

THE ECONOMIC TIMES

Who are the most successful immigrants in the world?

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A chance conversation on an airplane inspired one of our recent "Freakonomics Radio" episodes, "Who Are the Most Successful Immigrants in the World?" Stephen Dubner was on his way to South [Africa](#) when one of his fellow passengers, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, author of "The Black Swan" and "Antifragile," told him something remarkable: "If you look at 10 or 20 or 30 of the richest countries around the world, among the richest people in those countries is someone from Lebanon." Of course Taleb would say this, Dubner thought: He's Lebanese. But the idea stuck.

How successful is the Lebanese diaspora? And how did they get to be that way?

Dubner asked his friend George Atallah, who works for the [NFL](#) Players Association in Washington, D.C., and is Lebanese-American. He said that his father, Georges Atallah, is pretty much a walking, talking Rolodex of the Lebanese who's who. Not only does the senior Atallah seem to know each and every person with even a hint of Lebanese ancestry, but he also tries to claim just about any successful person as kin. Here's his son: "I tell you, even athletes, he'll look at [the retired [football](#) star John Elway's] name and he'll say 'John Elway is Lebanese.' And I'll say, 'What are you talking about?' And he goes, 'Yes, Elway. The "Elloway" family. [John Elway](#) is Lebanese!' We grew up with that all the time. He's just the best when it comes to that stuff. You know, we take a lot of pride in our culture."

We tried to verify the heritage of the Hall of Fame quarterback, but were unsuccessful. We did, however, put Georges Atallah to the test. His knowledge of who in the world is Lebanese or even part Lebanese (including Carlos Slim, the telecom mogul who is the richest man in the world; Michael DeBakey, the [heart](#) surgeon; the journalist Helen Thomas; Charles Elachi at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory; the actress Salma Hayek; [Carlos Ghosn](#), CEO of Renault-Nissan; the designer Elie Saab; the pop star Shakira; Paul Orfalea, founder of Kinko's; and even the guy who owns the bridge between Canada and Detroit) is, indeed, remarkable.

Why have Lebanese immigrants done so well around the world? Akram Khater, a historian at North Carolina State University and director of the Khayrallah Program for Lebanese-American Studies, pointed out how large the Lebanese [diaspora](#) is: While some 4.2 million people live in Lebanon today, there are an estimated 15 million to 20 million people of Lebanese descent living outside the country. Khater mentioned that the reasons for this massive emigration include the crash of the [silk](#) market in the 19th century and a brutal civil war in the 20th century.

Interestingly, Taleb said that it is precisely this volatility that has helped make Lebanese emigres so successful: "The idea is that in a natural setting, anything natural, anything organic, anything biological, up

to a point, reacts a lot better to stressors than without. ... A little bit of adversity results in a little bit more performance in anything."

Now, the story of immigrant success isn't, of course, unique to Lebanon. It turns out that Slovaks have the highest rate of homeownership in the United States, Nigerians are some of the most educated people in the country and Jews can claim the most Nobel Prizes.

Your next dinner party just got a bit more interesting.