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# Arab and Other Middle Eastern Americans

[REDACTED] (book edition)

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## [REDACTED] PICTURE QUESTIONS

- *What role have Arab Americans played in building up this country's wealth and institutions?*
- *What effect has the ideology of Orientalism had on U.S. society?*
- *How have Arab Americans challenged U.S. religious and racial stereotypes?*

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An Arab American correctional officer at a federal prison in Virginia has described experiences there after the attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11). An immigrant from Lebanon, he was one of a few Arab Americans working at the prison. Before 9/11 he had suffered some discrimination because of his appearance in this rural area of Virginia, but after the attacks he suffered much more. Fellow employees quit speaking to him, and some told him to “go back where you came from” or “go bomb something—your people are good at that.” He was called “camel jockey” and “sand nigger” and endured hate e-mails and a note on his car that said “death to Muslims. In 2003 his office was ransacked and personal records and photos were taken.” His superiors would not let him transfer from the facility. “It was degrading. Suddenly I became a second-class citizen. I became a criminal, a target, a person with no rights for something I had nothing to do with.”<sup>1</sup>

## Middle Eastern Americans

Many people in the United States seem confused about three important categories of Americans that overlap—Middle Eastern Americans, Arab Americans, and Muslim Americans. These are not the same. One of the fastest-growing umbrella groups in the United States, Middle Eastern Americans, (*a term for Americans whose ancestry lies in any of the Middle Eastern countries*) is a category now in the process of social formation and one much like other umbrella groups such as Latino Americans and Asian Americans. Arab Americans is an umbrella term as well, one that covers *people from numerous Arab countries*. Arab Americans are but one major group within the larger category of Middle Eastern Americans. Within the latter are also non-Arabs, especially Iranian, Turkish, and Pakistani Americans. Both the Middle Eastern and Arab American umbrella categories include Muslim Americans, a religious group, but this designation of Muslim encompasses many people who are not Middle Eastern. These Muslim Americans include many African Americans and South Asian Americans, who make up two-thirds of all U.S. Muslims.

Especially since the events of 9/11, this umbrella group, “Middle Eastern Americans,” has become more important. Americans with Middle Eastern ancestry often face violence and other racialized discrimination no matter what country they are from or

whether they are Christian or Muslim, Arab or non-Arab. Since 2001 the U.S. government, as well as private agencies, have frequently used “Arab,” “Middle Eastern,” and “Muslim” interchangeably to name a new political “enemy” and to target these people for an array of discriminatory actions, including unfounded interrogations, arrests, detentions, wiretapping, property seizures, and deportations of those here legitimately. These discriminators have had an effect: By targeting people from the Middle East, discriminators often force those targeted to see themselves as sharing significant experiences, backgrounds, and identities.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, 2000 census data and recent research reveal that a growing number prefer to identify themselves as “Arab American” or “Middle Eastern American” rather than by their specific country of origin, though the latter choice is still that of many.

Consider the three eras of immigration of Middle Eastern and Muslim immigrants. The first Muslim migration, largely unrecognized, came early and involved the involuntary immigration of enslaved people from Muslim societies in Africa. Brought here from the 1600s to the 1800s, they were the first Muslims in what later became the United States. The next period of immigration came much later, between the 1880s and World War II. These immigrants were mostly Arabs from the Middle East, including both Christians and Muslims. In recent decades a third era of immigration has encompassed more Arab immigrants and many non-Arab immigrants from countries such as Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan, many of whom have fled strife in the Middle East.

In this chapter we will not consider in detail non-Arab Middle Eastern groups, but they should be kept in mind as we explore the situations of Arab Americans. For example, Iranian Americans are a large portion of recent Middle Eastern immigrants and a growing U.S. group, one with a significantly different nationality and linguistic background from that of Arab Americans. Their increased presence has helped to create the umbrella designations of both Middle Eastern Americans and Arab Americans.<sup>3</sup>

## Arab Americans

Most Americans are not aware that the development of European civilization was heavily influenced by advanced Arab cultures from the tenth to twelfth centuries. In that early period, for example, Arab scholars made critical breakthroughs in mathematics,

such as the development of the place-value decimal system, well before European scholars did. They also made major contributions to the sciences, such as optics and medicine, and to seafaring technologies (for example, the compass). Much knowledge developed by Arab scientists and scholars was later imported into European civilizations.<sup>4</sup>

The widespread use of the Arabic language indicates just how far the Arab empire once spread. Today, Arabic is a language spoken by more than 300 million people, the seventh most commonly spoken language. It is spoken in the Middle East and North Africa, Malta, and Sicily, and was spoken in Spain for centuries prior to 1500. Modern Persian (Iran) and Urdu (Pakistan and India) are written in Arabic script, which is also used in parts of China, Russia, and the Philippines. From the eighth century to the fifteenth century, Arab Islamic (Moorish) culture was especially influential in Spain and the Spanish diaspora across the globe. From this Moorish period and other avenues of Arabic influence, some 2400 Arabic-origin words and place names have come into English—such as algebra, almanac, camel, chemistry, cipher, coffee, cotton, jar, mattress, nadir, orange, sofa, syrup, and zero. These reveal the substantial influence of Arab cultures, including Arab sciences and commerce.<sup>5</sup>

Today the Arab World ranges from Mauritania and Morocco in North Africa to Iraq and Saudi Arabia in what is now termed the *Middle East*. It includes countries in the League of Arab States, those with Arabic language and cultures. (Some countries in the Middle

East, such as Turkey and Iran, are *not* Arab states but have large Muslim populations.) Although many Americans with origins in Arab countries consider themselves to be Arab Americans, others from these areas—some Lebanese Maronites, Coptic Americans, Armenians, and Chaldean Americans—often do not. They prefer to accent their ethnoreligious origins.<sup>6</sup>

Before the Arab–Israeli conflicts of the 1960s, most immigrants from Arab countries identified themselves by religion, country, or family. After these conflicts, a stronger pan-Arab identity developed in the Middle East. This pan-ethnic Arab identity is also a political reaction to the stereotyping of Arab peoples in the United States and to an anti-Arab tilt by the U.S. government in some Middle Eastern conflicts. Numerous pan-Arab organizations, including the National Association of Arab Americans, the Arab American Institute, and the Arab American University Graduates, have been created since the 1960s conflicts. These groups have spent much time and energy trying to influence U.S. foreign policy with regard to Middle Eastern political-economic issues.<sup>7</sup>

Pan-Arab sentiments are not unique to the United States, nor have they arisen only recently. The concept of pan-Arabism initially developed in the early twentieth century and grew during the 1950s, especially under the influence of President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt. Even with the political, religious, and cultural differences in the Middle East and in the United States, a strong Arab pan-ethnic identity continues to exist in both areas.

**TABLE 12.1** Population with Arab Ancestry by Detailed Group: 2000 Census

Detailed Group	Alone*	Alone or in Combination**
Lebanese	244,525	440,279
Egyptian	123,489	142,832
Syrian	75,517	142,897
Palestinian	61,691	72,112
Jordanian	36,104	39,734
Moroccan	30,352	38,923
Iraqi	29,429	37,714
"Arab" or "Arabic"	167,166	205,822
Other Arab	81,754	82,337
Totals	850,027	1,189,731

\*Includes people who reported Arab ancestry only, regardless of whether one or more Arab ancestries were reported.

\*\*This category includes people who reported one or two Arab ancestries and people who reported both Arab and non-Arab ancestry. The total figure is less than the sum of rows because double-ancestry people are tabulated in two rows.

This chapter focuses on Arab Americans. According to the 2000 census, there are about 1.2 million Americans with some Arab ancestry, with about 850,000 of those reporting only Arab ancestry (Table 12.1).<sup>8</sup> The largest group is Lebanese, while the next largest groups are Egyptian and Syrian. These three groups make up over half the Arab American population. Note, too, that Arab American leaders consider the official U.S. census figure, which only counts people identifying certain Arab country backgrounds, to be a serious undercount, because of methodological weaknesses in census enumeration techniques, Arab American distrust of government surveys, and significant out-marriage. A current estimate of the Arab American Institute Foundation is that there are about 3.5 million Arab Americans.<sup>9</sup>

**Q** How have Arab civilizations in the Middle East shaped the development of European and American societies?

## Migration

### The Early Period

Today, many Arab Americans are immigrants or the children of immigrants. There have been two major periods of immigration from Arab areas and countries to the United States—one from 1880 to 1945, and a second migration from 1946 to the present.

Between 1880 and World War II, immigrants entered in modest numbers. They were primarily Christians from rural villages who, like most immigrants, viewed the United States as a land of opportunity. *Many planned to make some money and return home, a type of sojourner immigration.* They were generally from Greater Syria, an area that included what would later be known as Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine/Israel. By the 1920s, Arab Americans numbered about 200,000. Their descendants now make up a major proportion of Arab Americans.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, the discriminatory 1924 Immigration Act sharply reduced immigration from the Middle East, as well as from southern Europe and Asia.

### Later Immigration

Most Arab immigrants—more than 750,000—have entered the United States since 1967. According to

the 2000 census count of the foreign-born Arab American population, nearly half arrived between 1990 and 2000, which compares with 42 percent of the total foreign-born U.S. population. Moroccans, Iraqis, and the census category “other Arabs” are the groups with the largest proportions of recent arrivals, with about 60 percent of each arriving between 1990 and 2000. In addition, many immigrants have fled violent conflicts in the Middle East and Africa. Immigrants have come from at least twenty countries, ranging from Morocco in western Africa to the United Arab Emirates in the Middle East. The 1970s’ Lebanese civil war and the 1980s’ Israeli invasion of Lebanon generated numerous immigrants, including many Muslims. Yet other immigrants have fled wars between Iraq and Iran and between Iraq and Kuwait, as well as the civil war in Yemen. Many are Palestinians. Whether they are Muslim or Christian, they have often entered with a strong Arab nationalism and a greater inclination to criticize U.S. government policy in the Middle East than earlier immigrants. The largest numbers have been people from Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, as well as Palestinians. Most have been Muslim. Most have settled in metropolitan areas, especially in Washington, D.C., New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles. Indeed, the Arab American population is today more urban than the general U.S. population.<sup>11</sup>

However, since the events of 9/11, immigration authorities have created barriers to Arab immigration. Arab and Muslim immigrants have faced much racial profiling, and U.S. government officials have rejected more Arab visa applications, such as from tourists and businesspeople. Immigration regulations have been violated or applied disproportionately to Arab and Muslim immigrants. After the Homeland Security Act created the Department of Homeland Security, in 2003 the new agency gained control of immigrants and conducted a special registration program for men who had entered the United States legally from twenty-five countries, all but one predominantly Arab or Muslim. These men were required to be photographed and fingerprinted. Although much of this profiling program was soon ended for these Arab immigrants (but not for new entrants coming temporarily from several Arab countries), an array of other U.S. government actions since 2001 have resulted in significant mistreatment of Arab immigrants, mistreatment that groups such as the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee

(ADC) have described as racial profiling and discriminatory.<sup>12</sup>

In recent decades, as we have suggested, most later immigrant groups have more or less coalesced into an Arab American umbrella group, at least for key social and political goals. Most third-generation descendants of earlier Greater Syrian immigrants have also come to see themselves as Arab Americans. One Detroit study surveyed leaders of Middle Eastern (including Arab) organizations to discern if there were cultural traits shared across diverse Middle Eastern groups. The research found that most stressed the importance of extended kinship networks. One respondent commented, “The most important [thing] in our tradition is respect for the family. And closeness of family.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, Middle Eastern leaders, and presumably the immigrants they represent, have been concerned that U.S. culture tends to break up families through divorce and too-lenient supervision of children.

Many of these Detroit respondents mentioned religion, which has been central to Arab and other Middle Eastern cultures. Most Arab Americans come from backgrounds with a “common language, tradition, cultural traits, and values,” even though they have diverse national identities.<sup>14</sup> Although there are differences (such as in marriage practices) within the Arab American community between Christians, Muslims, and Jews, the dominant society’s anti-Arab stereotypes and hostility have provided pressures that tend to unite the Arab American community. In addition to family and religion, other cultural traits accented by this midwestern study’s respondents included an emphasis on tracing ancestry to Arab or Middle Eastern lands, an orientation to Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages, and a strong commitment to entrepreneurship to build strong community economies.<sup>15</sup> Americans from Arab and other Middle Eastern areas may have different physical features and religious backgrounds but often share certain cultural traits and political concerns. Still, only in a loose way can one speak of an umbrella groups called “Arab Americans” or “Middle Eastern Americans.”

**Q** What are the consequences of racial profiling for Arab Americans and the larger society?

## Stereotyping and Prejudice

### *Classified as an “Inferior Race”*

In the first period of Arab immigration, U.S. officials sometimes classified these immigrants as “Turks” and sometimes as “Syrians.” Judges, too, were confused about how to classify them. Between 1909 and 1944 at least eight court decisions legally assessed whether certain Arab Americans were “white.” Four ruled that they were white and four ruled that, by “common knowledge” or “legal precedent,” they should *not* be considered white. Thus, in 1914 a South Carolina court ruled that while a Syrian immigrant “may be Caucasian,” he or she was *not* what the 1790 Naturalization Act called a “free white person”—and thus could not become a U.S. citizen. In 1915 this decision was reversed on the grounds that the relevant laws were those of 1873 and 1875, which allowed Syrians to be considered enough like Europeans to be officially “white.” Later decisions would sometimes disagree, asserting that Arab Americans were not white.<sup>16</sup>

The right of Arab immigrants to citizenship and to claim whiteness continued to be challenged in many institutional arenas, including courts, at least until the 1940s. Racist writers of the early twentieth century saw them as “parasites” and “Mongolian plasma” that would “contaminate the pure American stock.”<sup>17</sup> Syrian immigrants were cataloged with southern and eastern Europeans as “inferior races” by leading European American intellectuals such as Madison Grant. Nativists termed Syrians the “most foreign” of immigrants. Many suffered extreme stereotypes and related notions that many whites drew from the entrenched white racist frame, including derogatory terms such as “blackie,” “camel jockey,” and “sheeny.”<sup>18</sup>

### *Recent Stereotyping and U.S. Politics*

Strong negative images of Arab Americans and other Middle Eastern Americans have been circulating among other Americans for decades now. For example, a 1975 undergraduate guide at Columbia University described one Arabic course by suggesting that every other word in Arabic was about violence and that this signaled the character of the Arab mind.<sup>19</sup> One survey of portraits of Arab peoples in U.S. textbooks reported that they portrayed Arabs as ignorant about other peoples and anti-Jewish

sentiment as the link holding diverse Arab peoples together. A 1981 survey of Americans found that 44 percent of respondents considered Arabs to be “barbaric” or “cruel,” while about half thought they were “treacherous” or “cunning.” More than half thought they were “warlike” and that men “mistreat women.”<sup>20</sup>

A 2006 national *USA Today*/Gallup survey found that many Americans still hold negative stereotypes and favor discrimination against Muslim Americans, many of whom are Arab Americans. Four in ten openly admitted they were prejudiced against Muslims. More than four in ten thought Muslims were extreme in their religious beliefs, and a majority felt they were not respectful of women. Some 31 percent admitted that they would be fearful if they saw a Muslim man on a plane with them. Given these negative and fearful views, it is not surprising that one-fifth said they would oppose a Muslim as a neighbor and that 40 percent favored discriminatory security measures—such as Muslims being required to carry special identification and being searched more thoroughly at airports.<sup>21</sup>

Since the 1960s, U.S. government policies regarding the Middle East have generated or accelerated the spread of negative stereotypes of Arabs and Arab Americans. For example, Terrel Bell, Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of Education, reported that in the 1980s mid-level aides in the White House and other government agencies made racist comments about Arab peoples as “sand niggers,” as well as similar derogatory comments about African Americans. These racist perspectives were at the time linked to an intentional government weakening of enforcement of U.S. civil rights laws.<sup>22</sup> The common labeling of Arab and other Middle Eastern peoples with old terms such as “camel jockeys” and “sand niggers” during the Gulf War of the early 1990s and more recent Middle Eastern conflicts has helped to rationalize U.S. interventions overseas in the minds of many non-Middle Eastern Americans.

Today, as in the past, political figures in the Middle East are sometimes characterized in biologically racist terms. Cartoons have long shown Arab leaders as evildoers with “sharply hooked noses” and a “mustachioed leer.” The late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was portrayed by leading U.S. newspapers as having “pendulous lips,” and other Arab leaders have been portrayed in the media and on the Internet as having “beak-like noses.” These por-

trays are similar to old anti-Jewish stereotypes.<sup>23</sup> The media have stereotyped Arab men as militaristic extremists and Arab women as distinctively servile. The stereotyping in such anti-Arab views is underscored in Evelyn Shakir’s comments on her family: “Terrorist, oil sheik, master of the seraglio—it was impossible for me to connect these terms with my uncle who baked blueberry muffins for his wife’s breakfast and washed out her underthings by hand, or with my other uncle who belonged to the Rotary Club, voted Republican, and was a deacon in the Baptist church.”<sup>24</sup> Note, thus, the *omission* from much of the mass media of positive images of Arab and other Middle Eastern Americans. As the scholar Karyn McKinney Marvasti has put it recently, “So the only cultural resources ‘average’ Americans have to draw on in thinking about these groups are the negative, ‘terrorist’ images they’ve seen the most. This is particularly likely since relatively few non-Arab Americans have Arab American neighbors and friends.”<sup>25</sup>

Television programs and the movies have often circulated harshly stereotyped images of “male terrorists” or “veiled, dominated women” and have largely ignored important differences among Middle Eastern peoples. The influential Arab scholar, Edward Said, famously described the negative and stereotyped views of Middle Eastern peoples as a western ideology of *Orientalism*. Orientalism targets Middle Eastern and Asian peoples with many hostile stereotypes and goes back centuries in Western thought, pervading much scholarly work as well as popular thinking. Viewing U.S. immigrants from the Middle East and Asia as “threatening foreigners” or “deviants” allows those who target them to view discrimination against them as actually “patriotic” and “pro-American.”<sup>26</sup>

### Challenging Stereotyping

Until recently, few U.S. leaders outside Middle Eastern American communities have been willing to challenge these racialized images. In a speech to the 1984 Democratic Party national convention, Jesse Jackson, an African American leader, was perhaps the first major U.S. political leader to speak publicly of Arab Americans in strongly positive terms and as a people facing the “pain and hurt of racial and religious rejection.” Yet, Jackson paid a price for speaking out against this stereotyping. For a time,

whenever he spoke positively about Arab Americans or questioned what he saw as one-sided U.S. government policy favoring Israel in Arab–Israeli conflicts, Jackson was attacked in the media or by other politicians.<sup>27</sup>

In one survey, Arab and other Middle Eastern American leaders expressed concern about the common stereotyping and discrimination directed at their communities. They cited the frequency of negative images of Muslims as well as the infrequency of positive commentaries in the media. These leaders noted that among Arab Americans, those of the Muslim faith are the most likely to be targets of overt hostility and discrimination. They also noted that those who possess the physical or cultural traits associated with Arab or Middle Eastern Americans in the minds of other Americans are more likely to be targeted for hostility than those who do not fit these images.<sup>28</sup>

### *Stereotypes and Arab American Women*

Arab and Arab American women, as well as women from other Middle Eastern countries, have faced a range of stereotypes in the United States. They have frequently been portrayed as exotic, passive, or totally dominated by men, with the latter frequently being stereotyped as hot-tempered bullies. The religion of Islam and Arab culture are often viewed as extremely oppressive of women. For decades, numerous Western writers have circulated the notion that marital arrangements such as the “harem” are typical of some Arab societies, when in fact such arrangements of several wives have never involved more than a small elite in a few countries. The “harem” has been much more important in European fantasy than in the real world of contemporary Arab societies.<sup>29</sup>

The reality of life for Arab women in the many Arab countries and the United States is more varied and should be put in a comparative context. For example, several Arab and other Middle Eastern countries—such as Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tunisia—have a *greater percentage* of women in their governing bodies than the United States. Women in numerous Arab countries do face issues of an imposed *hijab* or *burka*—that is, covering clothing—though in many cases they themselves choose such covering out of respect for traditions or to be liberated from a “sex object” status in society. The issues

here are often complex. As one scholar has noted, “many veiled women report feeling full of dignity and self-esteem and enjoy that their physical, personal self does not enter into social interactions.” In addition, indigenous feminist movements in Middle Eastern societies are currently pressing to reduce barriers and improve the lives of women therein. We should note, too, that U.S. women are not “free” of gender domination. They face being objectified in an often extreme form that accents a certain image of (for example, bikini-clad, white, or thin) female beauty, which leads to pressure to diet in extreme ways or have cosmetic surgery to meet a socially constructed, usually male-oriented image. Historically, most women in Arab societies have lived under strong patriarchal conditions, yet this condition of strong patriarchal dominance has been characteristic of most non-Arab families in Western societies until recent decades. Many U.S. families are today strongly patriarchal, especially those most firmly situated in conservative religious (Christian or Jewish) traditions. In addition, today, as in the past, when it comes to everyday decisions, many wives and mothers in Arab families have substantial decision-making power.<sup>30</sup>

Generally speaking, traditional values in Arab countries have emphasized family honor and stipulated that women be modest and protected when around male strangers. For Arab American women, this gendered value system sometimes comes into conflict with prevailing U.S. values relating to such behaviors as dating or patriarchy. Some Arab American women “have engaged in outright rebellion against their parents’ or husbands’ authority. Others have been able to invoke traditional values to justify unconventional behavior; in the name of service to family and community, much has been permitted.”<sup>31</sup> Over time, many Arab American women have gained greater autonomy, sometimes creating tensions in their families. Moreover, women are particularly important to the persistence of Arab culture in the United States; some studies have found them to be the “anchor of the group’s sense of identity.”<sup>32</sup>

The centrality of a certain body imagery in the U.S. media—such as that of the often thin, light-skinned, or blonde models in advertising—creates problems for Arab American women. As a result, “dark pigmentation and, especially, dark body hair, have been sources of shame to [Arab American] girls

growing up in the United States.” Some feminist groups have emerged among Arab American women, in part because of their concern with the common U.S. image of ideal female beauty.<sup>33</sup>

**Q** How have U.S. government policies regarding the Middle East shaped the spread of racial and ethnic stereotypes?

## Oppression, Discrimination, and Conflict

### Early Discrimination

The early Arab immigrants and their children sometimes faced a clearly racialized discrimination, especially in southern areas where whites often classified them with African Americans. Considered to be “not white,” Arab Americans were sometimes turned away from voting places, restaurants, and rest rooms by racist whites in various southern and border states.<sup>34</sup> Across the country as a whole they faced less discrimination than did African Americans, but they were nonetheless often seen by others as not being white.

### Current Patterns of Discrimination

Although the U.S. Census Bureau now defines Arab immigrants and their descendants as “white,” many non-Arab Americans still view them as “not white.” Indeed, one recent survey of college students found that just 5 percent felt that the group termed “Arab Americans” was unambiguously white, with only 7 percent indicating that the group termed “Middle Eastern Americans” was white. For a majority of these well-educated (self-identified) white Americans, Arab Americans are not considered as white. Classification as “white, non-European” by the U.S. Census Bureau has not prevented continuing racial imaging, prejudice, and discrimination.<sup>35</sup>

For decades, to the present day, discrimination has been a problem. The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) has dealt with many complaints of employment discrimination faced by millions of Arab and Muslim Americans. For example, CAIR reported a significant increase in job discrimination and other civil rights complaints in 2005,

altogether 1972 as compared with 1522 in the previous year. (These are likely just the tip of the iceberg according to Arab American officials.) The largest number of these were in California. A mid-2000s research study by the Discrimination Research Center sent some 6000 fictitious job résumés from qualified applicants to a variety of California employers. An identifiably Middle Eastern name, Abdul-Aziz Mansour, got the lowest response rate.<sup>36</sup>

The array of contemporary discrimination is broad, from being forced to endure racist jokes, cartoons, and e-mails from fellow employees to not being hired or promoted because of Islamic religious observance or wearing traditional religious dress, to being taunted by people on the street on the way to work or school. Many cases of employer discrimination involve workplace prohibitions against religious practices, such as not allowing Muslim men to wear beards in the workplace, not permitting Muslim women to wear the *hijab*, or not permitting daily prayers. Protests against this discrimination by CAIR and other Middle Eastern American organizations has led to the rehiring of some employees who were mistreated or fired for such practices. Discrimination also affects Arab Americans in the U.S. legal system. Some lawyers have feared going to jury trials for Arab American clients because of negative depictions of Arab peoples in the media.<sup>37</sup> Unlike older white ethnic groups, most Arab Americans do not yet have the choice of escaping their racial and ethnic identities, even if they wished to do so.

### International Politics and Discrimination

The commonplace “Orientalist” distortions of Arab and other Middle Eastern peoples have serious implications for U.S. government policies regarding overseas matters. This is especially true for U.S. policies in the Middle East, a region where the U.S. government has long been heavily invested, in part because of its continuing concern for oil supplies. For decades U.S. policymakers in Washington, D.C., and U.S. diplomats in the Middle East have often not been well informed about the region’s history or cultures. Edward Said’s earlier assessment is still accurate today: “The Middle East experts who advise policymakers are imbued with Orientalism almost to a person.... If in the meantime the Arabs, the Muslims, or the Third and Fourth Worlds go unexpected ways after all, we will not be surprised to

have an Orientalist tell us that this testifies to the incorrigibility of Orientals and therefore proves that they are not to be trusted."<sup>38</sup> Such Orientalist views have become conspicuous recently in various U.S. interventions in the Middle East, such as in Iraq. That U.S. invasion and occupation of a sovereign country was conducted mostly by people with little accurate knowledge of that country (or region), little or no ability to speak local languages, and a propensity to stereotype those there as backward.

Much recent discrimination, including violent attacks on Arab Americans, is linked to international issues and conflicts and to stereotypes held by many non-Arab Americans. Since the 1960s, the United States has had a "negative atmosphere for Americans of Arab descent, due to the stereotyping, harassment, defamation, and exclusion of Arab Americans brought on by the widespread perception of Arabs as immigrants from hostile, enemy lands."<sup>39</sup> For example, influenced by this negative perception, President Richard Nixon responded to the 1972 killing of Israeli athletes in Germany by some Palestinians by establishing a secret government operation targeting people of "Arab ancestry." Although the attacks on Israelis had nothing to do with the United States, the CIA and the FBI collected information on Arab Americans and harassed thousands.<sup>40</sup>

The anti-Arab stereotyping has persisted since the 1970s, at the highest levels of the government. The 1990s Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act have given federal authorities powers to detain and interrogate immigrants suspected of being linked to terrorist organizations, without the usual civil rights protection such as the right to a speedy and fair hearing at which the evidence for detention is presented. These and more recent laws have often been used in discriminatory ways against U.S. immigrants and citizens with Arab or Muslim backgrounds, or those Americans who look like they might be Arab or Muslim (but are not).<sup>41</sup> As we have noted in the chapters on Japanese and Italian Americans, in the past some U.S. citizens have been viewed by their government as guilty until proven innocent, in contradiction to U.S. law, and only because of their racial or ethnic backgrounds.

Since the 1970s, Arab American community activists, especially those who critical views of U.S.

government policies, have been targets of harassment and violence. Some have received threatening phone calls, had property vandalized, or found dead animals on their front steps. In 1985 a regional director for one Arab American organization was killed by a bomb at his office. Some police authorities attributed the bombing to the extremist Jewish Defense League, which did express satisfaction at the bombing. In addition, the U.S. government has periodically conducted overt investigations or secret surveillance operations targeting Arab Americans solely because of their ancestry, appearance, or political views.<sup>42</sup>

U.S. involvement in the Middle East, especially in ongoing conflicts and the invasions of Iraq, has periodically generated outbreaks of overt hostility and violence against Arab Americans in the United States. Hate crimes often seem linked to media reports of particular events. Since the late 1980s, and increasingly since 2001, some Islamic mosques have been bombed or set on fire, and others have been vandalized. Many physical attacks on Americans of Middle Eastern descent took place following the 1991 Gulf War. In the early 1990s more than 150 anti-Arab hate crimes were reported to police. Since that war, Arab Americans have been blamed for events such as the April 1995 Oklahoma City bombing plot targeting a federal building by white terrorist Timothy McVeigh and his white associates. In the days after that bombing, there were more than two hundred attacks on Arab and Muslim Americans. More recently, the attacks and other discrimination have continued. In 2005 CAIR alone received 141 reports of actual or threatened violence against Muslim Americans, adding to more than a thousand such incidents since 2001. In addition, one poll found that since 2001 nearly three-quarters of Muslim respondents had experienced anti-Muslim harassment or physical attack, or knew someone who had experienced that. And a poll of Arab Americans found that nearly 30 percent had endured some discrimination, and also that one-third had not traveled by air since 2001 for fear of such discrimination. Since 2001 many Arab and other Middle Eastern Americans have reacted to these hate crimes, and their own experiences with related types of hostility, by changing the way they dress, talk about social and political matters, and practice their religion.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, in the 1990s the FBI and the Immigration and Naturalization Service developed a plan

to imprison Arab Americans in the event of a war between the United States and Arab countries.<sup>44</sup> Apparently, federal government agencies have not yet learned the lessons that became clear during the 1940s imprisonment of Japanese American citizens solely because of their racial characteristics. Persisting into the present, government actions based on racial stereotyping are not only unconstitutional, but a violation of international human rights treaties. Historically, they have also not enhanced national security (see Chapter 10).

**Q** Is anti-Arab discrimination in the United States connected to international actions by the U.S. government?

### *The Effects of the Attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon: 2001 and After*

The September 11, 2001, attacks by Middle Eastern terrorists—who were apparently angry about U.S. policies in the Middle East—on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon generated many hate crimes against Arab Americans or those who were thought to look like Arabs. Such crimes were principally about stereotyping and ignorance, for they were committed in spite of the fact that no Arab American citizen was implicated in the attacks and that seventeen of the nineteen men involved were from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, countries of origin for few Arab Americans (and, ironically, close allies of the U.S. government in the Middle East that have as yet suffered no serious repercussions for the attacks). In nine weeks after September 11, there were at least 520 violent attacks on people thought to be of Arab or Middle Eastern ancestry. These attacks included assaults, arson, and six murders. Some of those assaulted or killed were not Arab but were assumed to be so by ignorant attackers. In addition, hundreds of cases of employment discrimination were reported in this brief period, as well as increased discrimination in the form of racial profiling and other discrimination by law enforcement and airline personnel. Since this 2001 report, as we noted previously, many more cases of violent discrimination, employment discrimination, and racial profiling targeting Arab Americans have also been documented.<sup>45</sup>

In addition, the 2001 USA Patriot Act, passed quickly after the 9/11 attacks, gave the federal government broad authority to detain noncitizens with little or no due process and to carry out searches and surveillance with less judicial review. Many Americans concerned about civil liberties feared that laws said to be designed to reduce the possibility of terrorism would be used to target selected immigrants, particularly those who looked like Middle Eastern Americans. As the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee put it, “These serious civil liberties concerns should be alarming to all Americans, but there can be little doubt that it is the Arab American and Muslim communities who are facing the gravest threats to their rights and that these communities will bear the brunt of any major diminution of civil liberties in the United States.”<sup>46</sup>

This assessment has been accurate, to the present day. Many Arab and other Middle Eastern Americans have been targeted by federal agents and private security personnel in recent years because of the way they look. They have been removed from airliners. In one recent case Muslim religious officials (*imams*) were taken off a plane just because they were praying. This surveillance problem has become so general that Arab Americans have a term for it—“FWA,” for “flying while Arab.” In addition, the FBI, among other police agencies, has targeted Islamic mosques since 9/11, but has apparently not done the same surveillance of conservative Christian churches, a few of whose members have been linked to various terrorist acts in the United States. Much surveillance of Muslim Americans assumes a fallacious connection between their everyday religion and certain terrorist actions. One should also recognize that the “actions of the September 11 terrorists are not condoned under Islamic law.”<sup>47</sup>

### *Taking Action Against Discrimination*

Arab Americans have taken action against some of this stereotyping and discrimination. Lawsuits by civil rights groups such as the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee have criticized the Homeland Security Department for using racial profiling to target Middle Eastern entrants into the United States. Civil rights protests have been aimed at the Chicago *Sun-Times* newspaper for stereotyping Arabs and for neglecting reporting on the Arab American community. Arab American groups organized a



*People celebrate at the Arab American International Festival in Michigan.*

boycott of the paper; protests called attention to editorials that claimed the late Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat was primarily responsible for Middle Eastern violence. Antidiscrimination groups have protested several movies such as *The Siege* (1998), which shows Arabs as terrorists and a threat to the United States, further feeding stereotyped images. The film directly links Islam to terrorism, showing Muslim rituals being conducted before acts of violence. Hala Maksoud, head of an antidiscrimination organization, described this film as “insidious, dangerous, and incendiary” and as inciting “hate which leads to harassment, intimidation, discrimination, and even hate crimes.”<sup>48</sup>

Many Arab Americans, and especially civil rights organizations such as CAIR, are taking action against anti-Arab and anti-Muslim discrimination. Various strategies are used. For example, CAIR often attempts mediation with employers to make them more sensitive to the religious needs of their Arab and other Muslim employees. If that fails, they may go to court.<sup>49</sup>

### *Local Conflict and Cooperation with Other Groups*

In areas such as Detroit, where Arab Americans have established many small businesses, periodic conflicts with other racial and ethnic groups have occurred.

Some black groups have reported that the relatively new Arab American merchants sometimes treat black customers with disrespect or discrimination. Arab American merchants have complained that black youngsters sometimes steal from their stores. This conflict is reminiscent of similar conflicts between Korean (or, earlier, Jewish) merchants and African American residents. Some local efforts—for example, at Detroit’s Wayne State University and on Youth Day at Belle Isle in Detroit—have been directed at improving communication between the African American and Arab American communities.<sup>50</sup>

In recent years some local Jewish American and Arab American groups have made substantial efforts to increase contacts and dialogue. For example, in Chicago, members of the Arab-American Bar Association and the Decalogue Society of Jewish lawyers have committed themselves to more positive intergroup contacts, especially among young people. In addition, groups of New York Muslims, Jews, and Arab Christians, including religious leaders, have met to work for increasing understanding between these groups and to reduce local interpersonal and intergroup violence.<sup>51</sup>

**Q:** What strategies of resistance have Arab Americans used to counter stereotyping and discrimination?

## Politics and Political Emergence

### *Gradual Increase in Political Activity*

By the 1930s a few Syrian Americans held elected public office, but it was not until 1958 that the first Arab American was elected to Congress. Greater political representation has come slowly. The first U.S. senator of Arab descent, South Dakota's James Abourezk, was not elected until 1980. By the late 1980s a few Arab Americans were named to major appointed positions in government, including White House chief of staff. Over the past decade or two, a modest number of Arab Americans have moved into positions of influence in the U.S. political system.

### *Recent Political Involvement*

In the fall of 2000, a majority of New York City's council members passed a resolution on the Palestinian–Israeli conflict that condemned Palestinian violence and called the Palestinian leader a terrorist but did not criticize Israel's violent role in the continuing conflict. Several council members left that meeting in protest over its one-sided character.<sup>52</sup> Such protests show again how international tensions spill over into local and national politics.

Arab and Muslim Americans have increased their political activity significantly since 1990. Major voter registration drives by Arab American organizations have led to a substantial increase in Arab voter participation. Nearly 90 percent are now registered to vote, and surveys suggest that these U.S. citizens pay more attention to politics and donate to political campaigns more than people in numerous other groups. Numerous Arab and Muslim Americans have been elected at state and local levels across the country. So far, the political campaigns of the 2000s have seen many Muslim and Arab American political candidates, more than ever. In the 2006 election, from California to Michigan to West Virginia and Connecticut, thirty Arab Americans ran for local and state positions, such as those in state legislatures, and eighteen were elected to office. These included John Baldacci, as governor of Maine. In addition, some Arab Americans have been appointed as ambassadors and placed on national and local political commissions. The presence of Arab American officials has had an effect in both large and small ways. For example, there is now a Friday (Muslim) prayer service held by two dozen congressional aides in the

Capitol building, and more attention is being given to the Arab American view of ongoing Middle Eastern conflicts.<sup>53</sup>

For the first time, in 2000 both Republican and Democratic national conventions had Muslim clergy giving prayers. In the November 2000 and 2004 elections there were many Arab American voters, mostly located in New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. In these presidential elections, states with significant numbers of Arab and Muslim American voters, such as Michigan, received substantial attention from presidential candidates. Candidate George W. Bush consulted with Islamic leaders in Michigan, where the Muslim community supported him in his 2000 presidential bid. (They shifted away from Bush significantly in his 2004 reelection campaign because of concerns over racial profiling and other discrimination by federal agencies.) As president, Bush appointed Arab Americans Spencer Abraham (Energy Secretary) and Mitchell Daniels (Director of the Office of Management and Budget) to his cabinet. (Donna Shalala was the first Arab American to serve in a presidential cabinet, for Bill Clinton in the 1990s.) In the mid-2000s five Arab Americans served in Congress: Nick Joe Rahall II (D–W. Va), Ray LaHood (R–Ill.), Charles Boustany (R–La.), and Darrell Issa (R–Calif.) in the U.S. House; and John E. Sununu (R–N.H.) in the U.S. Senate. About a dozen others have served in the U.S. House and Senate since George Kasem was the first Arab American to be elected to Congress in 1958. Numerous others have recently



*Spencer Abraham, a Lebanese American, has served as U.S. Secretary of Energy.*

served in state legislatures. Consumer advocate Ralph Nader, a Lebanese American, ran for president in the 1996, 2000, and 2004 elections. And in 2003 the first Arab American Muslim, Abdul Haidos, was elected mayor of a U.S. city (Wayne, Michigan).<sup>54</sup>

Negative images of Arab Americans have interfered with their ability to participate fully in politics. In recent decades political candidates have returned contributions of Arab or Muslim Americans, often with a public display, because the candidates were afraid to be seen as accepting contributions from them. For example, during the fall 2000 New York state senate campaign, the Democratic campaign returned a contribution by Muslim donors because of public reaction. Conventional stereotyping of Arab and Muslim Americans seems to be just below the surface of such discriminatory reactions to citizen contributions, which are usually actively sought by politicians.<sup>55</sup>

### International Politics and Linkages

Social and political ties to countries of origin remain important to immigrants and their descendants generations after they have become fully established in the United States. Today, for many Arab Americans, such as Lebanese, Iraqi, or Palestinian Americans, ties to home countries or lands are still of much importance. They closely watch political events in the Middle East and the U.S. government's involvement there.

In recent years many Arab and Muslim Americans have been critical of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, faulting it for tilting too far in support of Israel (Israel is currently the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid) and too much against the interests of the numerous Arab countries in the region. Arab Americans are often critical of Israel's treatment of Palestinians and their lands. Ibrahim Hooper, communications director of CAIR, has put it this way: "You're not going to find a Muslim who is not going to support the Palestinians' efforts to free themselves from occupation." Nonetheless, like most other Americans, most Arab and Muslim Americans do *not* support terrorism in any country. As Dr. Agha Saeed, chair of the American Muslim Alliance, an organization working for civic education and leadership training, has noted: "We are critical of Israel but not supporters of terrorism."<sup>56</sup> Not surprisingly,

then, Arab Americans in cities from Atlanta to Detroit to Riverside, California, have peacefully protested Israeli treatment of Palestinians and called for increased efforts to bring peace there.

The influence of Arab American organizations' efforts to bring their perspective into U.S. discussions of the Middle East can be seen in recent opinion polls. The majority of U.S. respondents in one 2006 national poll expressed a desire for the U.S. government to take an even-handed approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one not favoring either side. In addition, most (79 percent) felt that Palestinians should have equal rights with Israelis, while nearly two-thirds also supported an independent Palestinian state. In addition, recent surveys also show that overwhelming *majorities* of Arab Americans and Jewish Americans favor both an independent Palestinian state and the right of Israel to be a secure and independent state.<sup>57</sup>

Arab American political activists and organizations have also actively focused on critical domestic issues such as immigration reform and health care. Arab Americans and other Middle Eastern Americans have created a large array of important voluntary associations and organizations to provide support for their communities. Cities with large Middle Eastern communities have many voluntary associations, including Islamic and Christian religious groups, media groups, village societies, professional groups, educational associations, human service groups, and political organizations such as the Arab American Political Action Committee.<sup>58</sup>

Many Middle Eastern community leaders are working to build greater community and political cooperation across various Arab American and other Middle Eastern organizations. One leader has noted that "The one thing I wish is for a united community with one organization and leaders...who are most qualified and can accomplish things whether they're Palestinian, Lebanese, Yemeni, Shi'a, Sunni, Muslims, non-Muslims."<sup>59</sup> To promote such cooperation, organizations such as the American Muslim Political Coordinating Committee have been formed to link Arab and other Middle Eastern Americans politically across the country. Today the American Muslim Alliance, another relatively new political organization, has thousands of members in many states.<sup>60</sup>

## The Economy

Like other immigrants, some early Arab immigrants were attracted by the relatively high wages paid by Henry Ford in his automobile plant in Michigan. However, unlike many European immigrants, most early-twentieth-century Arab immigrants, those from Greater Syria, bypassed new industrial occupations expanding dramatically in the decades after 1890, and instead became peddlers or small merchants. As a result, they often had somewhat higher incomes than new industrial workers. Most settled in just a few cities, where many established grocery stores, fruit stands, and dry-goods stores. There they built residential and economic enclaves like other immigrant groups such as Italian and Cuban Americans.<sup>61</sup>

Early immigrants were often working-class, but many who immigrated more recently have been professionals and businesspeople. Indeed, Arab Americans today are disproportionately self-employed. Table 12.2 gives the current occupational distribution for those who gave their ancestry as only Arab in the 2000 census.<sup>62</sup> Compared to all U.S. workers, they are more likely to be white-collar and in managerial, professional, sales, and office occupations (which include entrepreneurs). They are less likely than U.S. workers as a whole to be in blue-collar, service, and farming occupations. (This pattern remains roughly the same if one adds those who told the Census Bureau they had both Arab and non-Arab ancestry.) Numerous Arab Americans have achieved prominence in professional and managerial occupations. Some we have already mentioned. Others include Dr. Michael DeBakey (inventor of the heart pump), Gibran Khalil Gibran

(poet), John Abizaid (top U.S. general), and Helen Thomas (dean of the White House press corps in the 1990s and 2000s). An Arab American schoolteacher, Christa McAuliffe, was among the astronauts who died in the space shuttle *Challenger* explosion.

Arab Americans are more prosperous economically than numerous other racial and ethnic groups. In Table 12.3 we observe that those of (only) Arab ancestry had a median income (\$52,318) just a bit higher than that of the total population. They had a poverty rate for families significantly greater (at 16.7 percent) than that for the total population. This is partially because numerous recent immigrants earn low wages. When one adds into the group those who listed both Arab and non-Arab ancestry, these figures change substantially. This larger group has a greater median income (\$66,195) and a smaller percentage in poverty (7 percent) than the Arab-only group and the general population.<sup>63</sup>

Arab Americans are concentrated in a few major cities, with the largest number living in the Detroit area. Although the Detroit metropolis is often seen as a distinctively African American city, its population now includes hundreds of thousands of Middle Eastern Americans. It has the largest Arab American population of any U.S. city and the largest Arab-origin population outside the Middle East and north Africa. Areas of the city have significant Iraqi, Egyptian, Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian communities. Metropolitan Detroit is home to the national headquarters of the U.S. Chaldean church and an Islamic Institute. Middle Eastern immigrants and their children, like other recent immigrants, have helped greatly

TABLE 12.2 Occupational Distribution: 2000

Occupation	Arab Americans	All Workers
Managerial, professional, and related	42.0%	33.6%
Sales and office	30.2	26.7
Construction, extraction, and maintenance	5.3	9.4
Production, transportation, and material moving	10.7	14.6
Service	11.7	14.9
Farming, fishing, and forestry	0.1	0.7
Total	100%	99.9%

**TABLE 12.3** Median Family Income and Poverty Rates: 1999

	Arab Americans	Total Population
Median family income	\$52,318	\$50,046
Poverty rate	16.7%	12.4%

to bring renewed prosperity to areas of Detroit and Michigan. Many Middle Eastern restaurants operate in the area, and Arabic-language signs advertise many Arab American shops and professional offices. Early 1900s' Arab immigrants went into the automobile industry in the area, and during the 1960s and 1970s Lebanese Muslims and Chaldeans (Catholics from Iraq) migrated there too. Many in this latter group became merchants with small stores. By the early 2000s more than 13,000 Arab American businesses were located in metropolitan Detroit.<sup>64</sup> Dearborn, part of metropolitan Detroit, is called the center of Arab America because of its large Arab population. Once known principally for being the home of the automobile industry, this area has become a city of mosques and Middle Eastern restaurants and shops and, recently, home of the country's only museum about Arab Americans.<sup>65</sup>

## Education

The average Arab American is better educated than the average American. The 1980, 1990, and 2000 censuses all reported that Arab Americans had higher average educational levels than the U.S. population averages. Table 12.4 shows two examples from the 2000 census.<sup>66</sup> For those of only Arab ancestry, 84 percent had at least a high school diploma, while 41 percent had completed at least a bachelor's degree. Both figures are higher than those for the general population. When those who reported both Arab and non-Arab ancestry are added in, both figures increase, to 94 percent and 45 percent,

respectively. One major survey of leaders of Middle Eastern organizations found a very strong emphasis on the importance of education, an emphasis serving to unite various Middle Eastern subcommunities. These leaders stressed education in part because education and knowledge have long been important within Islamic and other Middle Eastern cultures and in part because of its importance in facilitating advancement in society.<sup>67</sup>

Some parents send their children to private Muslim schools, but most send them to public schools. As with earlier immigrants and their children, tensions have sometimes arisen between schoolteachers and administrators, on the one hand, and students or parents, on the other. One Arab educator has noted that non-Arab teachers often fail to realize that not all Arab Americans share a cultural background. They or their ancestors have come from many countries. Conflicts arise when teachers are unaware that their Arab students come from diverse countries and cultures, when they make incorrect assumptions about the cultural backgrounds of students, or when they impose certain ill-considered school restrictions. For example, one teacher made the stereotyped and very inaccurate assumption that Lebanese women are not allowed to walk freely in the street. Other non-Arab teachers are unaware of the strong tradition of education and the extensive systems of schools in many Arab countries. Misunderstandings about appropriate roles and behaviors are another source of conflict. Muslim students have been suspended from schools, such as in Muskogee, Oklahoma, just for wearing the *hijab*. In addition, non-Arab teachers

**TABLE 12.4** Educational Attainment: Percent of Population 25 Years and Older, 2000

	Arab Americans	Total Population
High school graduate or more	84.0%	80.4%
Bachelor's degree or more	41.2	24.4



*An Arab American girl attends school in Dearborn, Michigan.*

often see Arab American parents as too strict with children, while the Arab parents may view teachers as too lax with disruptive students.<sup>68</sup>

Educator Wendy Schwartz notes that public schools have a responsibility to deal with racial and ethnic stereotyping faced by children: "Because prejudice against Arab Americans increases when political events involve Arabs, or are even speculated to involve them, educators need to be prepared to respond to possible harassment of Arab American students resulting from negative news reporting, and to invoke school policies against hate crimes and discrimination as appropriate."<sup>69</sup> Most are not currently prepared. Schwartz calls on educators to become sensitive to major cultural practices of Arab Americans, such as by respecting major Islamic holidays, and to become better informed about Middle Eastern history and contemporary sociopolitical issues in the Middle East.

## Religion

Religion has long been central to Middle Eastern countries and cultures, and many Arab Americans take religion very seriously. Some are Christian, a few are Jewish, and many are Muslim. Among Christians and Muslims there are distinctive subgroups.

Most early Arab immigrants were Christian. Generally, they immigrated from Maronite, Melkite, and Syrian Orthodox areas in Greater Syria. As late as the 1960s, most Arab Americans were Christian. Since the 1960s most immigrants have been Muslim. They and their descendants account for a significant proportion of the current U.S. Muslim population. Estimates vary as to the percentage Muslim among Arab Americans, with some estimating about half. Other analysts put the Muslim percentage at just 24 percent, with two-thirds estimated to be Christians today.<sup>70</sup>

Islam has been practiced in North America since the first century of European settlement (some enslaved Africans were Muslims) but did not become visible to most Americans until the 1940s or so. By the early 1950s, when the Federation of Islamic Associations of the United States and Canada was created, there were at least fifty-two mosques in the United States, not including African American mosques. Note that many U.S. Muslims are South Asian Americans and African Americans, with many of the latter being associated with distinctive Islamic subgroups such as the Nation of Islam. Indeed, the first Muslim elected to the U.S. Congress, in 2006, was Keith Ellison, an African American who had converted to Islam. By the late 2000s there were more than 2000 mosques in the United States, more than double the number of a decade before. According to some estimates, Muslims are now the second largest U.S. religious group.<sup>71</sup>

The arrival of Arab and other Middle Eastern Muslim immigrants since the 1970s has brought conflicts to some Islamic mosques and organizations. New arrivals have sometimes expressed surprise at deviations in U.S. mosques from what they regard as traditional Islamic teachings. Like Christian churches and Jewish synagogues, mosques have been significantly shaped by the U.S. environment. For example, Sunday schools have been set up, and Sunday prayer services have become more popular than traditional Friday services. Conservative Islamic



*People gather outside a new mosque in Orange County, California.*

revivalists have worked to bring U.S. mosques back to more traditional practices, seeking elimination of such events as raffles and teenage dances and segregation or reduction of participation of women in mosque affairs.<sup>72</sup>

Surveys of U.S. Muslims indicate that only 3 to 4 percent attend Friday prayers weekly. This is much lower than the 40 percent of Christians who attend church at least once a week. However, 47 percent of U.S. Muslims report that they fast for the month of Ramadan. Moreover, nationwide there are hundreds of Islamic day schools and even more Sunday and weekend schools. As of the mid-2000s, fewer than 5 percent of children with Muslim backgrounds are receiving direct schooling in Islam outside the home.<sup>73</sup> In the 1990s a training program for religious leaders was established in Herndon, Virginia, by the International Institute of Islamic Thought, which offers degrees in Imamate Studies and provides U.S. Islamic communities with religious imams educated in the United States. Until this was established, most leaders came from overseas, and the inability of some overseas leaders to understand U.S. society periodically created tensions with those served, especially with youth influenced by the dominant U.S. culture.<sup>74</sup>

Islamic scholar Yvonne Haddad has noted that while practicing Islam in the United States is becoming easier, problems remain: “The practice of religion is to pray five times a day, to perform ablutions before the prayers, to fast the month of Ramadan, to give alms, to go on the hajj once in a lifetime. Fasting is not as easy as fasting in a Muslim country, where the workday is shortened.”<sup>75</sup> Finding places to do ablutions and pray in the workplace can be difficult, but the growing numbers of practicing Muslims are pressuring employers to become aware of the need to provide facilities.

However, unlike the various denominations of Christianity (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant groups), Islam is not yet fully accepted in the United States. Its practitioners still suffer widespread prejudice and stereotyping. In this regard the practitioners of Islam suffer much as Jewish Americans once did for practicing Judaism in the United States. (Indeed, Jewish synagogues are still sometimes targets for anti-Jewish hate crimes.) U.S. media periodically connect mainstream Islam to extremists and terrorism. The media often refer to numerous incidents as involving “Islamic terrorists”—as though the religion of Islam routinely generated this terrorism. Yet, the same reporters and editors would never

refer routinely to the terrorists in places like Northern Ireland as “Christian terrorists,” even though Christian sectarian ideologies (Catholic versus Protestant) have often been linked to recent terrorism on that island. Clearly, in neither case is the broader religion, Islam or Christianity, responsible for extremist terrorism. Today, as Suad Joseph has noted, the portrayal of Islam is too often “achieved by misrepresenting and then essentializing and homogenizing a highly complex and diverse religion that has many different sects, legal systems, beliefs, and practices.”<sup>76</sup>

The recurring linkage of the religion of Islam to extremist terrorism creates serious dilemmas for many Muslim Americans. Much religious intolerance still confronts them in their everyday lives. Continuing anti-Arab and anti-Middle Eastern stereotyping and discrimination can create serious problems of identity and self-esteem for Arab and other Middle Eastern Americans. As a result, many have decided to deny or “de-emphasize their Arab or Islamic background.” This reaction is the same as that of numerous other immigrants groups, past and present, for whom the U.S. sociocultural context has often been a painful Procrustean bed, one with great pressure for one-way conformity to the dominant culture.<sup>77</sup>

## Adaptation and Assimilation Issues

### *Patterns of Assimilation*

Partial cultural assimilation has come relatively quickly for most Arab immigrants and their children. Earlier Greater Syrian immigrants soon adapted to new cultural and social environments, picking up English and certain U.S. folkways, even as most maintained their distinctive religious traditions. Intentional discrimination by European Americans played a role in frustrating the rise of first-generation Arab Americans and their children. In response to discrimination, they often anglicized their names, gave up Arabic, and tried to appear as Anglo-American as they could, especially in public.<sup>78</sup>

In the sphere of structural assimilation at the secondary level of economy and politics, these early Arab Americans advanced and gradually achieved substantial success. In the early period whites saw their nationality as “Syrian,” not “Arab.” Indeed, most did not see themselves as Arabs at that point,

although most had deep Arab cultural roots. While many had come to make money and return home, in the entrepreneurial process they came to be proud of their contributions to the United States. Their constant contacts with other Americans drew them into the individualistic culture and language habits of the dominant culture. As they became more attached to their new homeland, their attachment to Syria and Lebanon declined significantly.<sup>79</sup>

In contrast, Arab immigrants who have entered since the 1960s have assimilated more slowly at most levels, perhaps because their numbers have been much larger and because of more intense anti-Arab sentiment in the United States recently.

### *Contemporary Assimilation Issues and Patterns*

One major survey of Middle Eastern Americans in Michigan found that the issues receiving the greatest emphasis were immigration, cultural preservation, citizenship, and assimilation. Preservation of Arab and other Middle Eastern cultures, especially language and religion, is of great concern in Arab and other Middle Eastern communities.<sup>80</sup>

Generally speaking, significant language and other cultural assimilation is taking place in Arab American communities today. While the 2000 census revealed that 69 percent of Arab Americans over the age of four, and either foreign-born or born of two Arab parents, speak a language besides English at home, therein two languages are the norm. In many homes English is increasingly dominant. This is especially true for those who have intermarried with people from other racial and ethnic groups. Probably because of the growing Arab American population and continuing Middle East crises, interest in Arabic language and culture among native-born Arab Americans has increased in recent years. Those in the second and third generations usually have to take Arabic classes to become fluent, for most do not develop Arabic fluency at home.<sup>81</sup>

Although some Arab Americans oppose marriage outside the group because it threatens Arab American solidarity, intermarriage is increasing. Many second- and third-generation Arab Americans, as well as other Middle Eastern Americans, are moving out of enclave communities and intermarrying outside traditional nationality and religious groups. One recent study of Muslim Americans (mostly

Arab Americans) and converts in Houston found two major types of contemporary marriage patterns. Twelve of the twenty-seven respondents, mostly first or second generation, had traditional arranged marriages that were also endogamous. But fifteen of the twenty-seven had exogamous marriages outside their immediate nationality group, all of which were self-initiated. In addition, along with vertical economic progress for Arab Americans has come horizontal mobility, especially suburbanization. First-generation immigrants, like those in other immigrant groups, tend to live in older urban areas, while subsequent generations have been the most likely to move to suburbia. Indeed, many in all generations have moved to the suburbs.<sup>82</sup> This suburbanization, however, has often reduced attendance at mosques and weakened commitment to Islamic traditions.

### Assimilation and Generational Conflicts

Today, Arab American and other Middle Eastern American groups are relatively young populations; a large proportion are under the age of twenty-five. This pattern is characteristic of populations containing large numbers of recent immigrants. As with earlier Arab immigrants, assimilation pressures have led more recent Arab immigrants and their children to adopt the English language and some mainstream values constantly articulated in the media and public schools. As they become better educated, Arab and other Middle Eastern Americans, especially the young, are being drawn away from cultures of origin to the dominant U.S. culture. Education is essential for advancement, but results in greater acculturation to the Eurocentric core culture. Some in U.S.-born generations even mock the first generation, especially newcomers, as “boaters” who speak English with a strong accent or are not in tune with the dominant culture. In its turn, the first generation sometimes views later generations as far too assimilated and losing touch with their heritage.<sup>83</sup>

Like children of other immigrants, Arab children are caught between parents’ culture and the dominant U.S. culture; family conflicts often result. Parents and community leaders worry that young people are enticed away from traditional values and practices by negative aspects of U.S. culture—drugs, sexual promiscuity, and violence. As in other groups, many Arab American teenagers prefer the more

permissive core culture. U.S.-born teenagers seek to fit in by adopting such practices as coloring their hair unusual colors, wearing jeans, or listening to rap music. Some young people arrange dates at shops or in malls away from parents.<sup>84</sup> While parents are disturbed at their children’s lack of respect for the old ways, children frequently feel they are unfairly restricted. As one young Yemeni American put it, “I think it is not fair; I was born in a different society. I am in America.” At the opposite extreme, one young Jordanian American was sent for counseling because he had beaten his younger sister, who was dating a boy at school without permission.<sup>85</sup>

Some Middle Eastern community leaders fear that anti-Arab prejudice and discrimination will cause the youth to desire to abandon their heritage or ancestry even more rapidly. Indeed, some youth do try to hide their identities. In one interview, an Arab American girl told of a friend who passed herself off as half-black and half-Puerto Rican to avoid anti-Arab racism. However, she herself said, “I could constantly find an excuse to deny my culture, but I’m not.”<sup>86</sup> In addition, the targeting of Arab and Muslim Americans by racist outsiders and discriminators has often had the effect of encouraging youth to accent these identities. Thus, one recent research study of second-generation Arab Americans on the west coast found that many were accenting their Muslim identities (often in a Muslim first, Arab second pattern) in response to stereotyping and discrimination. This became one of the vehicles “for self-reinvention and public action, particularly among those who participated in Muslim student activism on college campuses.”<sup>87</sup>

**Q** How might assimilation or power-conflict theories be used to explain generational conflicts among Arab Americans?

### Creating a Hybrid Culture

Recall Andrew Greeley’s *ethnogenesis* perspective (Chapter 2), one that recognizes the reality of cultural differences within contemporary racial and ethnic groups and seems to fit the Arab American experience in certain ways. Arab Americans constitute more than a single Middle Eastern group. Their origins lie in nearly two dozen different countries.

Today they are becoming a composite group of diverse cultural origins. Within the U.S. context, immigrants from various Arab countries and their descendants have increasingly forged a distinctive Arab American umbrella group shaped by their Arab heritages and by adaptation to the European American culture. Despite substantial adaptive changes, significant Arab cultural distinctiveness remains.

One study found that Michigan's Arab American organizations have helped young people to become assimilated to certain good features of U.S. culture and society while at the same time cautioning them about bad features and emphasizing traditional Arab family and religious values. As one leader has put it, "We even actually encourage our kids to assimilate in American society."<sup>88</sup>

Gary David and Kenneth Ayoub have defined **mediated assimilation** as *the process whereby Arab American organizations act as cultural filters to screen out some undesirable features of U.S. culture*. The pattern of using strong community organizations for both assimilation to and resistance to the dominant culture has been typical of many immigrants to the United States. This view of the effects and role of community organizations differs from the view that these organizations are interested only in promoting ancestral traditions and maintaining old cultural ways. In the mediated assimilation model, these organizations attempt to maintain some adherence to tradition, but also help create a new "Arab American" mixture. A hybrid Arab American culture appears to be developing, one that includes elements of ancestral and home-country practices but that also adapts these elements to the assimilation patterns within a specific community. The new hybrid Arab American culture is "specific to the community's experiences both in the new and old lands."<sup>89</sup> This hybrid particularly helps to blend together groups of people, young and old, whose ancestral roots are in different countries into an umbrella Arabic American culture.

### *Power-Conflict Issues: Identities in the Face of Hostility*

A power-conflict perspective underscores certain distinctive aspects of the Arab American experience. The dominant European American majority has the major say in how Arab Americans are portrayed in

the media and how they are viewed and treated in the many U.S. institutions. In public discussions and settings, the European American view of Arab Americans customarily decides whether the latter as a group are placed toward the darker, more socially undesirable end of the prevailing racial-ethnic continuum or toward the lighter, more socially desirable ("white") end. Recall the numerous European American judges who, between 1909 and 1944, vacillated on whether certain Arab American groups could be considered "white." Indeed, one important dimension of daily interaction with European Americans for Arab Americans is that they are treated as, at worst, "sand niggers" and "terrorists," or, perhaps with less overt hostility, as "not yet white," even as they are officially listed as "white" by the Census Bureau.

Continuing societal stereotyping and discrimination, usually at the hands of European Americans, have pressed some Arab Americans to deny or deemphasize their Islamic or Arab ties. Although the majority continue to openly claim their nationality and religious backgrounds, they often restrain their reactions to anti-Arab prejudice and discrimination even as they may work quietly to eliminate them. Moreover, some Arab Americans, such as those represented by the Arab American Institute, have sought to have Arab Americans officially classified as a distinctive non-European group, like the "Hispanic" category devised by the U.S. Census Bureau. Also, many Arab Americans publicly identify themselves as "people of color," and thus link themselves to the long struggle of movements against racial oppression in the United States.<sup>90</sup>

Clearly, the racial-ethnic identity of Arab Americans today is much more than a "symbolic identity" without lasting significance—the view some analysts hold of group identity in white ethnic groups such as Irish Americans. In this color-conscious society, Arab Americans' array of physical characteristics presents a continuing problem for their group and for European Americans who think in racist terms about them. Arab Americans vary from very dark-skinned to blue-eyed and blond, although most have brown eyes, dark hair, and olive or light brown skin.<sup>91</sup> Although some can and do pass as phenotypically white, many others who might do so in fact reject this option and emphasize certain differences from European Americans. They are usually proud of their national origins. Some

intentionally assert that their identities are *not* white European.<sup>92</sup> Most European Americans, for their part, seem to view Arab Americans and other Middle Eastern Americans, taken as a group, as “not white.” The persistence of anti-Arab stereotyping and hostility both encourages and discourages movement away from a strong Arab American identity.

## Summary

Middle Eastern immigrants have been coming to the United States for more than a century. The largest group among these are Arab immigrants from more than twenty countries. By the 1920s there were about 200,000 Arab Americans, mostly Christians. They and their descendants make up a substantial proportion of today’s Arab American population. The rest of this group encompasses many recent immigrants from Arab countries, most of whose religious background is Muslim. These immigrants and their descendants have helped to make Islam the second largest U.S. religion. As has been the case for other immigrant groups, economic and political conditions in countries of origin are major reasons for recent migration. Many immigrants have fled wars in the Middle East, including the civil war in Lebanon. Most have a strong sense of Arab origins and an inclination to be critical of traditional U.S. policies in the Middle East.

Today, Arab Americans have established strong communities in a number of large cities. The largest

number live in metropolitan Detroit. Many have become successful professionals or businesspeople, and some are beginning to move into important political offices. Arab Americans still face widespread stereotyping and significant and sometimes violent discrimination. Hate crimes have frequently targeted Islamic mosques, as well as Middle Eastern individuals and their families and homes. Negative images of Arabs and Arab Americans are common in some media; men are often portrayed as extremist or domineering and women as servile or repressed. Only a few U.S. leaders outside Arab American communities have yet been willing to challenge these stereotyped images in a regular and sustained way.

Arab Americans are today in the forefront of those fighting racial and ethnic stereotyping and religious discrimination. Like other groups facing serious discrimination, they have created important community and civil rights organizations that have pressed for expanded civil rights not only for Arab and other Middle Eastern Americans but also for all Americans.

## Key Terms

Middle Eastern  
Americans 342  
Arab  
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sojourner  
immigration 344  
mediated  
assimilation 360