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Middle Eastern Americans and Socioeconomic Class in American Politics

Keywords: Middle-eastern American, SES, post-9/11, racism, education, healthcare

*The Middle-Eastern American's experience in the US underwent a dramatic shift after the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>.*

Key Facts:

- Arab Americans make up approximately 4.2 million people in the United States
- Arab Americans tend to earn 27% more than the American average
- The Department of Justice reported a 1600 percent increase in Arab-American hate crimes after 2001
- Poorer Arab Americans tend to hold on to their culture and traditions more so than their wealthier peers
- Members of the upper class tend to assimilate rather quickly into American culture

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## Middle Eastern Americans and Socioeconomic Class in American Politics

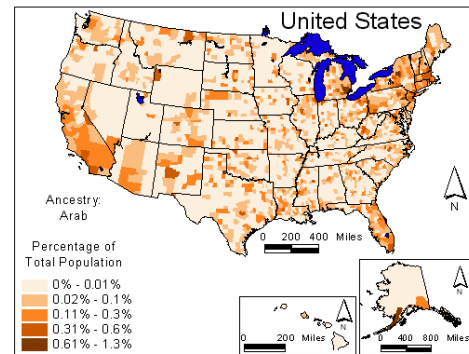
*By Alex Donnelly*

When the term 'Middle-Eastern American' comes to mind, many people visualize a very-religious, Arabic speaking person with a turban or burka. However, this is a common misconception. Since the 1970s, a new wave Middle Eastern migration began that was the most diverse ever in terms of country of origin, religion, and especially, socio economic class or SES. The four main language groups in the middle-east are Arabic, Hebrew, Persian and Turkish and most Middle Easterners are in fact Christian. Others are Muslim, Jewish, or identify with a vast number of tribal religions. Although there are certainly some lines of continuity, there are vast differences in the "American Experience" that these Americans encounter based on their socioeconomic class.

Although there are many different elements of middle-eastern culture, this issue brief will focus specifically on the Arab-American experience, because of the shared racism they encountered after

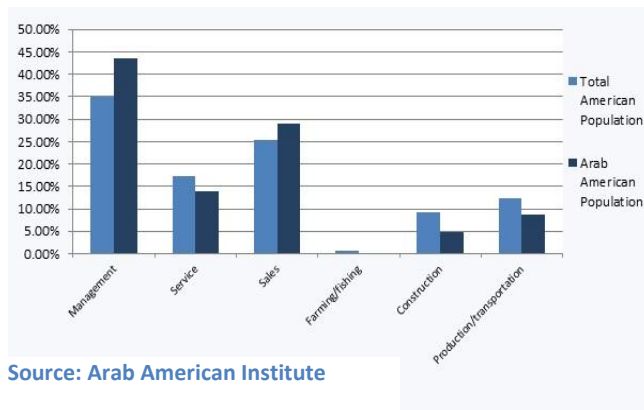
September 11<sup>th</sup>. A 2008 national poll found that two in five Americans have unfavorable views towards Arab-Americans. But interestingly enough, that same poll found that seven in ten Americans admit to not knowing very much about their culture, opinions, and values. As any American will tell you, 2001 was a turning point for

Arab Americans. Fear of Muslims during this time rose substantially. In 2001, the Department of Justice recorded a 1600 percent increase in anti-Muslim hate-crimes on the previous year. Arab Americans also tend to have more limited access to political participation; only 63 percent are registered to vote, compared with the U.S. average of 76 percent.



Source: Arab-American Anti-Discriminatory Committee

Over 50 percent of Arab-Americans have a bachelor’s degree, compared with the national average of just about 30 percent. And about 61 percent of Arab Americans hold white-collar jobs,



compared with 49.4 percent of the rest of the country. That being said, access to wealth and education varies greatly within the Arab-American community. One of the biggest factors is socio economic class. Middle-class Arab-Americans tend to assimilate very quickly

into the mainstream middle class and therefore migrate in higher numbers than lower-class Arabs. The children of these middle-class Arab-American immigrants however, tended to have little interest in carrying out the traditions of their families; many did not learn Arabic and took a more progressive and liberal view on religion. These middle class children grew up feeling more or less integrated into a ‘normal American experience’. The poorer Arab-Americans tended to remain much more distinctive. The language barriers made it difficult for them to find jobs, and economic factors forced many to live in ghettos. Here, their identity as Arab-Americans flourished and they therefore had little need or desire to adapt to U.S. customs. These Arab-Americans were the focus of much of the racism that swept the country after September 11<sup>th</sup>. Because of language and cultural differences, they were more easily distinguishable and bothered for their heritage. SES has much more of an effect on Arab-Americans than one might think.

An interesting point to note when discussing SES is the differences between the Arab-American class breakdown and that of the nation as a whole. As of 2010, only 5% of Arab Americans were unemployed, compared with 9.1% of Americans overall in the same year. The Arab American Institute reports that their “Mean individual income is 27% higher the national average”. However, the same study reports that 13.7% of Arab-Americans live below the poverty line, compared with 12.2% national

average at the time. It would appear that Arab-Americans tend to be concentrated in the upper and lower classes, with a relatively smaller percent in the middle class. It would appear that there are relatively low levels of social mobility within the Arab-American community. This is unfortunately mostly due to the language barriers and racism that they face.

Healthcare varies greatly across SES for Arab Americans as well. Poorer Arab Americans tend to hold much stronger to cultural norms and therefore go about healthcare much differently than the average American. Mental health is generally regarded as a stigma to them and patients will rarely find treatment. Even if they did seek help, they would have an even tougher time affording healthcare as many poorer Arab Americans hold part time jobs that do not include health coverage or pay for sick leave. "Many recent immigrants don't speak English fluently and that will limit their ability to seek medical care," says Shirley Laffrey, author of [Assessing Arab-American Health Care Needs](#). The middle and wealthier classes do not tend to have these issues finding or affording healthcare.

As a whole, the Arab-American community is very diverse. Poorer Arab-Americans tend to hold on to their culture much more than wealthier ones. Among the lower class, access to education and health services can be very meager, while members of the upper class tend to assimilate rather quickly into American culture. No matter their SES however, many Arab-Americans struggle with the racism and general distrust that swept the nation after 9/11. Hopefully the next decade is more open-minded.

For more information, go to:

Arab American Institute: <http://www.aaiusa.org/>

Arab American culture: <http://www.arabamericanmuseum.org>

Arab American Anti Discriminatory Committee: <http://www.aaiusa.org/>