Karam states that “enrolled in elite schools, Middle Eastern youths were made aware of the alleged inferiority of their ethnic difference in the mid-twentieth century” (2007, 78). This same sentiment was expressed by several of my participants, such as “Jaqueline,” who stated that she was mockingly called “turca” at the private school she attended when she had hummus or kibbeh in her lunchbox—echoing Karam’s findings.

Politics and Belonging

The term “turco” also played a part in Latin American politics. For example, my participant “Monica” stressed that she felt the negative use of the term when she tried going into politics and the “turca” label was used against her. She argued that political opponents “used it as an insult... even though I was born here in Colombia, to Colombian parents...” Indeed, some of my participants allege that the use of the term *turco* as a discriminatory label was mostly used as a political tool against opponents of Middle Eastern descent. For

and opinions of eight of these participants are included in this text. All the names are pseudonyms (see Devis-Amaya 2014).

example, my participant “Edgar” mentioned politician Gabriel Turbay, a second-generation Arab immigrant who rose to politics in the 1930s and ran for Colombia’s presidency.¹⁷ He acknowledged the discrimination Turbay received, being labelled as *turco*, but believed this was “merely political” instead of a “hatred” against the politician or against Arab immigrants in general.¹⁸ At the same time, a number of authors argue that most of the discrimination against “turcos” was based on commercial reasons and competition (see Rodríguez and Restrepo 1982; Fawcett de Posada and Posada Carbó 1992; Vargas and Suaza 2007).

Moreover, there were different, even contradictory, representations of the “turco” label. Whilst it was associated with stinginess, greediness, and wanting to cheat the customer into paying more money, it was also connected to generosity, friendliness, and even regarded as a “term of endearment” (Vargas and Suaza 2007; Morrison 2005, 423). Indeed, Karam (2007, 12) argues that even though the term “turco” was used derogatively when it was coined, “today, Middle Easterners claim that ‘turco’ is not discriminatory but a ‘joking’ or ‘caring’ term of reference....” The interpretation of the term has been fluid rather than static, with shifting significance attached to it and a balance of rejection and tolerance among the diasporic community (Moore and Mathewson 2013).

Most of my participants argued that neither they themselves nor their children had ever felt discriminated against because of their ancestry. My participant “Gabriel” told me the story of when he was around ten years old, he told his classmates that his grandfather was Lebanese. He said that from that day on he became “el turco,” that it lasted for the remainder of his school years, and that he always found the nickname “entertaining.” He said the nickname disappeared for a while whilst he attended university and reappeared again when he started working as a journalist. He stressed that the nickname helped him develop a “sense of identity” connected to his Middle Eastern ancestry. As such, he believed that “turco” was a “normal” nickname: “it’s the nickname for all the Lebanese,” he stated. Similarly, my participant “Juanita” stated that her friends lovingly call her “turqui,” whilst “Monica” stated that whenever she is called “turca” (outside of politics) she takes it as a “loving” nickname: “Many people call me ‘turquita’ and I do not bother to explain anymore, I let them call me that without any issues.”

Finally, there was also an argument that the “turco” label was not discriminatory but rather “ignorance” or a “lack of understanding,” as my interviewee “Maria” put it. For

¹⁷ Vargas and Suaza (2007) illustrate the discrimination against Turbay, including opponents calling him a “dirty turco.”

¹⁸ Authors such as Vilorio (2004) and Almeida (1996) share this sentiment.

example, my participant “Jaqueline,” a descendant of a Lebanese migrant, analysed the different labels and their accuracy. She stated:

The Syrian-Lebanese don’t exist, either one or the other [Syrian or Lebanese]... it’s not a nationality. “Turcos” is worse, as it’s ethnically incorrect. Arab is like Latin American [too general], and Lebanese is a community within the Arab one.

She felt a strong connection to her Lebanese background, and all the other labels seem erroneous to her—though not necessarily negative.

Conclusion

All these accounts demonstrate the different uses and interpretations the term has had, as well as the diversity of experiences within the Arab diasporas. Some individuals and scholars have analysed the inaccuracy of the term “turco” and how it has evoked negative connotations, whilst others emphasise the camaraderie it brings with it. The differences in connotations showcase both the variety of experiences that these migrants and descendants of migrants have had, as well as the extent to which some of them have been able to appropriate the term and its symbolic associations for their own benefit—be it economic, political, social, or cultural. Indeed, these identifiers have become important for some as an aspect of their identity and sense of belonging, whilst others have rejected them, seeing them as discriminatory or as a form of “othering” (Devis-Amaya 2014).¹⁹

The use of the term “turco” can be seen as an example that illustrates how the historical mislabelling of groups can continue to influence contemporary social, cultural, and political dynamics. This term is far more than an incorrect linguistic footnote: it is a representation of historical national, ethnic, and socio-economic prejudices in the region; of the boundaries of national identity and sense of belonging within these societies; and of how the local context can have significant implications for the assessment of the label, from differentiation and discrimination to appropriation and integration. Today these descendants of Middle Eastern migrants have become part of the socio-cultural, political, and economic histories of their Latin American nations; and as such, the labels attached to them have also done so.

¹⁹ I argue that many in the communities saw the labels as a hierarchy within a “desirability” rank, some seeing ‘turco’ and Arab as undesirable and Lebanese more desirable; others also seeing Arab as desirable and as an opportunity to create links with the Middle East (Devis-Amaya 2014).

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