

History, Demography and Identity

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The headline of an article in the September 24, 2001 *Newsweek* read, "Patriotism Versus Ethnic Pride, An American Dilemma: Arab-Americans Worry About a World of Hate."¹ The article reported that the September 11th incident made it difficult and still makes it difficult for Arab-Americans to function on a daily basis because of all the hatred and harassment. Unfortunately, this is not an exceptional situation. Indeed, the Arab-American community has been prevented over and over again from simultaneously demonstrating both its patriotism and its communal pride.

William Leuchtenburg, a distinguished American historian, looked at American history books about twenty years ago and came to the following conclusion: "From the perspective of the American historian, the most striking aspect of the relationship between Arab and American cultures is that, to Americans, the Arabs are a people who have lived outside of history."² For one may read any standard account of the history of America, until the most recent times, and derive from it the impression either that the Arabs [and, to almost

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the same extent, all Arab- and Muslim-Americans] have had no history or that it was only of the most inconsequential sort.”³

Surveys of high school textbooks in six states in the United States including New York, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Indiana, Kansas and California indicated that Arabs, Arabism, and Islam were discussed only occasionally.⁴ The treatments, however, were along the lines of stating that Islam has five pillars, then mentioning four and forgetting the fifth. Or they referred to Muslims in a very disparaging fashion, and included cartoons that denigrated Arabs and Muslims. There has since been some improvement, but it has been minimal.

So the question arises: who are the American Arabs, and where did they come from? Since I have been asked to cover the history, demography and identity of a diverse Arab-American community over the past one hundred and twenty years, it will be possible for me to address only general trends, leaving the details and nuances to be discussed during the question/answer period, and by other participants.

The Arab-American community is composed of approximately three million people, both Muslims and Christians. Among the Muslims, Sunni Muslims are in the majority in the United States as they are in the Arab world. There are also Shiite Muslims and Druze. (Although Druze, with their own religion, sometimes are not included in the Muslim community, they are nevertheless part of the Arab-American community.)

Christian Arabs are drawn from every Christian group: from Eastern churches, like the Maronites and Melkites, and churches united with Rome, as well as Protestants, and there is now even an occasional Mormon American Arab.

The group originally came from what today are Arabic-speaking countries,⁵ and what they were called here reflects American confusion about who they are. They have been referred to by a plethora of different names: Turks, Syrians, Arabs, Arabians, Muslims, Syrian-Lebanese, Asians, Turks from Asia, Caucasians, White, Black, Colored. In the early period they were known as Syrians because they came from geographic Syria, which included present day Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Iraq. In later years, they came from the rest of the Arab world as well.

While there are Arab-Americans in all of the fifty states, they are concentrated primarily in industrial states such as New York, California, Michigan, Ohio, and New Jersey. There are large numbers in big cities such as Detroit, New York City, Los Angeles, the Washington area, Chicago, and Boston. On the whole, they are better educated than the average American, and their incomes are higher. That does not mean, however, that every Arab-American is well off and well educated. About ten percent fall under the poverty level⁶ and are largely shut off from the rest of the community, either as a matter of choice or because their lack of English makes them fear it.

There were, broadly speaking, two waves of Arab immigration to the United States, and they had markedly different characteristics.

The first wave arrived between the late nineteenth century and World War II. It came from the geographic Syria region, especially from the small towns and villages in the Mount Lebanon area, and was primarily Christian. Most of the immigrants were lower-middle class or somewhat poorer. Their greatest bond was the family and the sect to which they belonged. They arrived not really understanding nationality very much, primarily because there was no such concept where they came from. Importantly, they thought of themselves as sojourners, believing that they would be here for only a short time before returning home. They therefore did not strike roots in the country right away.

However, by about 1908 or 1909, they began to think seriously in terms of settling down and becoming citizens. Unfortunately, that coincided with a surge of nativism in the United States, directed especially against people from Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire. The Arab immigrants began to encounter very serious roadblocks to citizenship. The Immigration and Naturalization Service argued that they were not really white free persons, but Asians like the Chinese and Japanese, and therefore were not entitled to citizenship. But Arab immigrants, who had been considered white by the American government and public since the 1880s, began to fight in court. By about 1923-1924 immigrants from greater Syria, especially Christians, had, through the U.S. federal courts, achieved "free white" status.⁷ However, Muslims and Arabs from outside Syria were not included in that category until the 1940s. A major court decision in 1944 reversed the 1942 denial of

citizenship to an applicant on the grounds that he was a Muslim, an Arab, not from an area that was accepted as part of Europe, and therefore not really white.⁸ The decision may have been motivated in part by the recognition that the United States was becoming a world power and it was in our national interest to be more inclusive (the court's opinion noted, "In so far as the Nationality Act of 1940 is still open to interpretation, it is highly desirable that it should be interpreted so as to promote friendlier relations between the United States and other nations.")⁹ In any event, after 1965, immigration law was liberalized¹⁰ and more and more Arabs arrived.

The extensive earlier restrictions on citizenship, however, led much of the Arab-American community to try and hide its background. It did not emphasize its origins to its children, who for the most part grew up either ignorant of their background and heritage or ashamed of it. Many in the community nonetheless believed that they were not only as good as others in the U.S. but that they contributed to the West by leavening its materialism with the spirituality of the East. They were largely assimilated by the end of World War II.

The second and quite different wave arrived after World War II. These immigrants came from all parts of the Arab world. Because their reasons for coming differed from those of the first wave, they brought a different set of characteristics to the community. Whereas the earlier community came primarily to gain material wealth, the second wave came for a variety of reasons. They were better educated. They had read about democracy and, acquiring a taste for it even though they were unable to practice it at home, thought they would be able to enjoy it in America. Among them was a desire for education and for a better way of life. But many immigrated as well because of conflicts in the area. They came as a result of the creation of the State of Israel and the dismantling of Palestine; many were Palestinian refugees. Others came as a result of civil wars in the area, and the revolutions in Egypt and Iraq and, later, Yemen. They were secular and articulate, and they had a better sense of nationality and identity. While some of them were

sojourners, by and large they came as permanent immigrants or as students who decided to remain. A community emerged that identified itself as Arab.

The second wave's arrival coincided with changes in the American culture, especially the demise of the old melting pot theory. The civil rights movement and developments in academic disciplines such as anthropology and sociology had led to the idea that it was all right to accept your background: to be an ethnic, if you will. The idea of an ethnic Arab community began to grow.

The 1967 War in Israel and Palestine was the watershed so far as the Arab-American community was concerned. American media coverage of the war was absolutely horrendous for the Arabs who lived through it. Almost none of it demonstrated any sympathy or objectivity about Arabs or Arab-Americans. The community reacted by forming organizations that would defend it, that would begin to explain the community to the rest of the society here, that would try to educate Arab-Americans about how to coordinate, how to get the Arabs and other Americans to talk to each other.

The Association of Arab-American University Graduates, a major national organization, was formed in 1967. The National Association of Arab-Americans, the first Arab-American lobbying organization, followed in 1972, thanks in large part to the efforts of former U.S. Senator James Abourezk. In 1980, as the result of a great deal of discrimination and prejudice, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee was created. And in 1985, the Arab American Institute was organized, primarily to get Arabs to participate in the political process.

Unfortunately, the Arab-American community found that it was difficult for it to participate fully in the body politic of this country. Arab-Americans discovered that they were simply shut out. If they ran for political office they found their opponents using their Arab background against them. The assumption was that an Arab background meant you were associated with terrorism. Even Arab-American money was suspect. When Arab-American citizens attempted to contribute to Walter Mondale's presidential campaign in 1984, he came under pressure: "How can you accept money from Arabs?" He returned the money. The same went for Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. When he received a hundred dollar check from his fellow Democrat, former senator Abourezk, he returned it. More recently, during the 2000 elections, Hillary Rodham Clinton returned "Arab" money after being taunted by her opponent for the U.S. Senate seat in New York. Accepting money from Arabs would have been a political liability. Again, these were not Arabs; they were Arab-Americans, trying to be full members of the body politic but told they were not allowed to participate in the process.

What does that do to the community? Arab-Americans had many reactions. One was ethnic denial, which in essence amounted to, "All right, I'm not an Arab-American, I'm not an Arab. I won't call myself Arab. I won't call myself Muslim-Arab in the United States. I'll call myself a subdivision like a Chaldean or a Copt or a Maronite or an Egyptian." Another response was to say, "We're really not Palestinians or Libyans; we're Maltese or Greek or Italian," so we can melt in, can't we?

Another group essentially chose ethnic isolation. This was particularly true of newer groups that came in the 1980s, especially Muslims. Finding that they could not change society's attitudes very easily and that they could not accept what was going around them, they effectively decided to remain in their own enclosure.

But the majority wanted integration. They wanted to be part and parcel of American society. Many succeeded. Unfortunately, societal attitudes have made this difficult. There is a move among the younger Arab-American population to insist that even though the designation white applies to Arab-Americans, in practice, Arab-Americans have not been white. They are not white; that is, they are not fully accepted; because of the way they are treated. This is especially true when there is a crisis that relates to the Middle East, and prejudice prevents their views from being taken into consideration. But if we are to integrate Arab-Americans, we need to read Arab-Americans into American history and to follow through by making sure that Arabs are indeed allowed to become integrated politically and socially. Movies have portrayed Arabs and Muslim-Americans in extremely negative terms.¹¹ We have to begin producing movies about average, decent Arabs and Arab-Americans. Unhappily, Islam and Arabism have been hijacked. They have been hijacked by extremists in the Middle East but, in a way, they have also been hijacked by different extremists here. By continuing to emphasize the negative we marginalize the majority of the people, good decent Americans who want to be integrated.

¹ Lynette Clemetson and Keith Naughton, "Patriotism vs. Ethnic Pride, An American Dilemma: Arab-Americans Worry about a World of Hate." *Newsweek*, September 24, 2001, p. 69.

² William E. Leuchtenburg, "The American Perception of the Arab World," in George N. Atiyeh, ed., *Arab and American Cultures* (American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1977), p. 15.

³ William E. Leuchtenburg, "The American Perception of the Arab World," in George N. Atiyeh, ed., *Arab and American Cultures* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1977), p. 15.

⁴ Michael W. Suleiman, *American Images of Middle East Peoples: Impact of the High School* (New York: Middle East Studies Association of North America, 1977).

⁵ These are the 21 members of the Arab League, including the Palestinians. A study in January-February 2000 by Zogby International found that 56% of the Arab-Americans included came from Lebanon, 14% from Syria, 11% from Egypt, 9% from Palestine. James J. Zogby, "Understanding Arab Americans, Part 1," April 3, 2000, <http://www.aaiusa.org/newsandviews/washingtonwatch/040300.htm>

⁶ "CPH-L-149 Selected Characteristics for Persons of Arab Ancestry: 1990," *1990 Census of Population and Housing, CP-3-2, Ancestry of the Population in the United States* (US Bureau of the Census, 1990), p.2. The Zogby International study mentioned in footnote 4 found that 30% of Arab-Americans earn more than \$75,000 a year, and that 22% earn under \$25,000. 48.5% had at least a college education.

⁷ See Joseph W. Ferris, "Syrian Naturalization Question in the United States: Certain Legal Aspects of Our Naturalization Laws," Part II, *The Syrian World* 2, no. 9 (1928), pp. 18-24.

⁸ *Ex Parte Mohriez*, 54 F. Supp. 941 (1944); see *In Re Ahmed Hassan*, 48 F. Supp. 843 (E.D. Michigan) 1942.

⁹ The entire sentence reads, "In so far as the Nationality Act of 1940 is still open to interpretation, it is highly desirable that it should be interpreted so as to promote friendlier relations between the United States and other nations and so as to fulfill the promise that we shall treat all men as created equal." *Ex Parte Mohriez*, op. cit., at 943.

¹⁰ 1965 Immigration Act, PL 89-236.

¹¹ See Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Olive Branch Press, 2001).