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Race & Ethnicity in America
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Topic: Class Divides within the Middle Eastern American Community

Key Words:

1. Middle East
2. Arab American
3. Muslim American
4. Refugees
5. Small Business Owners

Key Points:

1. Though many people equate the Middle East with Islam, most Middle Eastern Americans are not Muslim, and most Muslims in American are not from the Middle East.
2. The median household income for native born Americans is lower than that of Arab Americans, although the income varies greatly by Nationality. For example, Lebanese-Americans earn significantly more than Moroccan Americans.
3. Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine (West Bank and Gaza,) Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait. This list also includes the North African countries of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. In addition, Afghanistan is classified as the Middle East by some and part of South Asia or Central Asia by others. The Sudan and Mauritania are also sometimes considered part of the Middle East¹
4. The U.S. population is concentrated in five markets-the Detroit/Dearborn area, Los Angeles, New York/New Jersey, Chicago, and Washington D.C., but segments of the population live in all 50 states.²

Brief:

“Middle-Eastern American” is a broad term that encompasses any American with national extraction from the Middle East. Within this category, there is a high amount of socioeconomic disparities, often corresponding to national wealth and political stability in the nation of origin.

¹ "MEARO : Module #2: Middle Eastern Immigration Post 1965."

² Asi, Maryam, and Daniel Beaulieu. "Arab Households in the United States, 2006 to 2010."

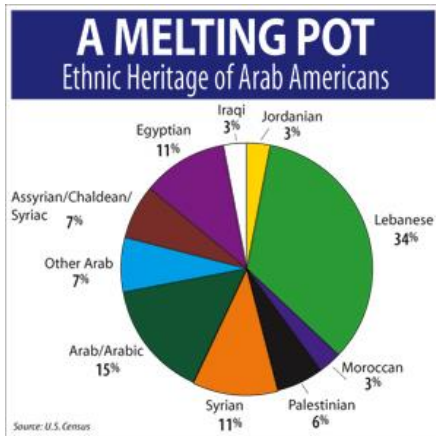


Figure 1 <http://www.allied-media.com/Arab-American/AAnumbers.htm>

Thought the category of Middle Eastern American clearly contains ties to a certain geographic region, communities often tend to be lumped together by the U.S. public as simply “Arabs³”. This categorization is inaccurate, though there is some overlap between categories that identify as Arab and Middle Eastern. The Middle East is primarily a region that consists of the countries listed above in point 3. Arab, on the other hand, is a pan ethnic term that exists independently of geography. “Muslim American” is another term that is commonly discussed in conjunction with the others, but is also independent. Though many Arabs and Middle Eastern Americans are Muslims, many belong to other religious groups, and many Muslims have no Middle Eastern ancestry. The US Census collects data on race and ethnicity, but there is no current box for Middle Eastern or Arab Americans, who have historically been categorized as white⁴. This has been critiqued in recent years because of discrimination and marginalization that these communities have faced, which distinguishes them from the experiences of most white people in America. The complexity and confusion regarding the term “Middle Eastern American” is important to understand when considering class divisions.

For example, the median household income in the United States in 2010 was \$51, 914, which is about \$4,500 lower than the average income for Arab Americans, but the average incomes among different nationalities vary greatly⁵. The Census reports that Lebanese households have a much higher median income, at \$67,264, compared to Iraqi and Yemeni households with have median incomes of \$32,075 and \$34,667 respectively. While this a huge gap, overall data indicates that immigrants from the Middle East are relatively prosperous. Especially when compared to other groups of immigrants, Middle Eastern Americans have higher levels of educational achievement and English proficiency⁶, and many are entrepreneurs and small business owners. Lebanese Americans, for example, have managed to be extremely successful in business. In 2011, 42% of Middle Eastern and North African adults over 25 had bachelor’s degrees, which is significantly higher than the proportions of other foreign and native

³ "Arab and Other Middle Eastern Americans - Minority Rights."

⁴ Karoub, Jeff. "Census Bureau May Count Arab-Americans for the First Time in 2020"

⁵ Asi, Maryam, and Daniel Beaulieu. "Arab Households in the United States, 2006 to 2010."

⁶ Auclair, Gregory, and Jeanne Batalova. "Middle Eastern and North African Immigrants in the United States."

born adults⁷. On the other end of the education spectrum, though, 18 percent of foreign born Middle Eastern adults have not graduated high school, or the equivalent institution, which is significantly higher than native born populations. Many immigrants who qualify as Middle Eastern or North African come from countries with high levels of poverty or asylum seekers, such as Sudan, Yemen, and Iraq, and continue to live in poverty upon their arrival in the United States.

National and Ethnic disparities within the category of “Middle Eastern American” can be partially traced back to 20th Century push and pull factors. Economic opportunities, a stable political system, and government accountability drew people to immigrate to the United States. But immigration laws favored skilled workers, leading to high levels of Egyptian and Iranian immigrants who had the skills to be engineers, scientists, and other similar fields⁸. The levels of skilled workers coming from each country in the Middle East/North Africa region and their historic success have also influenced current statistics about affluence among the community. Today, refugees from countries like Syria, Iran, and Yemen have also led an economic and class divide between the broader communities, as many come to the United States with few resources.

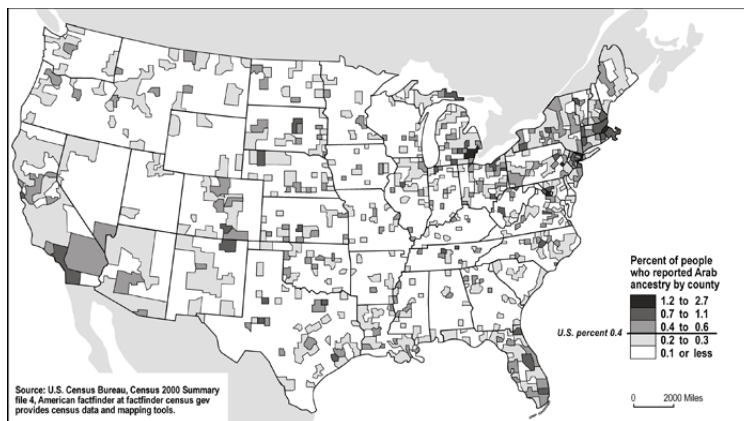


Figure 2 http://www.asjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/Escher_2_L.gif

Relevant Websites:

- <http://cis.org/MiddleEasternImmigrantsProfile>
- <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/middle-eastern-and-north-african-immigrants-united-states-0/>
- <http://minorityrights.org/minorities/arab-and-other-middle-eastern-americans/>

⁷ Auclair, Gregory, and Jeanne Batalova. "Middle Eastern and North African Immigrants in the United States."

⁸ "MEARO : Module #2: Middle Eastern Immigration Post 1965."

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