

# Ethnic Identity vs. Religious Affiliation: Understanding the Divide between Arab American Christians and Muslims

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Received: August 22, 2016      Accepted: August 26, 2016      Online Published: August 29, 2016

doi:10.22158/wjssr.v3n3p438

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjssr.v3n3p438>

## **Abstract**

*The epithets “Arab” and “Muslim” are often confused and, in the mind of many Americans, they expressly mean the same. In reality, they do not even overlap. Actually, although they have become more visible over the past few decades, Arab Americans remain an inadequately described community. The first challenge in studying them poses the problem of determining their size. The non-availability of official census data, added to contrasted estimates provided by nongovernmental institutions, makes it more difficult to draw an accurate statistical picture of such a tiny but extremely diverse group.*

*This paper seeks to explore the thorny issue of Arab American identity. It aims to track the paths of two communities, Arab American Christians and Muslims, that self-identify as “Arabs”, but differ in many respects as to the way they adjust to mainstream society and respond to the stumbling blocks encountered on their way for assimilation. It basically aims to demonstrate how, despite inherited sectarian frictions, both groups succeeded in recent history to cross faith lines and to constitute themselves as a cohesive ethnic entity in the United States. At the same time, it delegitimizes claims that the group named “Arab American” is a monolith, and demonstrates that, contrary to popular assumptions, the two labels, “Arab” and “American”, are not mutually exclusive.*

## **Keywords**

*Arab Americans, Arab Christians, Arab Muslims, ethnicity, identity, racial classification, misconceptions, Islamism*

## **1. Introduction**

Very often, Arabs and Muslims are being stereotyped as belonging to each other’s group. In the United States, where Arab Muslims constitute roughly one-third of the Arab American population and barely a quarter of the bulk of American Muslims, a widespread misperception of both communities still persists among many Americans who wrongly conflate the two groups and continue to use both labels, “Arab” and “Muslim”, interchangeably.

So, just as Muslims in the Arab world assume America is a Christian nation, many Americans assume all Arabs are Muslims. At the global level, recent headcount reveals that, contrary to popular belief, Arabs (originating mainly from North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Southwest Asia) stand for only 20 percent of Muslims worldwide, with a sweeping majority based in South and Southwest Asia (in countries like Indonesia, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh) (Note 1).

This paper seeks to address the thorny issue of Arab American identity. It draws upon the quintessential experiences of two communities that self-identify as Arabs, but are utterly different as to the way they interact with the mainstream society. It aims to explore how, despite traditional and sectarian boundaries, Arab American Christians and Muslims succeeded, over the last few decades, to cross faith lines and to constitute themselves as a cohesive ethnic group in the United States. The study conversely suggests, how, by no means a life binding pledge, the long sought ethno-political solidarity has often been the subject of extreme internal and external tensions that catapulted their communities into the national spotlight and further deepened their marginalization.

The present investigation is articulated around three major developments. First, it introduces both groups, Arab Christians and Muslims, and traces their history back to the arrival of the first Arab cohorts in the 1880s. It shows how, unlike early immigrants who were mostly Christians and who immediately assimilated into the mainstream society, the second and third waves, that respectively disembarked in the 1950s/1960s and 1970s/1980s, were mostly Muslims who were more inclined to preserve their Arab culture, especially their Islamic identity.

Second, while it deflects the incorrect equation of Islam with “Arabness”, the inquiry delves into the controversial issue of Arab American identity, and tempts to elucidate a number inaccuracies related to the label “Arab American”. It demonstrates how, far from forming a monolithic entity, Arab Americans are ethnically, religiously and politically diverse. So, like other mainstream communities, they have multiple and competing identities that not only shape the way they interact with their fellow citizens, but also their political discourse and activism. It suggests, ultimately, that the epithet “Arab” is nothing more than a cultural, linguistic, and to certain extents, political designation.

Third, the research spotlights the major global developments, subsequent to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, notably the advent of radical Islam. It investigates their repercussions across the Atlantic, especially how they resonated on Arab Americans. Incidentally, the growing shift, on the one hand, from Arab to Muslim identity, perceived among an augmenting number of young disenchanting Muslims, and the growing concern, on the other hand, discernible among certain Arab American Christians who feared their loyalty to the United States might be compromised by their close association with their Muslim peers, might lead to an inexorable identity crisis, and probably signal the end of unity among Arab Americans across religious lines.

## 2. Why “Arab” and “Muslim” Are Not Synonymous

### 2.1 Arab Immigration to the U.S.

The Great Migration to the United States (1880-1924) did not only bring about Europeans and Asians in search for a better life, it also drove cohorts of Arab immigrants who successively crossed the Ocean in small groups. Actually, Arab immigration to the New World came in three waves. The first, which started as early as the 1880s, brought groups of immigrants from the Greater Syria province of the Ottoman Empire which, at the time, comprised modern day Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan. Most were single, poor, and uneducated Christians who had no intention to settle permanently in the host country. The question remains then why most arrivals were Christians. Some researchers point out that, in addition to lack of funds to pay for the passage, some Muslims feared they would be unable to preserve their heritage in an overwhelmingly Christian environment (Note 2). As noticed by famous Arab American historian, Alixa Naff, who asserted: *“for Muslims, loyalty to an Islamic ruler, even one perceived as inept or cruel, was critical if Islam was to remain unified and if it was to withstand inimical Western Christian influences. Arab Christians on the other hand, exposed to and protected by the Christian West, attributed the decline of Arab culture to the backwardness of Islam and its Turkish rulers”* (Note 3).

Notwithstanding, while it is feasible to estimate their number (roughly 200,000 by 1924), it is almost impossible to know exactly how many Arab immigrants entered the United States during that period. This is due to diverse factors. Besides the non-availability of recorded data from the village/town of origin about leaving cohorts, poor annotation by American officials, especially the various ways they classified this group (“Greek”, “Armenian”, “Turk”, “Ottoman”, “African”, “Asian”, etc.), reinforced their invisibility and marginalization. So, unlike, for instance, Italian, Irish, or Jewish immigrants who formed cohesive ethnic communities upon their arrival in the United States, Arab settlers had rather to wait until the 1960s just to self-identify as Arab Americans (Note 4).

Regardless of problems of identification affecting the early Arab stock, their number continued to increase exponentially until 1917 when the federal government, under social and economic pressure, took drastic measures against new arrivals from non-European countries. In effect, between 1917 and 1924, the U.S. Congress passed several laws in that sense, including the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 which established a quota system that severely restricted immigration from all countries except northern and western Europe. As to Arab immigrants, referred to, since 1899, as “Syrian”, their number dropped to only 100 people per year (Note 5). In 1940, their overall number was estimated between 200,000 and 350,000 (Note 6).

The second wave of Arab immigrants to the U.S. (1950s-1960s) began after World War II and differed in many respects from the previous one. Dissimilar to earlier groups, most of the new arrivals were literate, qualified, and bilingual Muslims (about 70 percent) who came from across the Middle East, namely Palestine, Lebanon, Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq. Interestingly, they poured from

independent nations and shared a strong sense of ethnic pride and political awareness. If some came from middle class backgrounds, fleeing political turmoil and “intra-Arab” conflicts, others were ordinary students seeking higher education in American universities (Note 7). According to Gregory Orfalea, in his renowned volume, *The Arab Americans: A History*, from 1948 until 1966, 80,000 Arab immigrants entered the United States, many of whom were Palestinian refugees displaced by the 1948 Arab-Israeli War (Note 8).

The third wave of Arab arrivals (1970s-present) sparked a significant influx of both Muslim and Christian newcomers, especially after the United States had changed its immigration policy in the mid-1960s. Actually, the 1965 Immigration Act (also known as the Hart-Cellar Act) which ended all restrictions based on national origin, gave way to a massive exodus of diverse flows from regions devastated by long wars (Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon). Between 1967 and 2003, some 757,626 men and women of Arab descent arrived in the U.S., nearly eleven times the number of immigrants during the second wave (Note 9). Huge numbers came as refugees, subsequent to the First Gulf War in the 1990s, but many poured from countries like Sudan and Somalia escaping wars and starvation.

Finally, contrary to popular belief, the number of Arab immigrants to the U.S. did not dwindle after the 9/11 attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Arab influx continued at the same pace, leveling off at around four percent of the overall number of new residents (Note 10). According to Randa A. Kayyali, in her survey, “The People Perceived as a Threat to Security”, what has substantially dropped, since the 9/11 tragedy, was in fact the number of tourists, students, and temporary workers from Arab-speaking countries whom she called “nonimmigrants” (70 percent between 2000 and 2004). As a result of tough measures taken by the federal government, especially the USA PATRIOT Act (2001) (Note 11), the number of student visas slumped from 19,696 in 2000 to 6,826 in 2004, a decrease of 65.3 percent (Note 12).

## 2.2 *How They Are Counted*

Although the label “Arab American” is often used in the empirical data gathered about them, it remains widely misunderstood. Who is and is not Arab? Who are American Muslims? Are all Arab Americans Muslim? Are all American Muslims Arab? How do Arab Americans self-identify? How does the U.S. Census Bureau classify them as an ethno-racial category? What role do nongovernmental institutions, namely the Arab American Institute, play in providing reliable information that complement and/or readjust official statistics concerning this group? These and other questions need to be answered to depict a clear of who Arab Americans really are.

Because they neither immigrated from a nation-state like, for instance, the Italian or the Polish, nor did they have that sense of national consciousness, necessary to hold them together as a monolithic group, early Arab immigrants who arrived circa the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were difficult to identify, let alone to study or investigate. As a result, the use of the term “Arab” became problematic, not only for federal officials in charge of collecting data about new arrivals, but also for Arab cohorts themselves who did

not use that label to self-identify. So, regardless of their ethnic, linguistic, or religious make up, and because they were natives of the Ottoman-colonized Levant, early Arab pioneers were registered as originating from “Turkey in Asia”. The term “Arab” was only used to refer to Arab-speaking immigrants (Note 13).

The first Arab encounter with racial classification centered round the question of citizenship. Even though they were by no means singled out as a group in the midst of a sweeping nativist wave targeting Catholics, Jews, and non-European groups in general, Arab immigrants had every now and then to confront court challenges to their right to citizenship. Interestingly, the decision to fold Arab Americans in the “Caucasian race” and to grant them the American citizenship, as early as 1880, was not based on strict scientific or “biological” criteria. Rather, it stemmed from inconsistent and often arbitrary court rulings with little or no knowledge of the Arab world. Arabs were defined as “*person(s) having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa*” (Note 14). As to the U.S. Census Bureau, it simply did not consider “Arab” as a racial category, like “White”, “Black”, or “Asian”.

In December 1909, Arab immigrants (now referred to as Syrians) had to confront their first challenge that questioned their “whiteness”, and therefore their eligibility for citizenship, after a 23 year-old Syrian immigrant, named Costa George Najour, appeared in Atlanta’s Circuit Court to hear argument related to his petition to become an American citizen. The court questioned whether Syrians’ birthplace (Turkey in Asia) and his racial appearance qualified him for the white race, notably that the 1870 statute considered as white, among foreign-born applicants, only persons who were either “free white persons” or of “African nationality or descent”. The case was finally overturned on appeal, recognizing that Syrians were Caucasian and therefore eligible for citizenship (Note 15).

In 1914, a federal court in South Carolina re-launched the whiteness/citizenship controversy. It ruled that Syrians might be free white persons, but they were not “*that particular free white person(s) to whom act of Congress (1790) had donated the privilege of citizenship*”, a privilege conceded primarily to people of European descent. Again, the case was invalidated in 1915 upon appeal on the basis that “*physically the modern Syrians are of mixed, Arabian and even Jewish blood. They belong to the Semitic branch of Caucasian race, thus widely differing from their rulers, the Turks who are in origin Mongolian*” (Note 16).

Interestingly, each time they were faced with the threat of losing their citizenship rights in a context of white supremacy, Arab Americans demonstrated a staunch determination to battle for their white racial status, even sometimes at the cost of jeopardizing their ethno-religious unity. Some Arab Christians, for instance, in addition to their economic success which they branded as an undeniable sign of their assimilation, went so far as to play the religious card to offer evidence of their adaptability to a culture so heavily infused with Christian moral superiority, a card that definitely could not be played by their Muslim counterparts (Note 17). In 1909, for instance, H. E. Halaby (a person of Arab-Christian

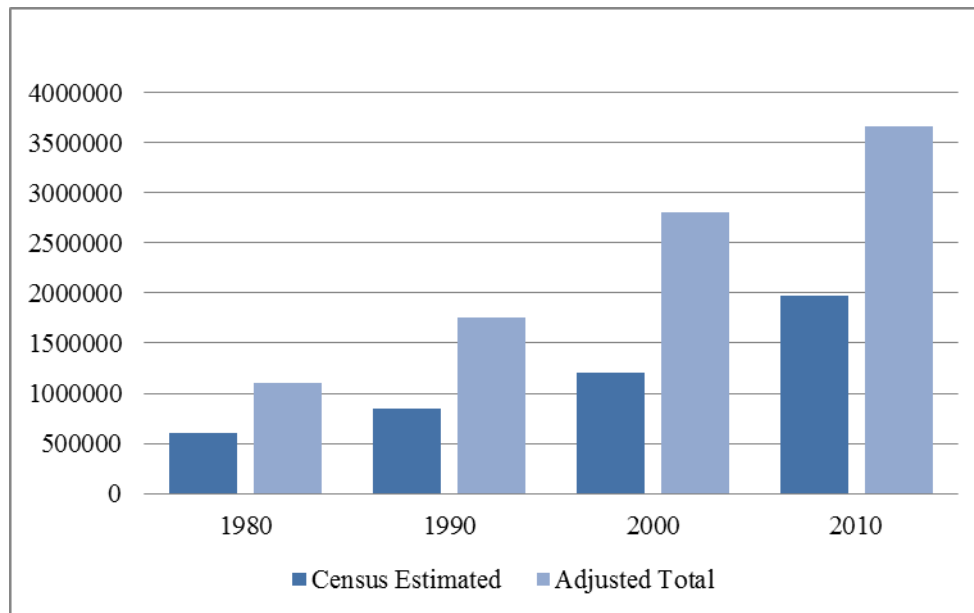
background) wrote a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* in which he argued: “*The Syrians are very proud of their ancestry, and believe that the Caucasian race had its origin in Syria, that they opened the commerce of the world, and that Christ, our Savior, was born among them, in which fact the Syrians take high pride*” (Note 18). By the same token and in the same year, a Lebanese-Syrian policeman (George Shishem), seeking citizenship, challenged the Department of Justice’s claim that, based on his faith, he was part of the “Mongoloid” race. He contended: “*If I am Mongolian, then so was Jesus, because we came from the same land*”, an assertion upon which the Los Angeles Superior Court overruled the Department’s decision, recognizing acknowledging Shishem’s religious appeal to whiteness (Note 19).

Still and all, while it granted them unquestionable legal and social advantages, as now they were recognized as an integral part of the white majority, Arab Americans have become increasingly aware of the pressuring need to redefine their identity to form an ethnically identifiable community. For, in addition to the fact that they were not officially recognized as a federal minority group, their classification by the U.S. Census Bureau as Caucasian/White by race served only to weaken any sense, among them, of group solidarity, and further reinforced their invisibility and dislocation. As a consequence, not only they became one of the least studied communities in most group-centered surveys and investigations, but also a significantly undercounted community.

Today, according to the 2010 Census, there are 1,967,570 persons in the United States who reported an Arab ancestry, a figure considered by the Arab American Institute (Note 20) and Zogby International as significantly lower than the actual number which they estimate at 3,665,389. As a matter of fact, the U.S. Census Bureau does not provide any Arab classification option, nor does it request religious affiliation. Instead, federal data on Arab Americans are derived from a question on ancestry (Note 21), a question which appeared for the first time in the 1980 decennial census, and to which surveyed individuals responded by listing a predominantly Arabic-speaking country or area of the world as their place of origin. As indicated in Table One, 290,893 persons self-identified as “Arab” and originating principally from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Morocco, and a further 224,241 as “Other Arabs”, with reference to those tracing their roots to countries such as Algeria, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen (Note 22).

To the Arab American Institute, officially mandated to collaborate with the U.S. Census Bureau as its only Census Information Center (CIC) and advocate on behalf of the Arab American community, the undercount stems from an inaccurate definition of the label “Arab” that markedly differs from the one provided by the Arab League (Note 23). For them, the American Community Survey (Note 24) identifies only a portion of the Arab population through the question of “ancestry”. For instance, they do not include Arab-speaking populations originating from countries like Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, Mauritania and the Comoros (see Figure 1) (Note 25). So, as demonstrated in Table 1, the number of Americans who claim an Arab ancestry grew by more than 72 percent between 2000 and 2010, and

more than doubled since 1980. According to the Arab American Institute, it is one However, regardless of their exact size, the Arab American population is an enormously diverse community that traces ancestral ties to 22 countries, and comprises a highly heterogeneous amalgam of groups with varying historical origins and religious backgrounds, but sharing a common cultural and linguistic heritage that gives them a unifying Arab American identity. of the fastest growing Arab diasporas in the world (Note 26).


















**Figure 1. Arab American Population**

*Source:* 2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates—U.S. Census Bureau.

Furthermore, contrary to what is conveyed about them in mainstream media that often portray them as foreign-born, the majority of Arab Americans, today, are native-born with nearly 82 percent who are full-fledged citizens of the United States (Note 27).

**Table 1. Arab Americans in the 2000-2010 Census**

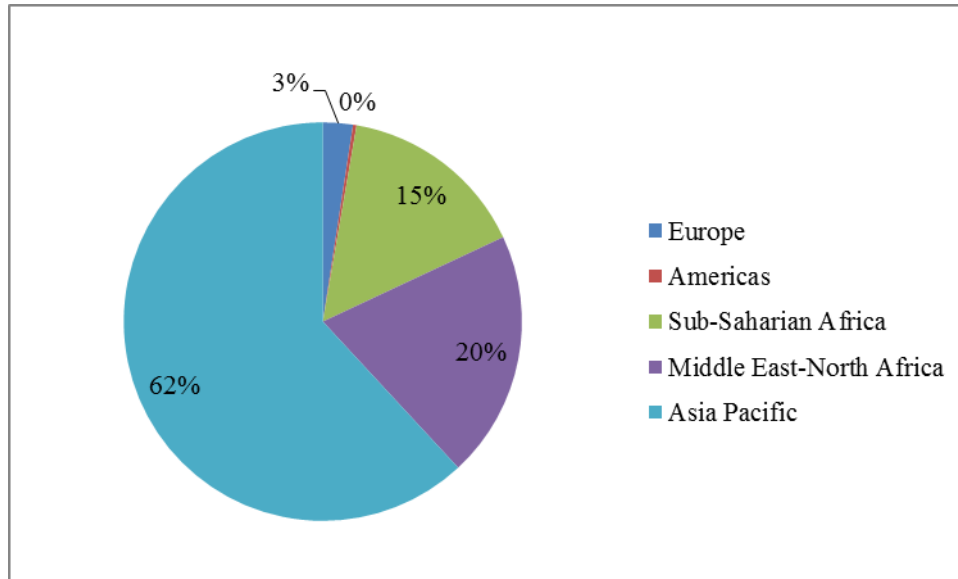
Ancestry	2000	2000 (% of US population)	2010	2010 (% of US population)
 <a href="#">Lebanese</a>	440,279	0.2%	501,988	%
 <a href="#">Syrian</a>	142,897	0.1%	148,214	%
 <a href="#">Egyptian</a>	142,832	0.1%	190,078	%
 <a href="#">Palestinian</a>	72,096	0.04%	93,438	%
 <a href="#">Jordanian</a>	39,734	0.03%	61,664	%

 <a href="#">Moroccan</a>	<b>38,923</b>	0.03%		<b>82,073</b>	%
 <a href="#">Iraqi</a>	<b>37,714</b>	0.01%		<b>105,981</b>	%
 <a href="#">Yemeni</a>	<b>11,654</b>	0.005%		<b>29,358</b>	%
 <a href="#">Algerian</a>	<b>8,752</b>	%		<b>14,716</b>	%
 <a href="#">Saudi</a>	<b>7,419</b>	%			%
 <a href="#">Tunisian</a>	<b>4,735</b>	%			%
 <a href="#">Kuwaiti</a>	<b>3,162</b>	%			%
 <a href="#">Libyan</a>	<b>2,979</b>	%			%
 <a href="#">Emirati</a>	<b>459</b>	%			%
 <a href="#">Omani</a>	<b>351</b>	%			%
<a href="#">"North African"</a>	<b>3,217</b>	%			%
"Arabs"	<b>85,151</b>	%		<b>290,893</b>	%
"Arabic"	<b>120,665</b>	%			%
Other Arabs		%		<b>224,241</b>	%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,160,729</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1,697,570</b>	<b>%</b>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2010).

Confusion over who is and is not "Arab" is made even worse when we add the religious element. The palpable lack of knowledge of this community, coupled with a group stigma that associates them with Arabs in the Middle East and Islamic fundamentalism, further complicates their endeavor to clear any misconception about them, and renders the distinction between the two designators, "Arab" and "Muslim", quite impossible. Actually, very few among their fellow citizens realize that, worldwide, only about 20 percent of Muslims are of an Arab descent (from the Middle East and North Africa), and more than 60 percent of the global Muslim population are based in Asia, in countries like Indonesia (more than 202 million), Pakistan (more than 174 million), India (more than 160 million), and Bangladesh (more than 145 million) (See Figure 2) (Note 28).

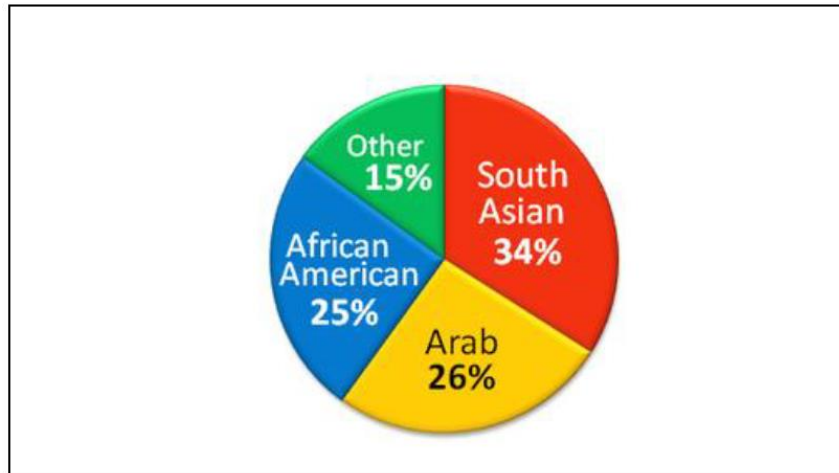




**Figure 2. Estimated 2009 Muslim Population**

*Source:* Pew Research Center (October, 2009).

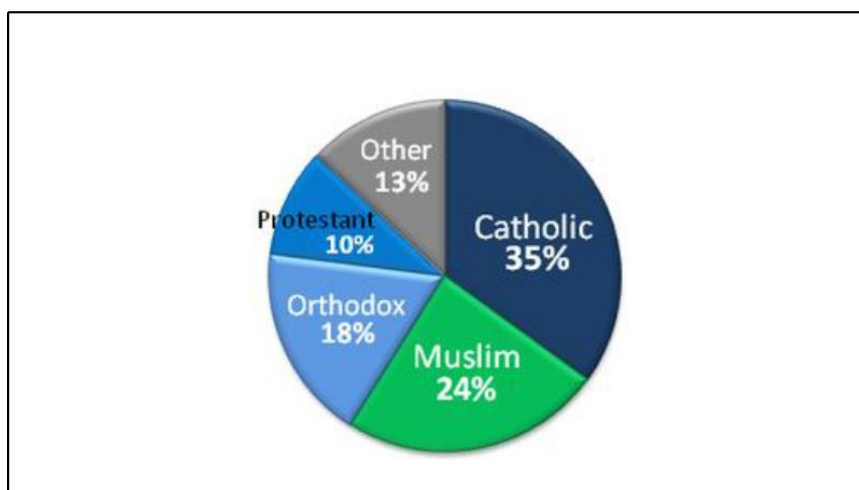
At the national level, once again and contrary to popular assumptions, not only Arab Americans constitute a minority among American Muslims, in general, but also within their respective community. According to recent estimates by the Pew Research Center, there are 3.3 million Muslims living in the United States, representing roughly one percent of the total American population (Note 29). In a similar vein, a 2009 Gallup poll reveals that American Muslims are one of the most racially diverse groups in the country, with African-American making more than a quarter of the overall Muslim population (Note 30). According, finally, to the U.S. Department of State (see Figure 3), American Muslims claiming an Arab origin stand for only 26 percent of American Muslims as a whole, compared with Asian Americans (34 percent) and Afro-Americans (25 percent) (Note 31).



**Figure 3. American Muslim Ethnic Distribution**

*Source:* U.S. Department of State (Recent).

Last but not least, although the Muslim component is growing fast in the United States, Christians constitute an overwhelming majority of Arab Americans. A 2002 Zogby International survey suggests that 63 percent of this group are Christian, 24 percent Muslim, and 13 percent who either identify with another religion or simply do not practice any faith at all (see Figure 4) (Note 32). Conversely, while Arab American Christians are divided between Eastern churches (Orthodox) and Latin rite churches (Maronite, Melkite, and Chaldean), most Arab American Muslims belong to one of the two main branches of Islam: Sunni and Shi'a (Note 33). Druze is another Muslim denomination originating mostly from Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine.



**Figure 4. Arab American Religions**

*Source:* Zogby International Institute Survey (2002).

### 3. White without Privilege

Currently, the group known as “Arab Americans” is situated at an interesting crossroads where the framing of a cohesive ethnic identity has become a matter of utmost necessity. Besides the fact that the federal agencies have often preferred to deal with individuals and groups identifiable in ethnic terms, Arab Americans realized that their “White” status could not sufficiently protect them against the anti-Arab/Muslim prejudice that accompanied the influx of Muslim immigrants, after 1965, and that gained ground following the 9/11 attacks. They understood that they needed more than racial homogenization to secure their future as full American citizens. First and foremost, they needed to redefine their identity across religious and sectarian lines, and notably form a defense mechanism that articulates their singularity as a distinct group, rather than a neglected segment of the white majority. As clearly asserted by Arab American specialist, Alixa Naff, who observed: *“One of the most prevailing themes in Arab American writings is that they are a group who ‘became white’ but who currently do not reap the benefits of ‘whiteness’”* (Note 34).

In a similar vein, numerous Arab American leaders and experts refuted any perceptible advantage from the “White” status, and argued that Arab racialization further amplified their invisibility and resulted in a skewed understanding of who they really were. For, unlike, for instance, Asian Americans, Arab Americans could not be racially identified, as the attribute “Arab” referred to a cultural ethnicity rather than to a racial category. More importantly, the close association, in public discourse, of Arab Americans with the Islamic religion, according to them, further alienated them as the “Other”, and preempted them in a *“not quite white”* or *“honorary white”* subdivision. In this respect, Sawsan Abdulrahim contended: *“Nonetheless, the demonizing of Arabs and Muslims, which began well before September 11, 2001, is part of a dynamic process of racialization that ought to be understood in the context of race history of the United States and, what is more important, challenged”* (Note 35).

It is worth to emphasize, in this context, that throughout their history, Arab Americans have often been subjected to a “shifting color line”, arbitrarily fixed and incessantly morphed by American courts. As a consequence, not only their changing racial classifications were fraught with inaccuracies pertaining to their number, but they also hindered any scholarly investigation about their group, leaving the ground free for media stereotyping and vilification. Most of all, Arab Americans demonstrated a firm resolve to claim their minority status, as they came to discover they had much to gain from achieving such an attribute, than remain categorized as “Caucasian”.

In January 2012, to partly counter mounting discrimination against Arab Americans, but also to derive economic benefits accorded to underprivileged ethnic groups, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) (Note 36) took the initiative to file a petition with the United States Department of Commerce, precisely its Minority Business Development Agency (MBDA), to qualify for “disadvantaged minority” status. Expectedly, such an asset would not only provide tangible economic advantages, as it would favorably position Arab American entrepreneurs, but would also grant them

unrestricted access to lucrative government contracts (Note 37). ADC's initiative was equally meant to challenge the legal designation of Arab Americans as "Whites" and create a new category on U.S. Census that comprises MENA's (Middle East and North Africa) populations (Note 38).

In sum, talking about an all-embracing consensus on the minority status across the Arab American community would be devoid of any substance, namely that a significant number among its members, notably Christians, suspect that such an initiative is likely to deprive them of the privileges of "whiteness" which they clearly relate to their Christianity. In other words, some Arab American Christians (especially among the assimilated stock) are reluctant to leverage their "Caucasian" status for certain utilitarian gains which seem more likely, in a context of war on terror, to benefit their newly established Muslim peers than themselves. As stressed by Arab American expert, Khaled A. Beydoun, who points out: *"the cost of winning minority status—for many assimilated Arabs—is the whiteness and accompanying privilege American courts granted them, and rejected others, over the last century"* (Note 39). Actually, while he laments Arab Americans' inability to follow the footsteps of their Jewish counterparts who, thanks to an exceptional sense of group solidarity, succeeded ultimately in surmounting obstacles posited by their religion, Beydoun harshly criticizes part of the Christian component who, instead of standing side by side with their Muslim peers, singled out as the "other" after the September 11 tragedy, preferred rather to *"re-leverage religion as a marker of whiteness and patriotism"*, and use their Christianity as a *"trump card for inclusion in halls of power denied to Arab-American Muslims who rejected tokenization as a means for overcoming de facto Islamophobia-quotas in public and private hiring"* (Note 40). Beydoun finally substantiates his argument with a claim by Mouaz Mustafa, a political consultant in Washington, D.C., who contended: *"We're American and Arab, not Muslim, is what I heard... Many Arab Christians overcompensated by being hyper-Islamophobic"* (Note 41).

#### **4. The Evolution of Arab American Identity**

Achieving minority status at the cost of "whiteness" incontestably granted Arab Americans certain legal and economic prerogatives, but by no means was this sufficient to enhance group solidarity beyond the racial context. Actually, Arab Americans became aware that to compensate for the race deficit and to defend the community's vital interests, they needed more than self-perception. Principally, they needed to set up common goals that not only obscure their internal differences, but also surmount barriers pertaining to their extreme diversity. They became conscious that sharing a common linguistic and cultural heritage was not enough to cultivate a new Arab American identity that promotes their group and challenges their status as *"ambiguous outsiders"* (Note 42). They also came to realize that to consolidate their ethnic features, they had to endeavor for the creation of a new framework that would rally their disparate communities around central issues that could only be addressed through political mobilization. As lucidly captured by Gary C. David, in his insightful article, "The Creation of 'Arab

American’: Political Activism and Ethnic (Dis)Unity”: *“Just as geological pressure can transform coal into a diamond, social pressure can transform a diverse ethnic community into a unified social and political force”* (Note 43).

But the formation of a pan-Arab ethnic identity is a very long and complicated process, as Arab Americans had first to relinquish some of their traditional and sectarian bonds, especially ties with the ancestral homeland that naturally declined with acculturation. How to bridge the gap between two sub-communities, the assimilated Christian stock who showed little interest in political mobilization, and the newly-settled cohorts (those who arrived after World War Two) who were overwhelmingly Muslim, highly educated and eminently politicized? How to construct an ideological core and seek support for a political agenda that defends Arab Americans’ interests, regardless of their religious and national backgrounds? How to form an entirely novel identity that transcends group diversity and paves the ground for the emergence of an ethnic minority with the political label “Arab American”? These and other interrogations posed more than a challenge to Arab American leaders who, in such circumstances, had no alternative but to define a clear vision for the future their community, and set up a judicious political strategy that would secure their rights as the members of a distinct ethnic group, and more importantly as full American citizens.

However, taking into account the extreme group diversity, the discernible disinterest in political activism, namely the lack of consensus around common goals, one would gauge only an extraordinary event would have to take place to change the course of history for a community that had been still looking for a sense of purpose. The 1967 Arab-Israel War, in that respect, not only signaled the advent of a new era in Arab American history, but also provided a strong catalyst for a collective and large-scale political action that crossed faith lines and stressed the value of “being an Arab” above all other attributes. Actually, Arab Americans could hardly understand the unequivocal support shown by their fellow citizens to the Jewish state and, at the same time, the degree of “Arab” vilification across mainstream media and within the American political discourse. *“What resonated the most in the minds of many Arab Americans”*, commented Gary C. David, *“was not only the quick victory by Israel, but the out-right support given to Israel by the United States government, the mass media, and the public”* (Note 44).

To renowned scholar and Arab American Muslim expert, Yvonne Y. Haddad, the 1967 Six-Day War basically brought to visibility a group of people that, so far, had lived at the periphery of mainstream society and had often been marginalized in scholarly research and social studies. She observed: *“It was the advent of the Arab-Israeli war in 1967 that new meaning came to be attached to the term Arab-American. The specific experiences of Arabs in the United States became the subject of study analysis by a number of Arab intellectuals”* (Note 45).

Interestingly, the manifestation of the group acceptance of a new ethnic identity came as a reaction to anti-Arab bias. But Arab Americans found also common ground in the Palestinian cause which

enhanced, among them, a new sense of political engagement, and chiefly served as a linchpin to unify their ranks and galvanize their energies. Most of all, it demonstrated that the group, now named “Arab Americans”, was by no means a rigid monolith, but rather a fluid and dynamic ethnicity. It became evident, according to Ozdil Zehni, that “*Arab American identity was no longer dormant and amorphous. Arab Americans had become an integral American minority group*” (Note 46).

Put in a wider context, the emergence of ethno-political activism among Arab Americans could partly be attributed to Arab nationalism, or pan-Arabism, a political movement that had swept through the Arab World in the 1950s and 1960s (Note 47). Many Arab Americans joined to adopt an Arab nationalist stance, as probably for the first time, they realized how challenging it was for them to reconcile their Arab identity with their American one. But to some Arab specialists, namely famous scholar, Michael W. Suleiman, the burgeoning political consciousness among Arab Americans was, in large measure, due to the presence of a new cohort of “*politically sophisticated*” immigrants who not only injected new blood into a nascent group awareness, but also brought about a new sense of purpose to a community that for so long had lived at the margin of American mainstream society, despite its acculturation (Note 48).

Concomitant with the advent of political activism, in the late 1960s, was the emergence of Arab American national organizations with a clear goal, not to lobby for an “Arab” political agenda, but rather to combat anti-Arab discrimination and negative stereotyping at home and to advance the Palestinian cause at the foreign policy level. Arab American advocacy groups were, in fact, established as ventilation of a new spirit that aimed to embrace community interests, regardless of any national or religious consideration. None was oriented on religion, as, according to Yvonne Haddad, they “*appealed to a sense of shared history and a common destiny in the United States. They transcended religious and sectarian differences as their membership included concerned people of all faith communities*” (Note 49). Among the most influential, we can cite the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) which was formed in 1967, the National Association of Arab-Americans (NAAA) which had been active between 1972 and 2002, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) founded in 1980 by former Arab American federal Senator, James Abourezk, and the Arab American Institute (AAI) established in 1985 by Dr. James Zogby and headquartered in Washington, D.C.

### **5. Shift from Arab to Muslim Identity**

The new political awareness that fashioned the Arab American identity brought focus and intensity to a disparate community, but by no means precluded immunity from dislocation, as the group, now named “Arab American”, unquestionably made tangible progress in the sense of self-perception and political maturation, but pressures facing its survival have not changed in essence over the years. The 1980s, in this regard, not only marked a turning-point in the history of group unity and cohesion, more

importantly, it confronted the community with its first major identity crisis. Actually, with the global rise of radical Islam, subsequent to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, it became question for Arab Americans to redefine their identity, notably that an increasing number among its disenfranchised Muslim youth started to manifest a growing shift away from Arab to Islamic identity (Note 50). As perceptively anticipated by Khalil Jahshan, the executive director of the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA) who predicted: *“The next few years belong to the Islamists... Arab Americans lack the cementing factors”* (Note 51).

While it was premature, at the time, to come to definite conclusions about any utter group disintegration, the shift from a secular to a religious identity laid bare deep-seated frictions between Arab American Christians and Muslims, and signaled an outright return to pre-1960s sectarian and national antagonisms. Exacerbated by nationwide campaigns in the media, stigmatizing Arabs and Muslims as the “Other”, divisions between the culturally assimilated Christians who always felt more “American” than “Arab”, and the newly-settled Muslims who cling tenaciously to their Islamic identity, started to demarcate the two groups. It became increasingly obvious that, beyond a common cultural heritage and an endeavor to promote the Palestinian cause, both sub-communities did not principally share much else, as they *“did not necessarily live in the same neighborhoods or frequent the same social settings”* (Note 52).

The polemic over “Arab” or “Muslim” identity further polarized the two components of the Arab American community and intensified internal dissensions, with each group claiming more ethnic legitimacy. The “row” reached its apex after the 9/11 tragedy that sharply marked an end to four decades of secular ethnic unity, and seriously called into question the tremendous efforts vested by both Arab Christians and Muslims to reach consensus and group unison. The terrorist attacks laid bare the evidence that joining efforts to fighting against discrimination and promoting the Palestinian cause, as the top priorities of a common “Arab” agenda, did not prove a sufficiently strong group mobilizer.

Interestingly, while both experienced cultural marginalization, regardless of their religious identity, Arab American Christians and Muslims coped with the new post-9/11 context differently. If, to distance themselves from the Arab/Muslim stigma, Arab Christians chose to break with their ethnicity in favor of an all-encompassing adoption of the mainstream culture, their Muslim peers simply decided to retreat into ethnic enclaves, stressing their Arab and Muslim identity above all and everything. The massive influx of Arab Christian immigrants fleeing persecution in some Arab countries (Copts from Egypt, Assyrians from Iraq and Syria, etc.), over the past decades, added to the group disintegration, and fuelled fears about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism discernible among a growing number of Arab American Muslim youth, designated by some tabloid-style media as “Generation Islam”.

It is worth noting, in the same vein, that from the outset, Arab American Christians and Muslims did not evolve in the same neighborhoods, nor did they cohabit in the same social settings. As a result, both groups have developed conflicting views about how they should adjust to the mainstream society, and

often embraced incongruous attitudes as to how self-identify. For instance, while Arab Muslims stress “Arabness” as a principal requisite to Arab legitimacy, their Christian counterparts claim that they are Americans who happen to be of Arab ancestry. Caught in the midst of a ravaging vilification campaign that swept Muslims and non-Muslims alike, some Arab American Christians simply disengaged from their ethnic identity, assuming that they should not carry a burden that was not theirs to carry.

Socially speaking, while Arab American Christians could easily hide their cultural heritage, exhibiting conspicuous signs of their Christianity, like for instance “anglicizing” their names, wearing big crosses, attending the Sunday mass with other “mainstream” American, etc., Arab American Muslims, by contrast, could hardly hide their Islamic identity, especially their Islamic rituals (five daily prayers, the wearing of beards for men and the headscarf for women, etc.) which make of them a visible community, hence a frequently targeted one. Added to that, the recent global mutations, namely the war on terror, the ongoing civil war in Syria, the rise of ISIS or the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant, tightened the grip around this community, deemed unfit within the American ethno-religious mosaic. “*We’re on a double edge sword here*”, contended Osama Siblani, founder of the Dearborn-based (Note 53) newspaper, *Arab American News*, “*There is a general fear in our community that has increased. We are victimized twice. We are victimized as Americans and freedom-loving people and we are victims as Muslims and Arabs. Now you can’t mourn as an American, you have to justify. You have to retake your oath of citizenship. You have to dig up your ancestry. Some of my ancestors came here in the late 1800s. We are part of this great country. That’s what hurts*” (Note 54).

The sentiment of cultural marginalization is prevalent among, for instance, a number of Chaldeans who, although they share basic cultural characteristics with Arab Americans, expressly dis-identify with them on the basis that they are neither Muslim nor Arab. Put into another context, a Christian Lebanese student, for instance, shares very little with an Arab Muslim classmate, and certain Christian pupils of Arab ancestry simply hide their ethnic identity and distance themselves from their Muslim peers. Very often, some among them, who speak English with a native accent, feel disconcerted to have their parents encounter schoolmates and school officials.

Seen through the lens of patriotic loyalty and political trustworthiness, the diagnosis appears much more alarming. According to recent surveys, a substantial number of polled Americans continue to believe that American Muslims comprise a monolithic minority ill-suited to participation in American democracy, that Muslims in general privilege their Muslim identity over their other concerns, and that religion is the driving force behind all their political attitudes and behavior. Consistent with this, a 2015 Zogby International poll revealed that a sizeable portion of American respondents doubted the ability of Arab Americans and American Muslims to perform an important position of influence in the government. For instance, 35 percent of surveyed people felt that Arab Americans would be influenced by their ethnicity, and 46 percent felt that American Muslims would be influenced by their religion (See Table 2) (Note 55). Overall, the survey results suggested that there had been a continued erosion in the



favorable ratings Americans had of Arabs (40 percent in 2010 against 40 percent in 2015), and Muslims (48 percent against 33 percent respectively) (Note 56).

**Table 2. Arab Americans and American Muslims Working in Government**

*If an Arab/Muslim American were to attain an important position of influence in the government, would you feel confident that person would be able to do the job, or would you feel that any ethnic/religious loyalty would influence their decision-making?*

Group	Response	2010	2014	2015
Arab Americans	Confident they could do the job.	42	36	37
	Their ethnicity would influence their decision-making.	32	36	35
American Muslims	Confident they could do the job.	38	34	31
	Their ethnicity would influence their decision-making.	38	42	46

Source: Zogby Analytics (December 21, 2015).

On the whole, while some observers attribute the growing animosity against Arabs and Muslims to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the ensuing vague of terrorist attacks across the Western world, others highlight the lack of knowledge of the above-mentioned groups as an additional factor shaping attitudes toward them. For example, a majority of respondents, in the same survey, say they feel they do not know enough about Arab history and people (54 percent), or about Islam and Muslims (47 percent) (Note 57). Significantly, evidence of this lack of knowledge comes from the fact that a sizable number among Americans wrongly conflate the two communities. This is at least what one can deduce from a previous poll by Zogby Analytics (2014) which gives substance to this reality. In effect, as demonstrated in Table 3, 44 percent of polled Americans mistakenly believe that the majority of Arab Americans are Muslim (in reality, less than a third are), or that a majority of American Muslims are Arab (less than one-quarter are) (Note 58).

**Table 3. Ethnicity and Religion**

*Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree with the following statements:—The majority of Arab Americans are Muslim?*

Response	Total	Dem	Rep	Ind	18-29	65+	White	Non-white
Agree	44	41	50	42	43	47	44	43
Disagree	24	21	28	22	25	23	25	20
<i>—The majority of American Muslims are Arab?</i>								
Response	Total	Dem	Rep	Ind	18-29	65+	White	Non-white
Agree	30	25	40	25	36	27	30	30
Disagree	33	56	32	30	23	26	34	30

Source: Zogby Analytics (July 29, 2014).

## 6. Conclusion: Looking Ahead

On the whole, while it is premature, at this stage, to suggest an irrevocable divide between the two components of the Arab American community, Christian and Muslim, as secular Arab American organizations continue to collaborate to achieve two chief goals: combatting discrimination and promoting the Palestinian cause, one could arguably presume that the road is too long before they regain former group cohesion. At the same time, pursuing a *modus operandi* that narrowly prioritizes each group's distinctive features, and engaging into a polarizing debate on who is more "Arab" or more "American" than the other, would unavoidably accentuate internal divisions and augment the community's vulnerability.

On the Christian side, disengaging from the Arab heritage and emphasizing their Christian faith as a symbol of their *Americanness*, proved relatively shortsighted as they discovered that whatever cultural concessions they make, they could never attain the "American" identity. As plainly expressed by Ray Hanania, a Christian Palestinian American journalist and stand-up comedian, in his famous book, *I'm Glad I Look Like a Terrorist: Growing up Arab in America*, "We pushed our ethnicity down because we wanted dearly to be part of this country. We Changed our names, gave ourselves nicknames, to make it easier for Americans to accept us. 'Kaffirs, or sub-humans'; 'Discriminated against'; 'Victims of bias and stereotyping'; 'Defenseless against the fears and frustrations of society'. These words have meaning to us. No one can really understand the truth of their own ethnicity until they have experienced the pains and the joys of another's" (Note 59).

On their part, while it appears legitimate that they defend their minority status, especially their right of worship in a multi-faith society, Arab American Muslims should pursue more public engagement and work to change the negative perception of Islam among their fellow citizens. Furthermore, marginalized as they are within an already marginalized group, they should more than ever endeavor to delegitimize claims that there is one kind of Islam and one kind of Muslims characterized by their hatred of the West. More importantly, they need to demonstrate that being a Muslim is not the most salient identity when it comes to political participation, as pertinently reflected in a nationwide survey conducted, in 2007, by the renowned Pew Research Center (Note 60).

The inquiry revealed that, contrary to popular assumptions, American Muslims as a whole (Note 61) are diverse, well-integrated, and largely mainstream in their attitudes, values, and behaviors. For instance, when asked about how they felt about their personal identity, nearly half of them (47 percent) said they were Muslims "First", and 28 percent thought of themselves as American "First", a strikingly inferior percentage to that of white evangelicals who identified themselves first by their faith (62 percent) (Note 62). More than six-in-ten U.S. Muslims (63 percent) saw no conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern society. When it came to income and education, American Muslims generally mirrored the U.S. public, with roughly a quarter (24 percent) among them who had a college degree, and 41 percent reporting household incomes of \$50,000 or more annually (against 44

percent nationwide). Like other Americans, once again, American Muslims held mixed views about political issues. As a matter of fact, 38 percent of respondents described themselves as moderate, against only 19 percent who identified as conservatives. They were more likely to affiliate with the Democratic Party (63 percent) than with the Republican one (11 percent). Last but not least, though Muslims in the U.S. had doubts about the war on terror, the vast majority among them said they were either very concerned (51 percent) or somewhat concerned (25 percent) with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism across the globe (Note 63).

All in all, in the recent context of increasing Arab and Muslim stigmatization, fuelled by the inflammatory rhetoric of some GOP presidential candidates suggesting, amongst others, that all Muslims register in “databases”, Arab American Christians and Muslims should, more than ever, surmount their internal frictions and mobilize an on-the-ground effort to combat discrimination. Moreover, to achieve community goals and avoid cultural extinction, they should consider that both identities, “Arab” and “American” are not mutually exclusive, but rather, are expressive of some sort of “cultural hybridity” reflecting recent changing social environments. As positively asserted by Palestinian American journalist, Ray Hanania, “*Perhaps with such efforts, in the future Arab Americans will no longer be seen as a small bubble floating apart from the rest of society’s brew, but rather as an important ingredient in the diverse ethnic framework that brings strength to American society*” (Note 64).

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Note 3. Naff, A. (1985). *Becoming American: The early Arab experience* (pp. 26-27). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Note 4. Arab speaking immigrants who arrived during the penultimate turn of the Twentieth Century did not have any national consciousness, as, unlike their European counterparts, they did not come from a nation-state, and the Arab World, at that time, still languished under Ottoman Turkish rule. For more details about Arab immigration to the U.S., see Naff, A. (1983). *Arabs in America: A historical overview*. In S. Abraham, & N. Abraham (Eds.), *Arabs in the New World: Study on Arab-American communities*. Detroit: Wayne State University, Center for Urban Studies. Naff, A. (1985). *Becoming American: The early Arab experience*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. Mehdi, T. (1978). *The Arabs in America (1492-1977): A Chronology and fact book*. Dobbs Ferry, New York: Oceana Publications. Boosahda, E. (2003). *Arab-American faces and voices: The origin of an immigrant community*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

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- Note 18. *New York Times*, 1909, October 15, p. 10.
- Note 19. *The business of remaking Arab-American identity*. (2012, June 15). Retrieved from <http://www.uk.news.yahoo.com/busines-remaking-arab-american-identity-190513625.html>
- Note 20. Based in Washington, D.C. and established since 1985, the Arab American Institute (AAI) defines itself as a “non-profit, nonpartisan national leadership organization. AAI was created to continue and encourage the direct participation of Arab Americans in political and civic life in the United States”. Retrieved from <http://www.aaiusa.org/about-institute>
- Note 21. According to the Arab American Institute (AAI), the ancestry question is based on self-identification of up to two ethnic origins, and refers to “a person’s ethnic origin or descent, ‘roots’, heritage, or place of birth of the person or person’s parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States”. See AAI. (2015, May 16). *Adding a MENA category to the U.S. Census*. Retrieved from <http://www.aaiusa.org/2020census>

Note 22. <http://www.census.gov/2010census/>

Note 23. The Arab League or League of Arab States is a social, cultural and economic grouping of 22 Arab States in the Arab World which, as of 2015, has a combined population of around 422 million.

Note 24. The American Community Survey (ACS) is a nationwide survey designed to provide communities with a fresh look at how they are changing through critical economic, social, demographic, and housing information. Retrieved from <http://www.aaiusa.org/2020census>

Note 25. By contrast, there are many immigrants to the United States from Arab-speaking countries who are not classified as Arabs, like Jewish Americans, Armenian Americans, Kurdish Americans, and Azeris. Kayyali, R. (2006, July 1). The people perceived as a threat to Security. *Op. cit.*

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Note 31. Data from U.S. Department (2001, April), based on estimates by Zogby International 2000 and U.S. Census Data 2000. One should notice, however, that the size of American Muslim population has proved difficult to measure due to the fact that the U.S. Census Bureau is not allowed to gather statistical data based on religious affiliation.

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Note 35. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

Note 36. Founded in 1980 by former U.S. Senator James Abourezk, ADC is "a civil rights organization committed to defending the rights of people of Arab descent and promoting their rich cultural heritage". It also considers itself as "the largest Arab American grassroots organization in the U.S.". Retrieved from <http://www.adc.org/about-us/>

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Note 40. *Ibid.*

Note 41. *Ibid.*

Note 42. See Naber, N. (January 2000). Ambiguous outsiders: An investigation of Arab American community. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23(1), 37-61.

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Note 46. Zihni, O. (2014). Arab American identity. *Op. cit.*

Note 47. By no means a new ideology, pan-Arabism was re-launched by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s. It advocated Arab unification across nation-state boundaries, and strongly rejected Western involvement in the Arab World. The movement lost steam and credibility after the humiliating 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

Note 48. See Introduction: The Arab American Experience. (1999). In M. Suleiman (Ed.), *Arabs in America: Building a new future. Op. cit.* (pp. 10-11).

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Note 51. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

Note 52. David, G. (2007). The creation of “Arab American”: Political activism and ethnic (dis)unity. *Op. cit.*

Note 53. Located in the state of Michigan, Dearborn is the most important Arab American concentration.

Note 54. See Salhani, J. (2015, November 24). Arab Americans in Dearborn fear ISIS, and the white supremacists who think they are ISIS. *Think Progress*. Retrieved from <http://www.thinkprogress.org/justice/2015/11/24/3725261/between-isis-and-anti-muslim-americans/>

Note 55. Zogby Analytics. (2015, December 21). *American attitudes toward Arabs and Muslims*. Retrieved from [https://www.aaiusa.org/american\\_attitudes\\_toward\\_arabs\\_ans\\_muslims\\_2015](https://www.aaiusa.org/american_attitudes_toward_arabs_ans_muslims_2015)



Note 56. *Ibid.*

Note 57. *Ibid.*

Note 58. Zogby Analytics. (2014, July 29). *American attitudes toward Arabs and Muslims*. Retrieved from [https://www.aaiusa.org/american\\_attitudes\\_toward\\_arabs\\_ans\\_muslims\\_2014](https://www.aaiusa.org/american_attitudes_toward_arabs_ans_muslims_2014)

Note 59. Hanania, R. (1996). *I'm glad I look like a terrorist: Growing up Arab in America* (p. 9). Urban Strategies Group Publishing Co.

Note 60. Pew Research Center. (2007, May 22). *Muslim Americans: Middle class and mostly mainstream*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/files/old-assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>

Note 61. Arab American Muslims are not singled out as a group as they represent a tiny percentage of the U.S. population that are not often interviewed by general population surveys. Actually, their reduced numbers do not allow for meaningful analysis.

Note 62. Ruby, R., & Smith, G. (2007, July 6). *How Muslims compare with other religious groups*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/2007/07/06/how-muslims-compare-with-other-religious-americans/>

Note 63. Pew Research Center. (2007, May 22). *Muslim Americans: Middle class and mostly mainstream*. *Op. cit.*

Note 64. Hanania, R. (1996). *I'm glad I look like a terrorist: Growing up Arab in America*. *Op. cit.* (Preface).