UNITED STATES OF AMERICA (HTTPS://MINORITYRIGHTS.ORG/COUNTRY/UNITED-STATES-OF-AMERICA/)

Arab and other Middle Eastern Americans

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Profile

No single term encompasses all Americans of Middle Eastern/West Asian/North African descent, but the official category used by the United States (US) Census and other agencies is 'Arab Americans'. However, while they were not profiled in the 2010 Census, nor will be in the next census in 2020, Arabs were estimated at 1.7 million (0.5 per cent) in the 2010 American Community Survey on ancestry, including Arab 291,000, Egyptian 190,000, Iraqi 106,000, Jordanian 62,000, Lebanese 502,000, Moroccan 82,000, Palestinian 93,000, Syrian 148,200, and Other Arab 224,000. In addition, the 2010 survey estimated there to be 464,000 Iranian, 475,000 Armenian, 107,000 Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac and 195,000 Turkish – though in many cases informal or independent estimates have suggested the communities are in fact higher. Data cited by the Arab American Institute suggest that some 3.7 million Americans can trace their roots back to an Arab country.

Just over half are native-born and over 80 per cent are US citizens. According to the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) up to 63 per cent of Arab Americans are Christians (35 per cent Roman Catholic, 10 per cent Protestant and 18 per cent Eastern Orthodox) and around 24 per cent are Muslims.

Arab and other Middle Eastern Americans include Americans of Lebanese, Egyptian, Syrian, Palestinian, Jordanian, Moroccan, Iraqi and other Arab ancestry (including Yemeni, Kurdish, Algerian, Saudi, Tunisian, Kuwaiti, Libyan, Emirati [United Arab Emirates], Omani, Qatari, Bahraini and Bedouin), who fall within the general terms Middle Eastern and North African. There are also communities with other ancestry in the US, such as Amazigh (Berbers) originally from North Africa.

Although Arab Americans share broadly similar histories of immigration and reception in the US, their origins, faiths, languages and cultures are diverse. Many would not necessarily consider themselves a 'minority', preferring to see themselves as part of the mainstream, while still seeking recognition of their communities.

Historical context

Immigrants from the Arabic-speaking countries arrived in the US in three distinct waves. The first, between 1890 and 1920, brought over 250,000 people from what was then Greater Syria and other regions; these arrivals were mostly Christian peasants seeking economic opportunity. The second wave came after the Second World War and the creation of Israel, when tens of thousands of Palestinians emigrated to the US. After 1965, when prejudicial immigration laws were reformed, there was a third wave of Arab immigrants, numbering about 250,000. The second and third waves were about 60 per cent Muslim and often highly educated, constituting a 'brain drain' from Palestine, Egypt, North Africa, Iraq, Yemen and other parts of the Arab world. North African Arab Americans, Muslim and non-Muslim, are increasing in number, and share concerns both with other Arab Americans and with African Americans.

By the late 1980s, the US cut back the number of Middle Eastern immigrants it accepted. Many recent immigrants are alienated by prevailing attitudes and have limited contact with longer-established, more assimilated Arab–American communities. Linguistic barriers have also blocked their social and economic advancement. On average, however, Arab Americans in the twenty-first century are better educated, more prosperous and more politically active than the average American.

In the 1980s, Iran became one of the top ten source countries for US immigration, although by the early 1990s it had become more difficult for Iranians to obtain visas. Many came as students in the 1960s and 1970s, but most arrived after the Iranian Revolution. A large number are Muslims and supporters of the former Shah, but many left because they were members of leftist opposition movements, non-Islamic faiths or oppressed ethnic groups. The total number of Iranian Americans is unclear: the 2010 American Community Survey of the US Census Bureau reported 463,600, though unofficial estimates suggest they may number up to 1 million. The largest Iranian population centre is in Los Angeles, although New York City and Washington DC also have large communities. The state of

Texas also has a large Iranian community. Many of the immigrants were members of the upper classes in Iran, and on average they are extremely well educated. Half the US Iranian population is self-employed. However, many were never wealthy and the process of moving to the US has caused considerable financial hardship and personal pain. Open hostility between the US and Iranian governments has also raised problems for the Iranian–American community. The 1979-80 hostage crisis at the US embassy in Iran, in particular, led to widespread harassment, violence and discrimination. The community also experienced a similar backlash following the 11 September 2001 attacks, including, according to the National Iranian-American Council (NIAC), improper workplace background checks, interrogations and surveillances, deportation proceedings and inappropriate recruitment of informants within the community.

Armenians fled in significant numbers to the US as a result of the genocide of 1915-23, and immigrants from Armenia and its diaspora continue to arrive. The 2010 American Community Survey counted 474,600 Armenian Americans. Turkey was also a significant source of immigrants in the early twentieth century, and several thousand people came to the US from Turkey each year after 1960, many of them Kurdish. The 2010 American Community Survey counted 195,300 people of Turkish origin.

Political and socio-economic issues

Middle Eastern immigrant communities are often lumped together by US politicians and the general public as 'Arabs'. Persians and even non-Middle East groups like South Indians and Pakistanis have shared the brunt of widespread anti-Arab (and anti-Iranian) prejudice. Arab Americans and other Middle Eastern people have been the targets of repeated Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) investigation and random violence since the early 1970s, and each US confrontation with a Middle Eastern country is followed by an outbreak of hatred. During the 1991 Gulf War, hundreds of anti-Arab actions, including arson, bombings, assault and attempted murder, took place across the country. In 1985, Alex Odeh, a regional director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) was killed by a bomb trip-wired to his office door, to little government or media reaction. In 1995, when a federal building in Oklahoma was bombed, government officials and media blamed the event on Arabs or Muslims for days, causing a rash of violence, until the FBI charged members of a white anti-government militia.

Since the late 1970s, Arab Americans and Arab Canadians were periodically subjected to harassment at border crossings, and the US repeatedly sought to deport politically active Arab visitors or immigrants as 'terrorist supporters', even though they have not been convicted of any crime. Negative stereotypes of Middle Eastern characters and of Islam have been common in US film and television, and in radio and newspaper commentaries.

The ADC and several other Arab groups have become highly visible as critics of bias in US foreign and domestic policy, as well as in public life. Many Arab–American individuals have achieved political prominence, mostly from the assimilated 'first wave', including members of Congress, senators,

cabinet members, state governors and municipal officials. Non-Arab groups have organized more around internal professional, academic and religious ties.

Following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US, Arab Americans across the country were subjected to harassment and discrimination both in their communities and at the hands of state agencies including arbitrary detention, racial profiling and aggressive checks and detention for questioning in US airports and border crossings. These issues have persisted in the ensuing years as the Middle East has continued to be a focal point of US foreign policy, with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the protracted conflict that followed. In recent years, the emergence of revitalized threats, particularly the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and a spate of violent attacks in North America and Europe by local sympathizers, has helped to drive continued hostility towards Arab and Middle Eastern Americans of all faiths.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and state and local fair employment agencies also documented a significant increase in the number of charges alleging workplace discrimination based on religion and/or national origin in the wake of September 2001, many filed by individuals who are or are perceived to be Muslim, Arab, South Asian or Sikh. These charges most commonly alleged harassment and unfair discharge.

Current issues

The legacy of the 11 September 2001 attacks and the subsequent engagement of US forces in Afghanistan and Iraq has had long-lasting implications. Indeed, the discrimination they experience continues to be both ethnic and religious in nature, shaped by anti-Muslim attitudes – prejudice frequently applied to practitioners of other faiths presumed on account of their ethnicity to be Muslim. Arab and Middle Eastern Americans have repeatedly suffered spikes in hate crime following major incidents in the US or Middle East since the 1970s, demonstrated by the rise in targeted violence after September 2001 and in the wake of more recent incidents such as the November 2015 attacks in Paris.

This trend has, however, become far more pronounced since the election of Donald Trump as President. While previous leaders, including George Bush Jr who, while instrumental in the so-called 'War on Terror' and the invasion in particular of Iraq, repeatedly emphasized the distinction between militant extremism and Muslim communities, the large majority of whom opposed terrorist violence. Trump, however, has actively sought to conflate Muslims with the threat of terrorism. One of the first steps following his inauguration was the signing of an Executive Order banning all people with non-immigrant or immigrant visas from seven Muslim majority countries – Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen – for 90 days. The legislation was blocked a number of times as unconstitutional by federal courts and went through various amendments before the Supreme Court in June 2018 accepted a revised version, restricting entry for nationals of Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen (as well as North Korea and certain officials from Venezuela).

Trump stoked further negative sentiment against Arab and Middle Eastern Americans at the end of 2018, with his push to build a wall along the US border with Mexico. During a meeting with Democratic Party Congressional leaders in December 2018, Trump stated that 10 'terrorists' had recently been apprehended at the southern border (a figure that proved to be baseless), while claiming that the wall would make Americans safer. Earlier in the autumn, the President stated that there were 'Middle Easterners' mixed in with the caravan of refugees heading towards the US border – again without proof, something which he later admitted. Sadly, these messages appeared to have an impact: a survey conducted in October 2018 concluded that a quarter of Americans believed that the migrant group 'includes terrorists'.

More positively, 2018 represented a significant year for Arab and Middle Eastern community political participation. Rashida Tlaib became the first ever Palestinian American to be elected to become a Member of Congress, representing a district in Michigan. She is also one of the first two Muslim women in Congress – together with Ilhan Omar who is Somali American and from Minnesota.

The US Census currently does not collect disaggregated data on Arab and Middle Eastern communities as (with the exception of figures on the Latino populations) it focuses on race rather than ethnicity. While the Census Bureau has acknowledged the need to improve data collection on these communities, it announced in January 2018 that there would not be Middle Eastern or North African categories in the 2020 Census: this was seen as a setback by advocates for their inclusion, given the importance of accurate data for public representation, though some community members were wary of this data being collected in the current political climate.

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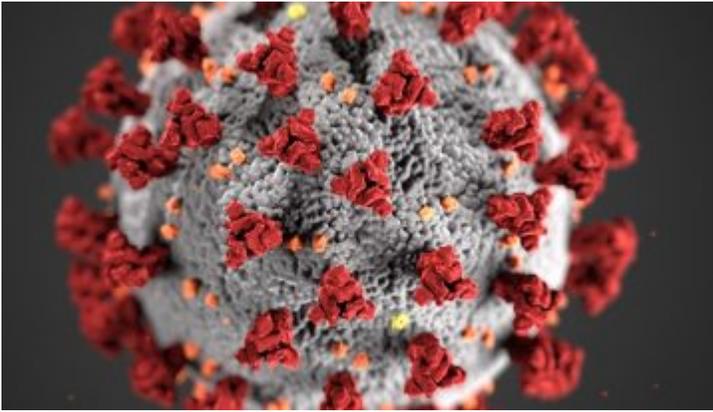 (https://minorityrights.org/2020/03/24/covid19-

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Minority Rights Group International (MRG) Deputy Director, Claire Thomas, writes this opinion piece for the Thomson Reuters News Foundation.

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Despite this worrying global situation, we reaffirm our commitment to safeguarding the rights of minority and indigenous communities and implementing indivisible human rights for all.

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