

Issue Brief: Middle Eastern Immigration

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Race & Ethnicity Issue Brief

Description:

This brief focuses on the immigration population patterns of Middle Eastern immigration to the United States from the 1970s up to today. The socioeconomic status, education level, and religious ideology of Middle Eastern immigrants in the United States will be assessed throughout the years in an attempt to understand at what levels Middle Eastern immigrants have incorporated into US society. The decline in immigration following September 11, 2001 will be reviewed along with the social and political implications that resulted within the United States and Middle-Eastern community do to this.

Key Words:

Middle Eastern, Muslim, Department of Homeland Security, immigrant quotas, Census, Immigration

Key Points:

- Between 1970-2000 there was a dramatic increase in immigration to the United States from the Middle East.

- Along with the increase in immigration has come multiple forms of religion, though in recent years the most common religion among Middle Eastern immigrants has been the Muslim faith.

- The events of 9/11 had drastic impacts to Middle Eastern immigration the the US, along with social and political ramifications.

- There was a sharp decline in the number of Middle Eastern immigrants coming to the US after 2001, though since 2004 the number has increased and the incoming immigrant population is much higher, resembling the numbers of immigrants prior to 2001.

- Middle Eastern men in the US are more likely to be employed and earn higher wages than their counterparts.

- There is an increase of illegal immigration to the United States from areas of the Middle East.

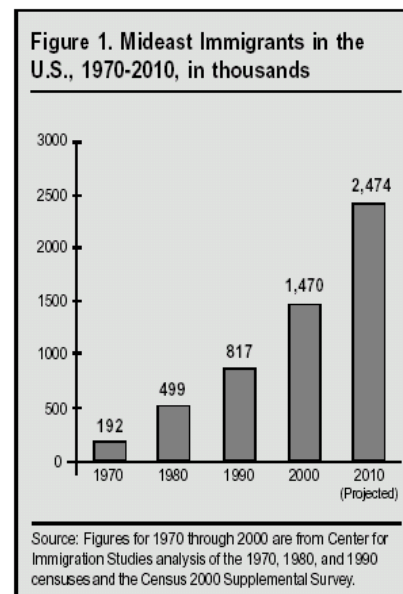


Figure 1:

<http://www.cis.org/articles/2002/back902ml>

Brief:

The prospect of the American Dream along with the lifting of immigration quotas favoring European immigration in the 1960s resulted in the influx of immigration from the Middle East to the United States. In this brief, the countries in Southwest Asia, Northern Africa, and Afghanistan and Pakistan are included within the terminology of the Middle East. Between 1970-2000 there was a rapidly growing population of Middle Eastern immigrant population forming in the United States. Comparing the sheer number of immigrants which came to the US in the 1970s versus the 2000 data (Fig. 1) demonstrates the radical growth of this racial/ethnic group in the United States. The estimated immigration during the 1970s was 192,000 people whereas in the year 2000, approximately 1.5 million Middle Eastern people immigrated to the United States, almost eight times that of 1970!³ The different internal conditions of Middle Eastern countries has resulted in several influxes of immigrants from these countries over time, and have thus resulted in varying reasons for the individuals to emigrate. The leading reasons for immigration from the Middle East to the United States is the pursuit of freedom, separation of church and state, escaping political and social repression, employment and education. During the 1990s the number of immigrants from the Middle East surged due to limited

employment opportunities for young people.

The drastic increase of Middle Eastern immigrants has resulted in their incorporation within all aspect of US society and culture. It is important to look deeper into how the Middle Eastern population has incorporated themselves in the US in regards to US citizens and other immigrant populations. On the whole, the education attainment of many Middle Eastern immigrants is higher than that of most natives and immigrants. In addition to this, men of Middle Eastern descent have higher employment rates in all sectors of the job market (labor, management, service, and professional) (Fig. 2). On the other hand, women of Middle Eastern descent have much lower rates of employment than any other ethnic group. On the whole, both Middle Eastern men and women earned higher incomes than the general population. Despite this, there are inequalities that manifest themselves when looked at on a more intricate

Fig. 2 <http://www.census.gov/2005pubs/censr-21>

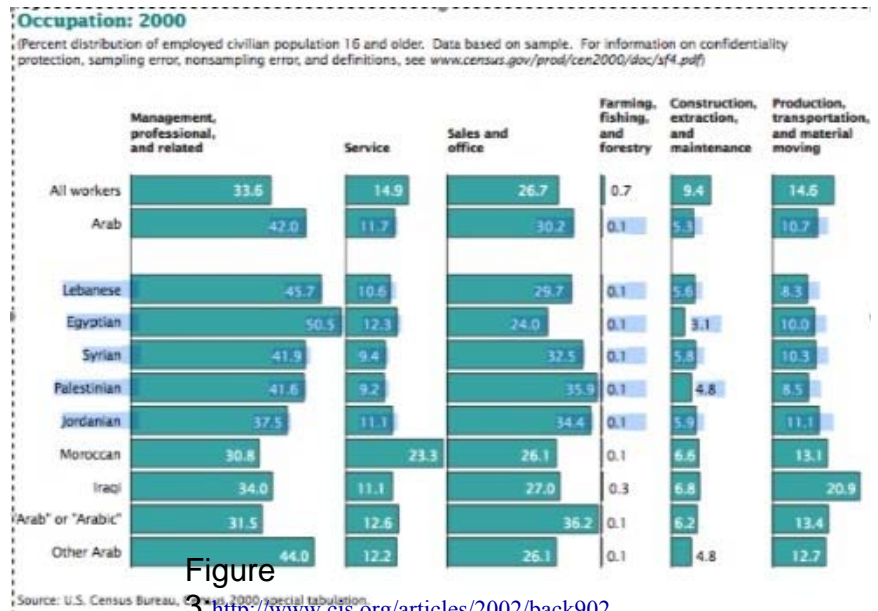


Figure 3

scale. In data collected in 2000 (Fig. 3) it shows that while the percentage of Middle Easterners self-employed exceeds that of natives, the poverty rate and use of welfare is considerably higher than that of natives. This high level of welfare status during the 1990s may be attributed to the refugee status of many of immigrants coming to the United States from Iraq. However, the consistent rise in welfare and poverty throughout the subgroups of the Middle Eastern population cannot be vindicated. These incongruencies may have larger implications and perhaps be attributed to the social and cultural aspects of the United States. After 9/11, there was a surge of hate crimes against people of Middle Eastern descent along with a lot of social hostility and tension within US communities. While there is no solid evidence that either racism or differences in cultural beliefs lead to these disparities, it is important to recognize that with most immigrant populations come different sets of ideologies, cultures, and languages.

It is important to recognize that people from the Middle East are not uniform and the population immigrating to the United States consists of different religions, languages, and cultures. However, within the past two decades the majority of Middle Eastern immigrants in the United States are Muslim. This is a drastic change from the 1970 census where 15% of the

Middle Eastern population coming to the US was Muslim; whereas in 2000 the immigrant population consisted of 73% that identified themselves as Muslim. □

The events of September 11, 2001 affected the much of the Middle Eastern population living in the United States, who suddenly experienced unwarranted racism and hostility. As depicted in Fig. 4, after the 9/11 attack, there was sudden and rapid decline in the number of Muslim immigrants admitted to the US States legally based on country. By 2003, the number of immigrants arriving from 22 Muslim countries had declined by more than a third. For students, tourists and other nonimmigrants from these countries, the drop was even more dramatic, with total visits down by nearly half. While some may argue that the appeal to move to the US after 9/11 as a Middle Eastern migrant declined because of anti-Middle Eastern hostilities that were displayed after 2001; the 1.5 million applications sent in after 9/11 in 2001 for visa lottery in from the Middle East shows the continued interest in residing in the United States. □ However, it may be surmised that after 9/11 there were stricter requisites in place by the Department of Homeland Security (the sector of government that deals with immigration) which may have resulted in the decrease of immigrants from Middle-Eastern

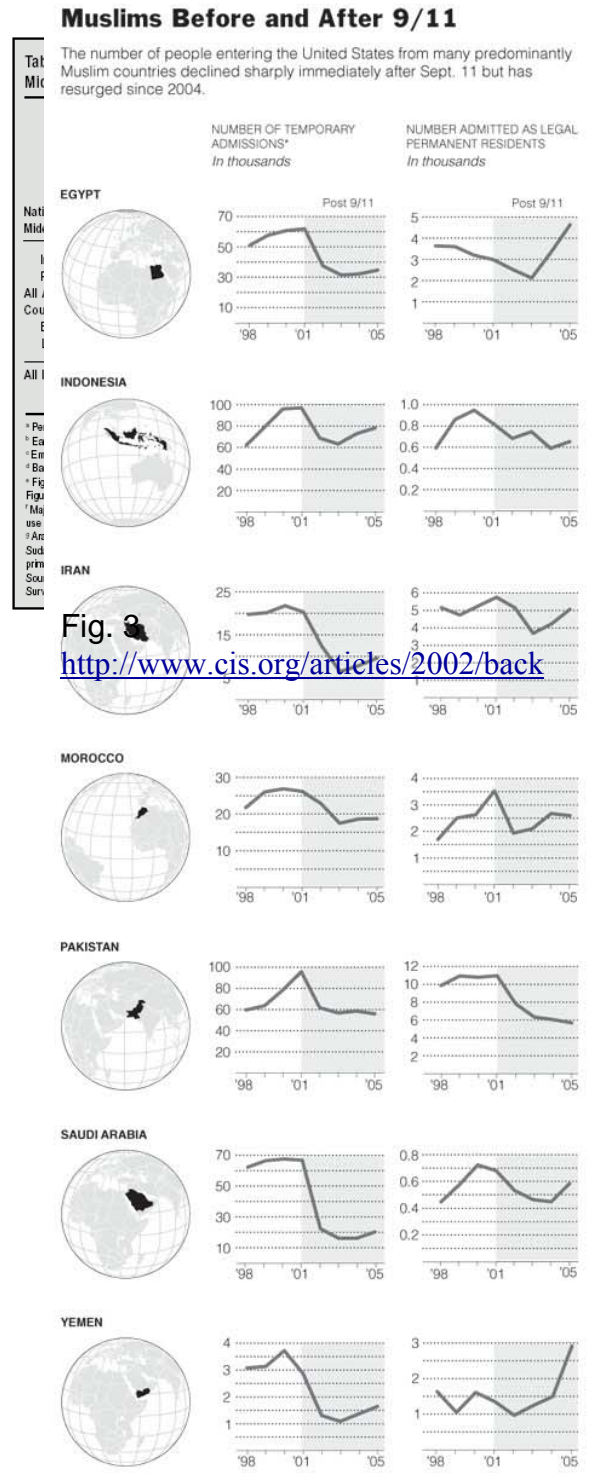
countries. While the Department of Homeland Security does not release the the details of their immigration stances or quotas, they have the ability to decrease or increase the people allowed to immigrate to the US. In past history, as during WWII, there have been restrictions in place against the immigration from different countries based on political and social relations. Figure 3 also displays that after 2004, the level of immigration began to increase in each country presented.² The INS (Immigration and National Services) has noted the increase of illegal immigration from Middle Eastern countries, estimating that 150,000 people from the Middle East lived illegally in the US in 1996. However, overall this represents only about 2% of the illegal population living in the United States. While this is not a significant number of the population, it shows the escalating desire to immigrate to the United States for those of Middle Eastern descent.

Today, there continues to be large-scale interest and immigration from the Middle East to the United States. As there is already a significant population of Middle Eastern residents, the large-scale immigration that is predicted to persist from the Middle East will further shape the political and social realm of the United States.

References:

¹CQ Researcher, Issues in Race and Ethnicity 4th edition. CQ Press. 2009.

²Takaki, Ronald. A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America. Hachette



*Includes students, tourists, foreign diplomats and business travelers, who may have been admitted more than once in a given year.
Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Figure 4: http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/10/nyregion/10Muslims.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1

Book Group. 2008.

<http://www.cis.org/articles/2002/back902.html>

<http://www.cis.org/articles/2002/sac830.htm>

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/10/nyregion/10muslims.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1

Websites that have interesting information and statistics about immigration for the Middle East:

http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/Immigration_Since_9-11.pdf

<http://www.dhs.gov/files/immigration.shtm>

<http://www.state.gov/s/d/rm/c6112.htm>

<http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/cenr-21.pdf>