

Discrimination Against Middle Eastern Americans:
Still searching for Affirmative Action Rights

Abstract

The September 11th attacks have largely alienated all Middle Eastern Americans from the rest of the country such that they are actively being discriminated against. Furthermore, attempts for reorganization as a collective unit are difficult as classification efforts largely obscure Middle Easterners as a distinct group. Only through new changes in legislative policy and a reintroduction into Academia can Middle Eastern Americans begin to be reintegrated into American Culture.

Key Points

- 9/11 has hurt the image of Middle Easterners in the eyes of Americans
- Middle Eastern Americans are facing growing amounts of discrimination in a time of a more tolerant US culture towards minorities
- Middle Eastern Americans need to be reclassified as a distinct group, different than whites and other minorities
- Post 9/11 policies have largely been used to arbitrarily discriminate against Middle Eastern Americans
- Through a reintroduction into the Academic Classroom, Middle Eastern Americans have a new chance to become reintegrated into American culture.

Issue Brief

The rights and affirmative action of Middle Eastern Americans have been largely hindered or even neglected due to a post 9/11 anti-Middle Eastern sentiment. The type of discrimination experienced by Middle Eastern Americans is unlike that of any other race. As a result, in a time of ever-growing appreciation and cultural understanding, Middle Eastern Americans are facing increasing amounts of discrimination and unequal treatment. The events of 9/11 created a backlash in cultural tolerance such that anyone who looked Middle Eastern or had Islamic sounding names became scapegoats for the anger of US Citizens. Furthermore, government initiatives such as the "War on terror" have essentially made practices of stereotyping and prejudice against Middle Eastern Americans socially acceptable.ⁱ Only through cultural unity, academia and meaningful contribution in society has the Middle Eastern American population began to redefine their race.

Although Congress has tried to institute certain policy changes that would hopefully reduce mistreatment, the majority of legislature has actually helped to legitimate discrimination against Middle Eastern Americans. For example, Bush passed a resolution on September 17th “condemning bigotry and violence against Arab-Americans, American Muslims and South Asians,” which James Zogby, (director of Arab American Institute) feels may have largely helped to limit the growing sentiment of racism and hate crimes against Middle Eastern Americansⁱⁱ. Nevertheless, the establishment of the US Patriot act allowed US law enforcement to preemptively target *Arab-looking* assumed to be associated with terrorism and detain them solely on the basis of their ethnicity. Furthermore, the NSEERS (National Security Entry-Exit Registration System) now gives authorities the discretion to fingerprint any “high risk” foreign visitors who come to the US.ⁱⁱⁱ The INS has largely begun to use the intelligence from the NSEERS to crack down on any illegal aliens and subsequently deport many Middle Eastern Americans. The result of these various policies is that Muslims, Arabs, South Asians, or any person resembling a similar skin tone are experiencing increasing amounts of disenfranchisement and a loss of rights.

The classification of Middle Eastern Americans has also created difficulties for their people in the US. In 1960, the US government unofficially removed Arabs from being classified as *White*, where they were previously categorized by the US Census and most affirmative action forms.^{iv}

Subsequently, they are denied the affirmative action rights of other racial minorities and excluded from the racial advantages received by Whites. For example, Judge Tuttle denied naturalization to an Arab on the grounds that Arabs as a class are not white and therefore not eligible for citizenship.^{iv} Furthermore, Arabs are not experiencing the benefits of affirmative action that other minorities have experienced as a recent study identified more than 45% of citizens who personally knew an Arab that experienced discrimination since 2001.ⁱⁱ Recently, more groups are forming to help assert the rights of Middle Eastern Americans including the American Civil Liberties Union, American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee and the Arab-American Institute, all of which have put pressure on the government to reconsider the legality of secret detentions that suspend rights of *habeas corpus*.

The rights of Middle Eastern Americans have been compromised, as many people do not take the time to understand their culture and instead consider them all to be *A-Rab*. It has been proposed that the only way to end mistreatment of Middle Eastern Americans is to reclassify them as a separate entity from Whites and other minorities. This would give them increased recognition of minority groups in the post-civil rights era, without sacrificing their rights as citizens. This would be the first step in overcoming the discrimination they face as a collective people and starting to build a new identity. Only recently have they introduced a box to check for Middle Easterner or Arab. However they often fail to be considered for affirmative action as these people frequently check *White* when identifying with a certain race.^v Middle Eastern peoples are being forced to work harder as a collective identity not only to reintroduce their value and contribution to society but to protest against instances of their own injustice.^{iv}

Currently, there is little to no discourse about the plight of Middle Eastern American peoples.^{vi} One of the ways in which this new Middle Eastern American identity has begun to emerge is through academic education. There has been a greater push for Middle Eastern Studies in academic environments as well as a reintroduction of their culture outside the stereotypes with which Americans are familiar. Under the influence of activist Edward Said, on October 21st, 2003, Congress passed a bill, requiring universities to show more support for equal teaching of Middle Eastern Studies, or face the threat of losing federal funding^{vii}. The idea is that through education, Americans could begin to develop a more representative view and qualitative assessment of the Middle Eastern Population. 9/11 has done a lot of harm to the US perceptions the Middle Eastern Americans, and only through proper time, teachings and tolerance can this begin to rebuild.

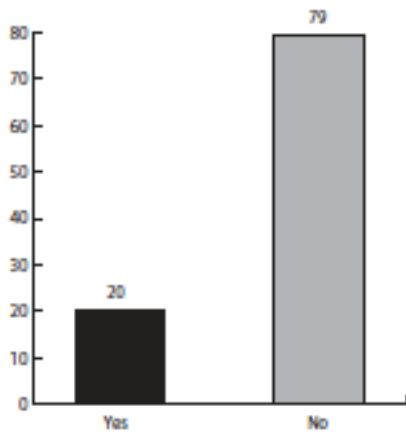


Figure 6: Personal experience with discrimination since September 11.

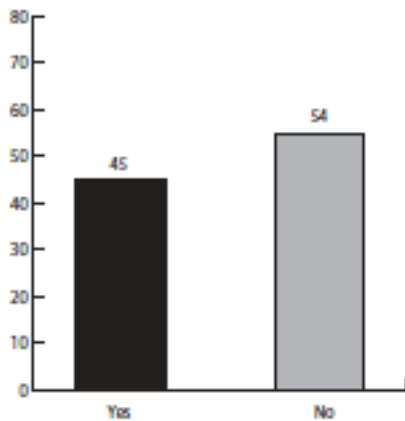


Figure 7: Know someone of Arab ethnicity who has experienced discrimination since September 11.



Figure 8: More profiling, less profiling, or about the same amount of profiling of Arab Americans since September 11?

Source: ¹Zogby, J (2001) "Arab American Attitudes and the September 11 Attacks." Arab American Institute, p 1-5

Middle Eastern Americans Protesting Against John Ashcroft's unfair use of NSEER and other discriminatory policy – April 6,



2002 Protesters march across the Brooklyn Bridge, April 6, 2002.

J. STEPHEN MOSES/AP PHOTO

Source: Hassan, S. (2002) "Arabs, Race and the Post-September 11 National Security State." *Middle Eastern Report*, 224, 16-21.

ⁱBozorgmehr, Mehdi. and Bakalian, Anny. (2004) "Post-9/11 Anti Immigrant Government Initiatives: The Response of Middle Eastern and South Asian American Organizations." *American Sociological Association*: San Francisco, CA

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- ii Zogby, J (2001). "Arab American Attitudes and the September 11 Attacks." *Arab American Institute*, 1-5
- iii NSERS <http://www.uslaw.com/bulletin/nseers-national-security-entry-exit-registration-system.php?p=50>
- iv Hassan, S. (2002). "Arabs, Race and the Post-September 11 National Security State." *Middle Eastern Report*, 224, 16-21.
- v Deer White Middle Easterners <http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php?t=653230>
- vi Orfalea, G (2001). "Arabs in America: Building a New Nation." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 117-117.
- vii Goldberg, *Osama University* http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2003/11/06/middle_east/print.html