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ARAB AMERICANS

Arab Americans are citizens or permanent residents of the United States who trace their origin to countries in the Middle East or northern Africa (Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, or Yemen). This entry provides a brief overview of the sociocultural background of Arab Americans and then describes their experiences of hostility and discrimination following the attacks of September 11, 2001.

History

The first influx of Arab immigrants to the United States took place between the late 1880s and the

1920s. A second wave began in the late 1940s, particularly after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Between 1925 and 1948, political restrictions were placed on Arab immigration to the United States, and it was further limited by the Depression and by World War II. Most of the recent immigration took place following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the civil war in Lebanon, the Kurdi-Iraqi conflict of the 1960s, the Iraq-Iran war from 1980 to 1988, and the Gulf War of 1990. These conflicts have contributed to a large influx of Arab Americans who have come to the United States in search of refuge from war, education, better health care, and an opportunity to establish their own businesses. Many of the Arab Americans in this immigration flow were Muslim, with higher educational backgrounds and incomes than their predecessors.

Demographics

Counting the number of Arab Americans in the United States is challenging in many respects, mainly because of misrepresentation or misidentification of their ancestry. Prior to the 1920s, census data counted Arabs along with Turks, Armenians, and other ethnic groups who were not of Arab origin; non-Syrian Asian Arabs were counted as "other Asians"; and Palestinians were counted as refugees, as Israelis, or according to their last country of residence. While the 1990 census data reported 870,000 Americans identifying themselves as having Arab ancestry, by 2000 this number had grown to 1.2 million. Assuming that census data are adjusted for its race/ethnicity category and that Arab Americans fill out census forms, it is estimated that by 2010 their number will increase to approximately 3 million.

One of the limitations of the census is that, to some extent, it does not overcome the problem of geographic location when taking "Arab" ancestry into consideration. For example, Egypt may be considered by many as an Arab country (particularly because its nationals speak Arabic as their official language); however, some Egyptians consider themselves Africans rather than Arabs. Another limitation is that people may identify themselves by the color of their skin rather than their ethnic origin. The U.S. Bureau of the Census categorizes Arab Americans as Whites, although some of them are Black.

Arab Americans live throughout the 50 United States, but the greatest percentage are in California, New York, New Jersey, Michigan, Ohio, Texas, Illinois, Massachusetts, Maryland, and Virginia. Dearborn, Michigan, has been identified by the U.S. Census Bureau as the city with the highest percentage of Arab Americans. A number of Arab Americans were exposed to multilingual education in their home country before immigrating to the United States and are bilingual, primarily in English and Arabic (the official language of Arab countries). However, they have different dialects, depending on their country of origin.

The majority of Arab American immigrants before 1960 were Christians (Maronites, Coptics, Chaldeans), while the most recent immigrants are mostly Muslim. According to the Arab American Institute, in 2002, 63% of Arab Americans were Christian (Roman Catholics, 35%; Eastern Orthodox, 18%; Protestant, 10%); 24% were Muslim; and the remaining 13% had another affiliation or no affiliation.

About 54% of Arab Americans are male, compared with 49% of the total U.S. population. Approximately 82% of Arab Americans have at least a high school diploma, while 36% have earned a bachelor's degree or higher, and 15% have earned graduate degrees. On average, Arab Americans' earnings are 22% more than the U.S. national average.

Impact of the September 11 Attacks

Prior to the September 11, 2001, attacks, Arab Americans assimilated fairly well with the American community as a whole in terms of dealing with trade, business, education, and other aspects of community living. While to some extent, they were subject to some level of stereotyping, scapegoating, hostility, prejudice, and discrimination prior to 9/11, the September 11, 2001, attacks were followed by increased hostility toward Arab Americans on the part of members of other racial and ethnic groups. One of the misconceptions created toward Arab Americans following the attacks was that they are all Muslim. Religion was therefore confused with

cultural background, heritage, and race. Ironically, Arab Americans belong to many different religions, and the greatest number of those residing in the United States are Catholics. This labeling and generalization about Arab Americans, particularly post-9/11, created hostile environments in Arab communities, instilled fear among them, and contributed to an array of incidents occurring against Arab Americans, with hate crimes being the most evident and most reported following the attacks.

The racial/ethnic identification of Arab Americans became even more problematic following 9/11. Hostility and acts of violence were directed against Sikhs, Pakistanis, Indians, and others because they were mistaken for Arabs. Part of this misidentification stems from the misconception that all Arab Americans are Muslim and from misperceptions about multiracial groups.

Hate Crimes and Arab Americans

Hate crimes are crimes motivated by religious, racial, ethnic, national origin, gender, disability, and sexual orientation bias. Although criminal acts motivated by hatred and prejudice have occurred throughout U.S. history, the term *hate crime* did not enter the nation's vocabulary until the 1980s. The FBI has investigated what are known today as "hate crimes" as far back as the 1920s; however, it was only after the passage of the Hate Crime Statistics Act of 1990 and a recommendation to the Attorney General that the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting program began gathering hate crime statistics. Since 1992, it has published reports on hate crimes annually. From 1992 until 2000, crimes motivated by racial bias comprised the largest portion of "reported" hate crimes, followed by religious and sexual orientation bias. The fewest were crimes motivated by ethnic and national origin bias. (When the disability component was added in 1997, it comprised the smallest number of reported incidents and generally has remained the category with the fewest crimes, particularly since hate crimes based on ethnic and racial bias are combined.)

The distribution of hate crimes based on racial/ethnic bias changed following the 9/11 attacks, with a significant increase in the number of hate crimes against Arab Americans. While the largest number of hate crimes remained those motivated by racial bias, crimes motivated by ethnic bias and national origin bias became the second most frequently reported in 2001. The other significant increase in hate crimes in 2001 was in the category of religious affiliation. Prior to 9/11, the second least reported religion-based hate crimes were anti-Islamic incidents; however, such crimes were the second highest reported following 9/11. (According to data from the *Uniform Crime Reports,* anti-Jewish hate crimes represented the largest number of religion-based hate crimes.)

Both official and community-based organization tabulations—derived from self-reported incidents and newspaper accounts—clearly demonstrate the severity of the September 11 backlash. According to Human Rights Watch, the FBI reported that the number of anti-Muslim hate crimes rose from 28 in 2000 to 481 in 2001, a seventeen-fold increase; the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee reported more hate crimes committed against Arabs, Muslims, and those perceived to be Arab or Muslim, such as Sikhs and South Asians; and the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which tabulated backlash incidents ranging from verbal taunts to employment discrimination to airport profiling to hate crimes, reported 1,717 incidents of backlash discrimination between September 11, 2001, and February 2002 (Human Rights Watch, 2002, Section V, "The Human Rights Backlash").

These hate crimes occurred throughout the United States. Some involved threatening phone calls and other forms of verbal harassment; others were violent crimes, including even murder. The victims included both adults and children, and the attacks targeted Arab American businesses, schools, and mosques as well as individuals. The majority of these acts were against Arab Americans, but some were directed at people who were *perceived* to be of Arab descent or Muslim. For instance, attacks were directed against Sikhs, Iranians, Indians, and other people of different nations who met the racial classification and features of an Arab. Such incidents reflected a widespread misconception of what an Arab American really *looked* like. The persons attacked, whether they were Arab Americans or not, were arbitrarily targeted primarily on the basis of physical appearance or dress.

Law Enforcement and Arab Americans

There is no doubt that the September 11 attacks affected the relationship between Arab American communities and law enforcement officials. One such impact were increases in government scrutiny of Arab American communities and in patrol. An important issue with which Arab Americans were concerned was an increase in immigration enforcement, surveillance, and racial profiling directed at Arab Americans. These actions, along with language barriers and a lack of understanding of cultural and racial differences on the part of the police, contributed to Arab American mistrust of law enforcement personnel. Arab American fears of deportation are another factor in relationships with police and immigration officers.

One strategy that law enforcement officials are using to rebuild trust and stronger ties with Arab Americans is community policing, with a particular focus on issues of public safety and security. Although feelings of distrust and discomfort between Arab Americans and police arguably stemmed from the September 11 attacks, Arab immigrants who have experienced an authoritative, dictatorial regime in their original home countries may have preconceived negative ideas about police and government. Organizations such as the Vera Institute's Center on Immigration and Justice have worked to improve relations between law enforcement and Arab Americans. The Arab-American Law Enforcement Association—a coalition of law enforcement personnel based in Dearborn, Michigan—has partnered with the Vera Institute to identify ways in which the needs of law enforcement can be balanced with the needs of Arab Americans.

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See also Community Policing; Media, Print; Hate Crimes; Immigration Legislation, Race Relations; Profiling, Ethnic: Use by Police and Homeland Security; Profiling, Racial: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

Further Readings

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