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Yemeni Immigrants in Western New York

Abstract

The country of Yemen came into being in May of 1990 when North Yemen merged with South Yemen. Sanaa, the former capital of the North, became the political capital, and Aden, the former capital of the South, became the economic center. Because of the less-developed economy in Yemen, many Yemenites (predominantly males) have emigrated out of the country seeking employment, often to send money back home. In addition, a brutal police force and government have led to violence and discrimination against people in the country, especially those that have voiced disagreements with the government. Yemeni individuals have been migrating to America since the 1800s with large influxes from the 1970s onward. There are about 5,000 Yemeni residents in Buffalo and thousands more in near Buffalo suburbs, particularly Lackawanna, the heart of the Yemeni community.

Keywords

Buffalo, Data/Demographics/History, Populations and Cultural Groups, Demographics and Data, Fact Sheet, PPG, PDF

Yemeni Immigrants in Western New York



Please note that this is a rough-and-ready guide, and that these facts will not be applicable to all Yemeni-Americans that you meet.

Background: Yemeni Immigrants

The country of Yemen came into being in May of 1990 when North Yemen merged with South Yemen. Sanaa, the former capital of the North, became the political capital, and Aden, the former capital of the South, became the economic center.² Because of the less-developed economy in Yemen, many Yemenites (predominantly males) have emigrated out of the country seeking employment, often to send money back home.³ In addition, a brutal police force and government have led to violence and discrimination against people in the country, especially those that have voiced disagreements with the government.⁴ Yemeni individuals have been migrating to America since the 1800s with large influxes from the 1970s onward.⁵

Yemeni Individuals in Buffalo

There are about 5,000 Yemeni residents in Buffalo and thousands more in near Buffalo suburbs, particularly Lackawanna, the heart of the Yemeni community.⁶

The first Yemeni individual arrived in western New York in 1918, but the largest influx occurred during the “Great Migration” in the 1950s, as many sought employment at the steel mills. When the steel mill closed, many Yemeni immigrants became entrepreneurs, opening small businesses throughout Buffalo (such as corner shops) and the surrounding areas. Today, there are nearly 350 small businesses in the Buffalo area that are owned by individuals of Yemeni descent.⁷

Cultural Attributes

Religious Traditions and Belief Systems

With approximately 99% of Yemeni citizens identifying as Muslim, the country of Yemen is considered an Islamic Society.⁸ However, strong distinctions exist between different Islamic sects (Yemen is approximately 55% Sunni and 45% Shia⁹) as well as with the other minority religious groups, including Christian, Jewish, Hindu and Baha’i. Conflict is more likely to arise between different religious groups than between varying ethnic groups. Although freedom of religion exists in the nation of Yemen, Islamic holidays are nationally recognized, and it is illegal for non-Muslims to attempt to convert Muslims.¹⁰

The Islamic tradition prohibits the consumption of alcohol, although it is not uncommon for Yemeni individuals to partake. Specific rituals for meat preparation are prescribed in the Koran. Many Yemeni individuals prefer to purchase meat from *halal* butchers who understand and follow these traditions.¹¹ Ramadan, a month-long Islamic holiday, is a time for fasting from daybreak to sunset. It oftentimes involves prayer and meditation and is considered the holiest month of the Islamic year.

Social and Familial Values

Similar to other Arab cultures, Yemenite culture is strongly patriarchal. Many familial decisions go through the eldest male, who is considered the head of the family. Women are expected to focus more on child-rearing and, in some rural areas, helping on the farm. The birth of a male child is highly celebrated and improves the social status of the mother.¹²

Family is a Yemenite individual’s primary devotion. Households are typically made up of all extended family living in one home or one family compound. Polygamy, though not common, is

The Five Pillars of Islam

Shahadah: profession of faith in God

Salah: prayer towards Makkah, Islam's holiest city

Zakat: almsgiving, service to God

Sawm: fasting during the holy month of Ramadan

Hajj: the pilgrimage to Makkah

legal in Yemen, and men may have up to four wives. The heads of households will determine marriages, which are typically arranged for their children at a young age. Divorce is uncommon, though it is not stigmatized.¹³

Social gatherings often center on sharing of culture and khat. A “Khat Chew” or just “chew” is a common social gathering in all levels of Yemeni society, in which individuals chew khat (a flowering plant that when chewed has mild euphoric effects) and discuss social matters, political decisions, history, and lore. Often music and poetry are shared. Typically, “chews” are segregated by gender. Alcohol is considered inappropriate both culturally and religiously.¹⁴

Language and Education

Arabic is the predominant language spoken throughout Yemen (about 90%). Modern Standard Arabic is taught in schools, but various dialects are spoken throughout different regions of the country. Some dialects remain only oral, though these dialects are diminishing as literacy becomes more common.¹⁵ Even so, oral culture remains a primary way to pass on traditions and knowledge.

Employment Skills and Experiences

The difficulty in finding employment led to many seeking work outside of the country during the 1970s and sending money back to families.

Farming (both livestock and crops) has long been an important source of income in Yemen. Yemen farmers have developed sophisticated water conservation methods, which enables the country to produce highly diverse crops.¹⁶

Many Yemeni work for the government. In addition, handicraft is common throughout the country, including skills with jewelry, leatherwork, carpets, glass, utensils, metalwork, woodwork, and stained-glass windows.¹⁷

Most people in Yemen are employed in agriculture and herding.

Services, construction, industry, and commerce account for less than one-fourth of the labor force.

The 2014 unemployment estimate in Yemen was 27%.

Medical Information

The political conflict that began in 2011, following the Arab Spring, has resulted in high food and oil prices throughout the country. This inflation has led to issues of malnourishment throughout the country. Nearly one in three children in Yemen is considered severely malnourished.¹⁸

Overall, Western medicine is most commonly practiced throughout Yemen, but many traditional medical practices are informed by Islamic practices, according to the Quran¹⁹, including cupping. Cupping is a process of heating a glass cup and placing it on the skin to create a vacuum effect. This process is intended to relieve muscle tension and stress. It may leave marks or burns at

times.²⁰ Female genital cutting, though outlawed in 2001, still occurs in some regions of Yemen.²¹

Because many Yemeni immigrants follow specific diets, for religious and cultural reasons, it is important for doctors to be aware of these restrictions when prescribing medications, and when assessing physical health.²² For example, most Muslims avoid eating pork for religious reasons. However, certain medications contain trace amounts of pork.²³

Resettlement Experiences

Yemeni culture is an important part of the identity of many Yemeni-Americans. The importance of holding onto Yemeni culture while also assimilating to the American way of life makes for some unique challenges among this population. Work-life balance is particularly difficult for women. Yemeni culture greatly values family, and it is common that much extended family will live together in one household. This creates challenges for women who are expected to care for the domestic matters of such a large house, while oftentimes also needing to work in order help support the family financially.

Other challenges that Yemeni immigrants have faced in Buffalo are barriers in education. Academic support, especially for those with limited proficiency in English, is often a big challenge. Additionally, a lack of understanding of immigrants' cultural and religious traditions can lead to tension and conflict at school and can negatively affect the emotional well-being and mental health of Yemeni students.²⁴

Lackawanna, NY has long been home to a large community of Yemeni-Americans.¹ This community continues to build as it attracts other immigrants through its development of important accommodations, such as a mosque and access to other non-profits as well as Muslim-centered stores.

Local Resources

WNY Muslim Association

4011 Bailey Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14226

WNYMuslims serves the Western New York community by creating awareness, encouraging diversity, and providing service. We empower Muslims and non-Muslims with the means to voice, connect, and contribute through creative media.

Access of WNY

609 Ridge Rd. 2nd Floor, Lackawanna, NY 14218

Located in Lackawanna, a non-profit that aims to foster relationships among Arab-Americans newly arriving to Erie County.

Includes: After-school program for Yemeni Youth, Summer education program, Arab-American Culture and Language education, College counseling, support and mentoring for immigrants new to the American university system, Immigration support services and citizenship classes, English as a Second Language support and healthcare access and referrals.

Lackawanna Yemen Soccer Club Sports and Education Center

51 Ingham Avenue, Lackawanna, NY 14218

Opportunities for recreational soccer, both indoor and outdoor. Started by the Yemeni community in Lackawanna, NY. For more information, email Yemensoccerclub@adelphia.net

Sky's the Limit

2619 Bailey Avenue Buffalo, NY 14215

A Yemeni-owned clothing store and beauty salon.

Farm Fresh Market

2724 Bailey Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14215

A recently expanded fresh market grocer, owned by a Yemeni family

MidCity Market

45 Kensington Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14214

A clothing and convenience store owned by a Yemeni family

International Institute of Buffalo (IIB)

864 Delaware Ave, Buffalo, NY 14209

iib@iibuff.org (716)883-1900

"The IIB seeks to strengthen Western New York by assisting refugees and immigrants to become independent, informed and contributing members of the community, and by promoting and supporting cultural competence, multiculturalism and global connectedness throughout the region." The IIB offers translation and interpretation services.

Catholic Charities (CC)

20 Herkimer St. Buffalo, NY 14213

(716) 842-0270

"Our Resettlement clients arrive in the United States through the auspices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS). Pre- and post-arrival services such as assistance with housing, food, clothing and employment are provided."

Journey's End Refugee Services, Inc. (JERS)

2495 Main St #317, Buffalo, NY 14214
(716) 882-4963

JERS “provides refugees with the resources and support they need to become successful, active and contributing members of the Western New York Community.”

Jewish Family Services (JFS)

70 Barker St, Buffalo, NY 14209
(716) 883-1914

Jewish Family Service assists families new to the US during the difficult transition to the American way of life. JFS provides employment services, ESL training, assistance in acquiring health care and social support services as well as public school enrollment and mental health support.

Jericho Road Community Health Center

184 Barton St., Buffalo, NY 14213
(716)-348-3000

Jericho Road offers a variety of health services to low-income and refugee families. The services range from healthcare for new mothers, to general case management, support in filling out forms, ESL education or educational support for a range of ages.

Coordinated Refugee/Asylee Legal Services (The CRLS Project)

237 Main Street, Suite 1015, Buffalo, NY 14203
(716)853-3087

A collaboration of legal service providers to support immigrants and refugees with civil and immigration legal services.

NOTES

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¹³ Id.

¹⁴ "Khat Chewing in Yemen." Bulletin of the World Health Organization. October 1, 2008. Accessed February 20, 2015. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2649518/>.

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²² Gamileh Jamil, interview by author, Lackawanna, NY, April 29, 2015

²³ Id.

²⁴ Id.

This fact sheet is one in a series of “snap shots” of Buffalo’s immigrant and refugee populations, made possible by a grant from the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo. They are free of charge at www.ppgbuffalo.org/publications.

The fact sheets in the series are:

- **Nepali Bhutanese Refugees in Buffalo**
- **Burman, Karen, and Chin Refugees: From Burma to Buffalo**
- **Eritrean Refugees in Buffalo**
- **From Puerto Rico to Buffalo**
- **Refugees from Sudan in Buffalo**
- **Yemeni Immigrants in Western New York**
- **Refugees from Somalia in Buffalo**
- **Refugees from Iraq in Buffalo**
- **Afghan Refugees in Buffalo**
- **From Central Africa to Buffalo: Refugees from Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, and Burundi**



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