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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics  
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### Issue Brief: African Americans and Arab Americans

#### **Key Words:**

Racial Profiling, Coalition Building, Muslim, Discrimination, End Racial Profiling Act

#### **Description:**

This issue brief focuses on the political intersections of the Islamic faith and the newly shared experience of racial profiling encountered by the Arab and African American communities in the U.S. This brief will discuss how both issues bridge these very different communities, and how coalition building will be necessary to create effective political change.

#### **Key Points:**

- A major intersection for African Americans and Arab Americans communities can be found in the newly shared experience of racial profiling and significant Muslim populations found between the two groups.
- The Pew Research Center estimates that there are 2.75 million Muslims in the United States—a large number of whom are native born African Americans.
- Foreign-born Muslims constitute 65 percent of the adult Muslim population in the U.S., and the biggest group is from the Arab region.
- Racial profiling and discrimination have long been issues of central focus in the African American Community. However, post 9/11 immigration policies and fear mongering has shifted these issues to be of the utmost importance to Arab Americans no matter their religious affiliation.
- The common experience that both communities now endure gives hope to the possibility of coalition building to fight for the basic civil needs of each group.

#### **Brief/Images:**

African Americans in the U.S. have long faced discrimination based on skin color. Even after the abolishment of slavery, African Americans were discriminated against, harassed and often killed by people who saw them as a threat to the “American” way of life. Similarly, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Arab Americans have faced discrimination and racial profiling as African Americans have endured since the first slaves arrived on U.S. soil. Although this shared experience of racial profiling is not positive, it can have a positive outcome. Because both African Americans and Arab Americans now have a shared sense of being ostracized from mainstream U.S. society, they can work together in effective ways to promote political change.

It is hard to compare the history of discrimination between African and Arab Americans because they differ greatly. Although some would argue that African Americans have shed the stigmas prevalent during the time of Jim Crow, there is still discrimination that happens today through tactics such as stop and frisk and the mass incarceration of the black community. For Arab Americans, however, this is something relatively new. The discrimination that has plagued Arab Americans predominantly began after the attack of 9/11, when the media blasted images of the Islamic extremists responsible for the destruction across televisions all over the U.S. After this moment, Islam was associated with evil for many citizens, and fear sparked legislation that would allow the federal government to step over boundaries to monitor suspicious persons. The

USA Patriot Act straddled the boundary between effective national security and the protection of the civil rights of citizens, as the act lessened restrictions for “wire-tapping” and other methods of surveillance. Even though extremist Islamic ideology was responsible for the terrorist attack, discrimination today focuses on Arab Americans simply because they “look Muslim” (SCU).

Although not all Arab Americans are Muslim, many are perceived to be on a day-to-day basis. While some people assume Arab Americans are Muslim because of how they look, a substantial amount of practicing Muslims in the U.S. are actually African American. In fact, 24% of foreign-born Muslims in the United States can be traced back to an Arab region, but more than 20% of Muslims are African American. In addition, the majority of converts to Islam occur within the African American community, allowing for Arab and African Americans to intersect more often now than ever. With 2.75 million Muslims in this country, over 1.21 million are African or Arab American (Pew, Brookings). Furthermore, the largest Muslim Arab communities in the U.S. are found in urban areas including LA, Detroit, NYC, and Chicago alongside substantial African American communities (Arab American Museum). For many years these groups have lived segregated lives and almost never joined together, but this shared experience of racial profiling can allow for collective action to occur.

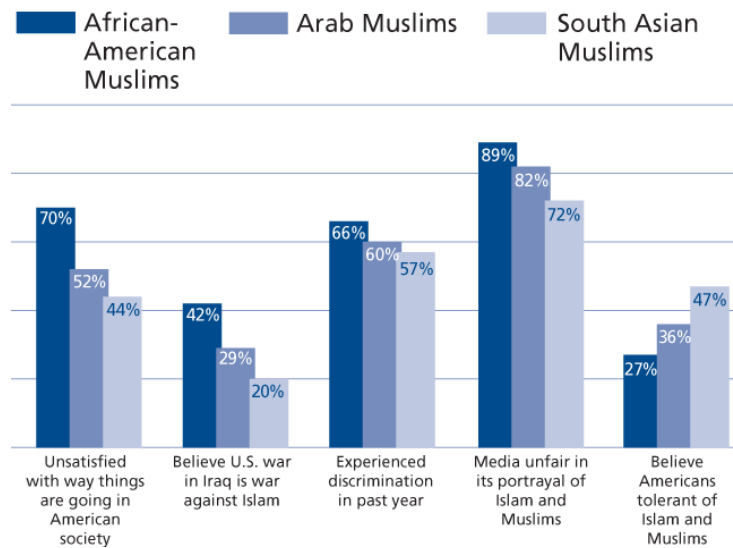


Source: <http://www.veteranstoday.com>

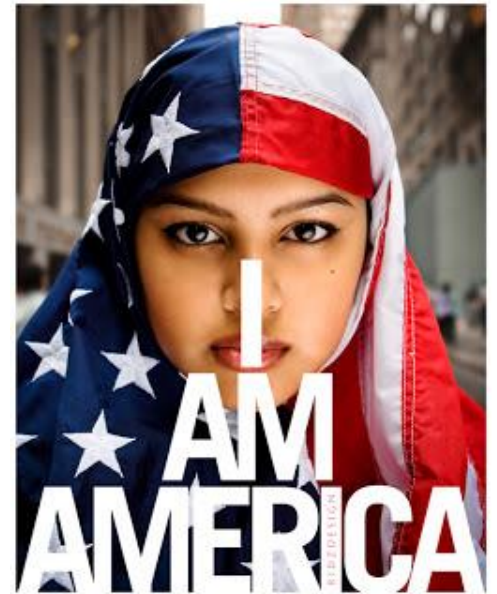
In his paper on African American and immigrant Muslim communities in the U.S., Abdin Chande discusses the difficulties and prospects for cooperation between foreign-born and African American Muslims. Although he acknowledges that the experiences of Arab and African American Muslims are very different and often block collective action from occurring, he has hopes that these communities can work together in the near future. “One interesting consequence of 9/11,” he argues “is that immigrant Muslims are now more willing to consult African Americans on civil rights issues over which [they] have a lot of experience” (239). Furthermore, the fact that African American civil rights leaders, such as Malcolm X, were tied to the Muslim community can be used to bring together African and Arab Americans regardless of religion to work together to build effective coalitions. Islam in African American communities has been historically linked to civil action, and now that 9/11 affects immigrant Muslim populations, there is hope for these two groups to work together.

While there has not yet been a great push for African and Arab American communities to work together on political issues, some progress is already occurring on the platform of ending racial profiling. Both the NAACP and the Arab American Association oppose Stop and Frisk and have marched together in opposition to the practice. Furthermore, the End Racial Profiling Act (ERPA) has been a piece of legislation that has brought these two communities together. ERPA calls for “eliminating profiling based on race, religion, ethnicity, and national origin”, and has been supported by both the Congressional Black Caucus and the Arab American Institute (ACLU). History has proven that coalition building is necessary to get legislation passed, and the intersection of experiences and religious beliefs found in African American and Arab American communities is the perfect resource to utilize to create political change.

## Diversity among American Muslims



Source: [contexts.org/muslims-in-america](http://contexts.org/muslims-in-america)



Source: [chicagomuslim101.blogspot.com](http://chicagomuslim101.blogspot.com)

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