ARE WE THE WORLD'S MOST SUCCESSFUL DIASPORA? MAYBE!

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The Lebanese diaspora shows up on many observers' short lists of the most successful diaspora in the world. Why?

I was driving HOME from work, listening to public radio, when Stephen Dubner, host of "Freakonomics," a weekly podcast, asked, "Who are the most successful immigrant groups in the world?" Certainly, the Lebanese diaspora will be one of them, I thought.

Sure enough, Dubner recalled sitting on a plane with intellectual Nassim Taleb, a Lebanese-American living in New York and the author of "The Black Swan" and "Antifragile," discussing how successful the Lebanese diaspora is. If you look at the 30 richest countries in the world, you'll find that among the richest people in those countries are Lebanese, Taleb told Dubner.

It is easy to recall many success stories from the Lebanese diaspora — the richest man in the world, Carlos Slim, Swatch founder Nicolas Hayek, consumer protection champion Ralph Nader, iconic DJ Casey Kasem, U.S. Senate leader George Mitchell, renowned heart surgery pioneer Dr. Michael DeBakey, White House correspondent Helen Thomas, designer Elie Saab, leading actress Salma Hayek, celebrated U.S. TV star Danny Thomas … the list goes on.

But such a list could be made with almost any immigrant group, American economist Louis Fortis, Ph.D., noted in an interview with HOME. Fortis, an educator and newspaper publisher-editor, who served three terms in the Wisconsin State Assembly, was a visiting professor at Rafik Hariri University in Mechref, Lebanon. He is a former professor at Smith College, a world-class U.S. liberal arts college, an adjunct professor at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and a self-made millionaire himself.

"Like many diaspora, those who leave for a better life are highly motivated, whether it is for an education or a career," said Fortis. "This leads to self-selection." However, there are reasons to consider that the Lebanese are exceptional, he added. "Lebanon is a small country but one that has for decades punched above its weight class."

Is the Lebanese diaspora, as a group, successful? More than others? And, if so, what makes it so special? Plenty of theories have been bounced around in academia.

What's the evidence?
Scholars researching the Lebanese diaspora say it has done exceptionally well. "It's very difficult to say across the board that they were the most successful diaspora," Akram Khater, Ph.D., told Dubner. Khater, a Lebanese American, is a professor of Middle East history at North Carolina State University. "The data show that, at least in the U. S., they are doing pretty well."

In the U.S., where the median annual household income is $50,000, a 2013 article in The Economist noted that "at $67,000, Lebanese-Americans are comfortably above the norm."

If you look at statistics today, Khater noted, in all economic measures, the Lebanese in America are highly successful. They have bigger houses, more professional employment and better incomes. In terms of doctorate degrees, they are usually three-to-one, and master's degrees, 2.4-to-one, compared to the rest of the American population, he said.

However, those markers of success are not present in every country with Lebanese immigrants. And that is not necessarily their fault. The success of diasporas does not depend solely on the characteristics of the group; it is also affected by the "reception and culture of the host countries," wrote Vincent Crapanzano in the introduction to the book "Politics, Culture and the Lebanese Diaspora," a 2010 collection of scholarly essays and research.

Still, many scholars contend the Lebanese diaspora has achieved a remarkable amount of success, especially as entrepreneurs. It is widely believed that Lebanese are among the top entrepreneurs in the world, researcher Hazem Kawazmi wrote in a 2011 study.

What makes the Lebanese so special?
Fortis said he divides the world into actors, directors and producers. The actors are the truck driver, the teacher, the doctor and the plumber. "There is a position with a job description and they fill the job," he said. Then there are the directors, who manage the businesses and institutions. Company presidents, hospital managers, or the heads of non-profits would fit that category. "They can direct and can reshape an existing institution."

Finally, he said, there are the producers, and that is where he would put many Lebanese. "They saw the need and created a business or a nonprofit to fill that need. It wouldn't have existed without them." A producer would be the one who saw the need for a hospital in a community without one, so he would organize a committee and start the process to build it. Or he would recognize a neighborhood without a grocery store and open one. "I saw a lot of producers among my students in Lebanon," Fortis said.

Take serial entrepreneur Paul Orfalea, the founder of Kinkos, for example. In 2012, the Lebanese American told Forbes magazine the idea for the successful international chain of