

## Middle Eastern Americans and Disabled Persons

### **Key Words**

Middle Eastern Americans, disabled persons, socio-economic status, discrimination, double minority

### **Description**

This issue brief will focus on the ways in which U.S. policy towards disabled persons both intersects and comes into conflict with U.S. policy towards Middle-Eastern Americans. It will additionally explore the political representation and participation, socio-economic status and discrimination against these two minority groups, highlighting the disparity between U.S. policy and public U.S. sentiment and actual treatment of the disabled and Middle-Eastern Americans.

### **Key Points**

- Disabled people and Middle Eastern Americans are both considered minority groups that have been/are socially stigmatized
- Political participation of these two minority groups is varied
- Increased stigmatization of Middle Eastern Americans was seen after 9/11
- Existing stereotypes and ignorance about these two groups is detrimental to U.S. policies, as well as political and socio-economic growth

### **Issue Brief**

There are currently 41,260,000 disabled people in the U.S. The disability rights movement began in earnest in the 1970s. It wasn't until 1990 that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed. It defined a disability as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities," and established laws for "qualified individual[s] with a disability." The "qualification" of an individual is interpreted by the employer on an individual basis, and is meant to be objective, but leaves room for subjective discrimination. Additional legal requirements of non-discrimination against the disabled include special requisites in bathrooms, ramps, elevators, parking spaces, and more.

Accurate data on Middle Eastern Americans is difficult to obtain, in part because they are not yet considered a separate ethnic category in the U.S. Census and are instead classified as “white.” Few studies have been conducted on Middle Eastern Americans, and so for this reason much of the statistical information regarding Middle Eastern Americans is gleaned from Arab American organizations. The categorization of all Middle Eastern Americans as Arab is not accurate because Middle Eastern Americans are from a variety of countries (Fig. 1), speaking many different languages among each other. As an example, Iranian Americans are from the Middle East but do not have Arabic ancestry, and thus are excluded from many studies on Middle Eastern Americans. As such, most of the following information will refer to Arab Americans, while it is frustratingly and inadequately implied that this sub-category does not include all Middle Eastern Americans.

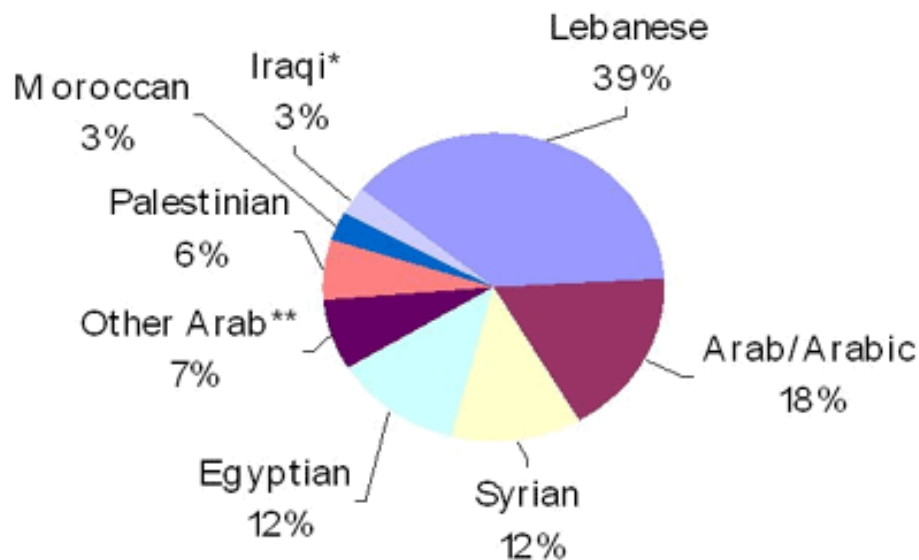


Fig. 1: Source: 2000 U.S. Census Sample Data

Immediately after 9/11, U.S. politicians, including former President George W. Bush, and many in the media publicly and repeatedly appealed to Americans not to take part in acts of racial violence against Arab Americans. However, these uses of inclusive political language do

not obscure the fact that the Bush Administration and Congress proceeded to pass the Patriot Act, which greatly infringed on civil liberties. Here we see a discrepancy between the rhetoric of U.S. policy and the actual employment of it in the lives of Middle Eastern Americans.

Based on a poll by Columbia Broadcasting Company/*New York Times* in September, 2001, 26% of Americans thought Arab Americans were more sympathetic to terrorists. In September of 2002, this figure increased to 33%. Also important to note, are polls by Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* in which immediately after the attacks on September 11, 35% of Americans stated having less trust in Arabs living in the U.S. A year later, the mistrust increased to 44%. These statistics are worrisome in their revelation of ignorance about Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and Islam, that fuels “Islamaphobia,” which is based on the Hegemonic fear of the “Other.”

The consideration of political participation of Middle Eastern Americans as a threat is hindering their full political participation. This is evident as recent as June 2008, during President Barack Obama’s campaign when two Muslim women at a rally were not allowed to stand behind him and be photographed because of their headscarves. Regardless of this challenge, Middle Eastern Americans are in fact one of the most politically active ethnic groups in the U.S. In 2000, Arab Americans had a voter turnout of 69% and 15.6% donated to a presidential campaign.

In considering the effectiveness of disabled political politics and policies, the founding of the Special Olympics is an important milestone. Timothy Shriver is currently leading the movement on banning the “R” word (retard). In addition, in an effort to improve voter accessibility to polling places, Congress had data collected and analyzed on Election Day in

2000 regarding the conditions for voters with disabilities. It was found that 56% of polling places in the contiguous U.S. have at least one potential impediment in between the parking lot and polling place but have curbside voting available, 28% have one or more potential impediments with no curbside voting, and 16% have no impediments (Fig. 2). While many of the public who were polled are in favor of increasing disabled people's rights, Congress reported local politicians blame lack of available funding for improved polling accessibility.

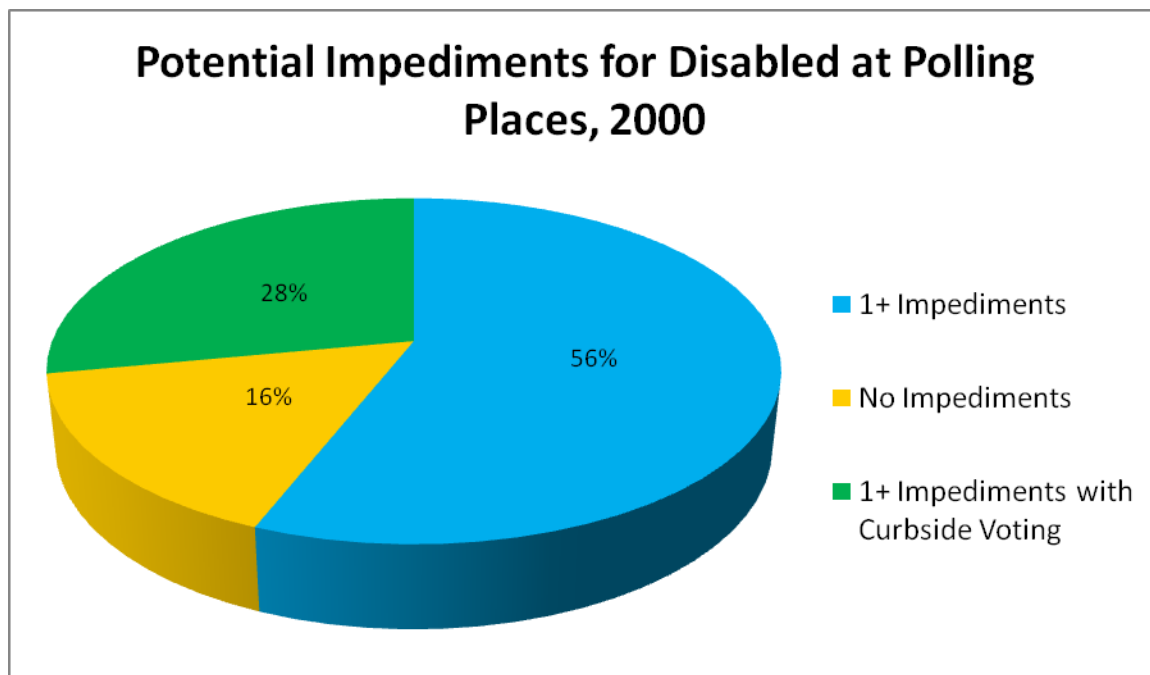


Fig. 2: Source: U.S. GAO Report to Congressional Requesters. *Voters with Disabilities: Access to Polling Places and Alternative Voting Methods*. p 26.

For these two groups to make gains in U.S. policy-making, political participation, and societal perception, a strong stance is needed by politicians (and citizens) on U.S. policy destigmatizing Middle Eastern Americans and disabled persons. In order to be successful, this change must start in the media. In addition, serious efforts should focus on the education of non-Middle Eastern Americans about Middle Eastern Americans, especially when such strong

sentiments regarding Middle Eastern Americans exist. Also, the incorporation of Middle Eastern Americans into the U.S. Census as their own distinct group will prove to be advantageous.

Over 14% of Arab Americans are disabled. This creates the challenge of a double minority for them. The intersection of these two groups is seen in the shared experience of social stigmatization. The stigmatization associated with being disabled and/or Middle Eastern American can affect political participation and representation, which may in turn contribute to lower economic assistance and less social equality and recognized civil rights. The effect of immigration and acculturation in addition to the stressors of scrutiny by the government and general public on Middle Eastern Americans can contribute to mental health problems. Statistically, the disabled are 40% less likely to participate in politics. The disabled and Middle Eastern Americans both face discrimination based on their physical appearances, although this is not always the case in disabled people. However, both groups also share the lack of a cohesive and successful social and political movement. While not in concordance with the ADA's definition, it is possible that as an alternative definition of disabled persons, a person can be disabled politically or socio-economically. In at least the latter of these two "disabilities" there is stigmatization attached. In each case the "disabled" are prevented from participating fully in society due to the imposition by others of their racist and usually ignorant beliefs.

## Works Cited

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## Relevant Websites

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U.S. Census Bureau: [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

Americans with Disabilities Act: [www.eeoc.gov/types/ada.html](http://www.eeoc.gov/types/ada.html)