

LGBT Middle Eastern/Arab Americans

Key Words: Middle Eastern, Arab American, LGBT, POC, queer

Description: This issue brief discusses the discrimination that Middle Eastern/Arab Americans must contend with in a post 9/11 society. It highlights the

Key Points:

- Although Middle Eastern/Arab Americans are registered as white on the United States census, they do not enjoy the unearned privileges associated with whiteness.
- Middle Eastern/Arab Americans experience discrimination akin to that of People of Color (POC).
- In a post 9/11 society, Middle Eastern/Arab Americans face more discrimination than before.
- LGB¹ Middle Eastern/Arab Americans must contend with sexual orientation based discrimination from society at large and within Middle Eastern/Arab communities.

Issue Brief

Middle Eastern/Arab Americans may comprise a small portion of the United States' population but they are a diverse group of people. Arab Americans in particular come from 22 nation states such as Iraq, Somalia, Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan and represent a range of religions. In a post 9/11 world, Middle Eastern and Arab Americans must contend with an

¹ Research has predominantly focused on LGB individuals, not transgender, thus I have chosen to not include the T. Hopefully there will be more research and literature that speak to the experience of transgender Middle Eastern/Arab Americans.

increased amount of discrimination. However unlike People of Color (POC), Middle Eastern and Arab Americans are not protected from race based discrimination because they are officially classified as white on the United States census. Thus they do not enjoy the unearned privileges and protection that stem from whiteness. Additionally, this classification erases the complexities and differences that exist within the Middle Eastern/Arab American identities. For these reasons, Middle Eastern/Arab Americans are marginalized like POC.

Table 1.
Total and Arab Population and Households by Selected Arab Ancestry Group: 2006–2010
 (Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see www.census.gov/acs/www/)

Ancestry group	Total population		Total households		Average household size	
	Number	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Number	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Number	Margin of error ¹ (±)
Total	303,965,272	(X)	114,235,996	248,114	2.59	0.01
Total Arab²	1,517,664	17,397	511,102	5,035	2.93	0.02
Lebanese	485,917	6,375	181,127	2,437	2.66	0.03
Egyptian	179,853	4,999	60,137	1,731	2.95	0.05
Syrian	147,426	3,950	56,040	1,432	2.67	0.04
Palestinian	83,241	4,035	25,679	1,163	3.50	0.10
Moroccan	74,908	3,183	23,365	1,170	2.75	0.07
Iraqi	73,896	4,162	22,979	1,189	3.27	0.10
Jordanian	60,056	3,797	18,134	1,088	3.42	0.11
Yemeni	29,358	2,618	6,812	550	4.34	0.21

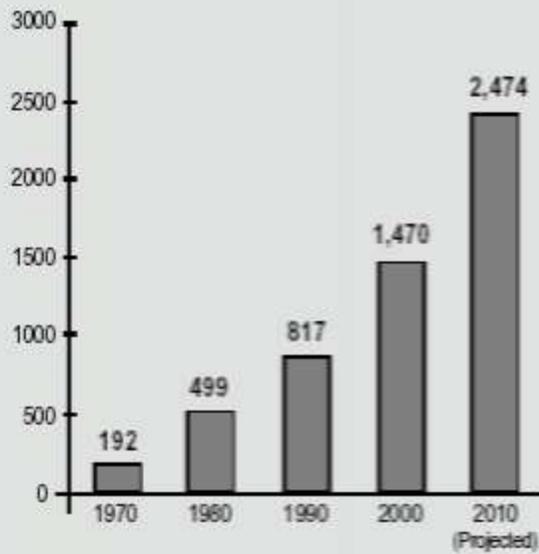
(X) Not applicable.

¹ Data are based on a sample and are subject to sampling variability. A margin of error is a measure of an estimate's variability. The larger the margin of error in relation to the size of the estimate, the less reliable the estimate. When added to and subtracted from the estimate, the margin of error forms the 90 percent confidence interval.

² The total Arab estimate includes selected ancestry groups (Lebanese, Egyptian, Syrian, Palestinian, Moroccan, Iraqi, Jordanian, and Yemeni), as well as general "Arab/Arabic" responses and other Arab groups not shown.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey Selected Population Tables 2006–2010, DP02 and B01003.

Figure 1. Mideast Immigrants in the U.S., 1970-2010, in thousands

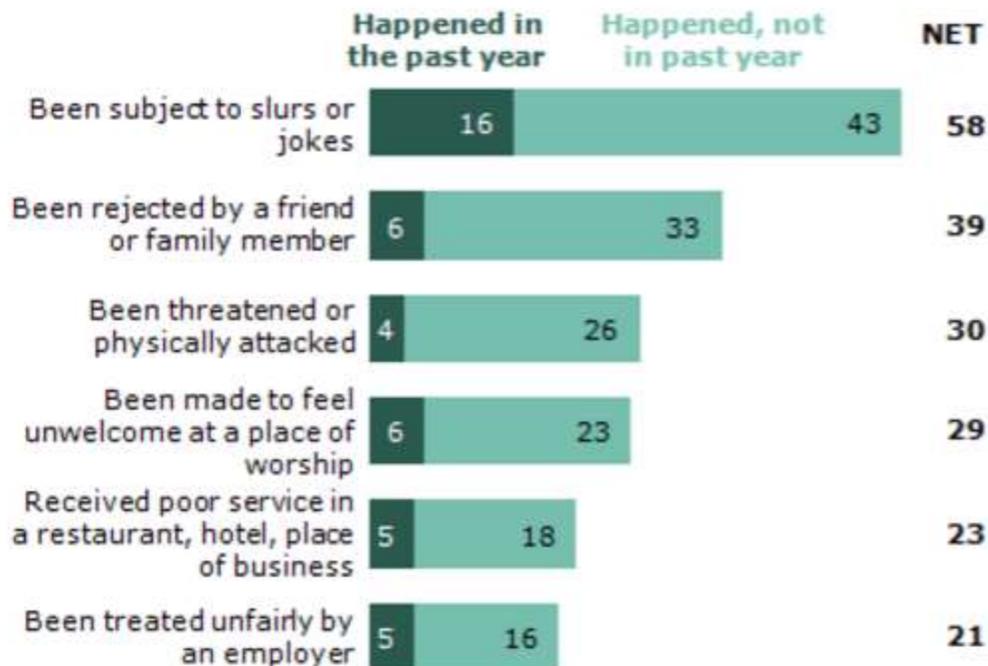


Source: Figures for 1970 through 2000 are from Center for Immigration Studies analysis of the 1970, 1980, and 1990 censuses and the Census 2000 Supplemental Survey.

LGB Middle Eastern/Arab Americans must deal with an additional discriminatory layer due to their sexual orientation creating a double minority status which adds additional strain to their lives. Although society is becoming more accepting of LGBT people, LGB Middle Eastern/Arab Americans are not immune from experiencing discrimination for they continue to live in a heterosexist society where that is not uncommon.

Perceptions of Discrimination

% saying this ... because of their sexual orientation or gender identity



Notes: Based on all LGBT (N=1,197). "Net" was computed prior to rounding.

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They must also face discrimination from members of Middle Eastern/Arab American communities. It is not uncommon for LGB individuals to struggle to reconcile their sexuality with their familial obligations. Generally speaking, Middle Eastern/Arab Americans come from a collectivist society that emphasizes the importance of family. Many people are expected to marry and have children and some families may feel that this is not possible for LGB individuals. Additionally, homosexuality is usually associated with Western culture and white men. Consequently, to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual is an affront to cultural norms. This is particularly strong in Muslim communities because being lesbian, gay, or bisexual goes against the usual interpretation of the Qur'an's stance on homosexuality.

According to the Qur'an, it is the story of Lut that condemns homosexuality. In it, God sends two angels to stay with Lut in his home. Apparently the people surrounding Lut's home wished to 'know' the angels. This knowing is alluded to be the gang rape of men. For this reason God chooses to punish and destroy the people of Lut. There are more modern interpretations of the story that state that the people of Lut committed numerous sins and there is no one sin in particular that led to their damnation. In spite of these contemporary teachings, the traditional story of Lut continues to be the widely accepted standpoint. This suggests that this anti-LGB sentiment is more cultural than it is religious.

A qualitative study about North American progressive gay Muslim men, researchers found that some gay Muslim men often struggle with their faith due to their sexuality.² For example, some men felt "betrayed" by their God and faith because they felt that they had done nothing wrong by being gay. Others cleaved to their faith in order to "deflect heterosexist pressures and assumptions by family". However for some, forming a strong relationship with Allah help them to reconcile their faith and their sexuality. These instances serve as a counter to the general notion that religion is oppressive and that faith and a LGB sexuality cannot exist at the same time.

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