

Issue Brief: Middle Eastern Americans & The First Amendment

Key Words

Middle Eastern Americans, the First Amendment, Freedom of Speech/Religion, Islam, The Patriot Act

Description

This issue brief focuses on Middle Eastern Americans and the First Amendment issues regarding freedom of speech and religion. A special focus will be paid to specific issues surrounding this topic since tensions grew post-9/11.

Key Points

- The primary religion of Middle Eastern Americans is Islam. For the purpose of succinctness, this will be the main religion of interest in this issue brief.
- Though there was a spike in anti-Middle Eastern sentiment after 9/11, it appears that negative perceptions have settled to pre-9/11 levels.
- Conflicts related to violations of the First Amendment which arose served to highlight and expose US policy on immigration, and freedom of speech/religion.
- The USA Patriot Act is a controversial bill which critics say threatens both the First and the Fourth Amendments.

Issue Brief

Middle Eastern Americans as a group aren't specifically measured by the U.S. Census. Their absence and debatable categorization as "white" in the Ethnoracial Pentagon may have led to the gross misunderstanding of their culture and identity in the wake of 9/11. Ethnically and religiously Middle Eastern Americans are an incredibly heterogeneous group. While the Middle East itself is overwhelmingly Muslim (98% in 2000), this is untrue of the Middle Eastern American population. Furthermore, the Center for Immigration Studies suggests that Middle Easterners are one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the United States. It is estimated that Middle Eastern Americans comprise approximately 1.8% of the US population.

Islam is the majority religion of the Middle East, but due to its geographic enormity Judaism, Christianity and a variety of minority religions are practiced as well.

However, the religious composition of Middle Eastern Americans has seen a dramatic shift. In 1970 approximately 15% were Muslim, while the rest were primarily Christian minority groups from predominantly Muslim countries seeking refuge in about by 2000, the percentage grew to an estimated 73% of immigrants.

Though the climate of religious freedom became more precarious after 9/11, statistics showed no waning interest of Middle Easterners to immigrate. In fact, in October 2001 alone the Department of the State received over 1.5 million visa applications from the Middle East. Due to the nature of the US immigration policies, more Middle Eastern immigrants are granted visas based on the criteria of a family member already present in the country. This has created a prominent Muslim religious movement within the Middle Eastern American population.

Analysts predicted an overwhelming public backlash in the wake of 9/11. In the immediate aftermath, a spike in Islamophobia highlighted and exposed US policy on freedom of speech and religion. President George W. Bush implored Americans to respect the First Amendment. However, a study released by the FBI in November 2002 reported a 17-fold increase in anti-Muslim crimes. Based on polls of the American public, it appears religious intolerance is due in part due to a misunderstanding of terminology and ignorance. There is often confusion over the terms “Arab”, “Middle-Eastern” and “Muslim”, and these terms are frequently bundled together and misused. The blatant Euro-centrism in the term “Middle East” has recently led to a backlash resulting in the classification of the United States as the “Middle West”. Data shows that many Americans even believed that the tragedy on 9/11 was part of the teachings of Islam.

At the forefront of the issues surrounding freedom of religion and speech is the USA Patriot Act, passed just 43 days after 9/11. Critics of this bill believe that it violates the fundamental freedoms of US citizens and blatantly targets Middle Eastern Americans. With the rise of anti Middle Eastern sentiment, simply exercising your First Amendment rights could make you a potential target for enhanced surveillance. Although it appears the climate has settled more recently, Middle Eastern Americans and the right to freedom of speech and religion are at the forefront of American politics.

Table 1. Middle Eastern Countries with the Largest Immigrant Populations in the United States, 2000

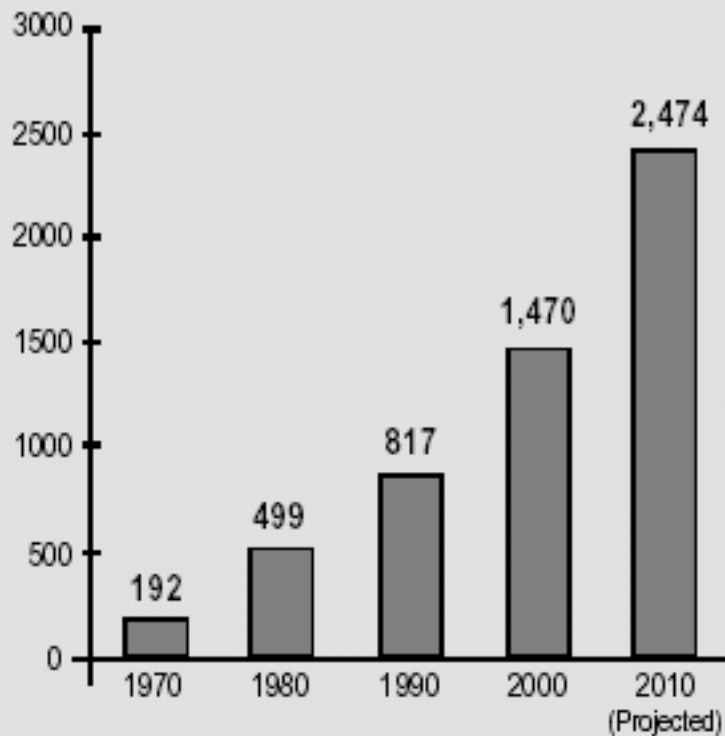
Country	Total 2000	1990-2000	1980-1989	pre-1980
Iran	279,062	70,648	90,437	117,977
Pakistan	269,831	143,125	88,530	38,176
Israel	123,695	44,456	39,577	39,662
Iraq	112,586	68,414	7,470	36,702
Bangladesh	103,341	86,885	13,149	3,307
Turkey	91,178	49,264	13,603	28,311
Egypt	87,266	44,632	15,518	27,116
Lebanon	83,396	21,731	29,841	31,824
All Others	319,492	162,794	86,162	70,536
Total	1,469,847	691,949	384,078	393,611
All Arab Countries*	583,846	291,357	130,176	162,313

* Arab countries include Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Omar, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, UAE, Yemen, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, Mauritania, and all persons who did not report a country but were born in the region and gave an Arab ancestry, primarily Palestinians.

Source: Center for Immigration Studies analysis of public use file of Census 2000 Supplemental Survey.

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

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.

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

Works Cited

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Websites

CIA Factbook- Middle East

https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/region/region_mde.html

Center For Immigration Studies

<http://www.cis.org/>

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

<http://www.uscirf.gov/>