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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics

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“We'll Kill Bin Laden Today”: Middle Eastern Americans and Violence

Key Words

Middle East, Arab Americans, violence, hate crimes, 9/11

Description

This brief focuses on the wave of violence against Middle Eastern Americans, particularly after 9/11, as well as discussing pre-9/11 violence against Middle Easterners and their associated institutions in the United States. Attacks against those perceived to be Middle Eastern American are also discussed, and motivations for this violence described.

Key Points

- While Middle Eastern Americans are broadly categorized as “white” on the Census, and some choose to identify with that category, others who cannot or choose not to may have differing experiences.
- People of Middle Eastern descent, their institutions, and those who matched stereotypes about Middle Easterners were targeted after the 9/11 attacks.
- Due to continuing tensions between Middle Eastern countries and the United States, attacks also occurred before 9/11.
- Many of the attackers explain their violence by citing attacks on Americans or the United States by other Middle Easterners, and associated their victims with terrorism.

Under the current “ethnoracial pentagon” of groups defined by the Census, Middle Eastern Americans are classified as “white” (“About Race”). Despite this classification, Middle Eastern Americans range in phenotype from those who appear very similar to those of European ancestry, to those who look more distinctively “Arab,” “Persian,” or other ethnicities. However, those who have not been able to or choose to not “pass” as European American have faced discrimination, persecution, and sometimes even violent attack throughout American history (“Not Quite White”). Particularly in the wake of 9/11, Middle Eastern Americans and those perceived as looking “Arab” or Muslim were subject to this kind of conduct.¹



A sign found in the remains of the Islamic Center of East Bay after it was burned down by arsonists.

Post 9/11 violence was primarily concentrated in areas with large Middle Eastern or Arab-American populations, such as the states of Michigan, California, and New York (Datcher). This violence not only targeted individuals, but also their workplaces, homes, and schools, and manifested as threats, physical assault, and bombings. At one Chicago school, demonstrators rallied around the cry “Kill the Arabs.” In Los Angeles, a Saudi man was attacked after revealing his national origin to men he had asked for directions (“ADL Responds”). Because being a Middle Eastern American is often conflated with being a Muslim, despite most actually being Christians, mosques are often targets. For example, between 2005 and 2007, the Islamic Center of East Bay in California was subject to

¹ In this brief, I may refer to Arab-Americans and Middle Eastern Americans. While not all Middle Eastern Americans are of Arabian descent, the plurality are, and most information about this kind of violence against Middle Easterners

threatening voicemail messages, broken windows, and arson which resulted in the destruction of the building (Moynihan). However, as recently as 2012, a Christian church in Michigan with a predominantly Middle Eastern American congregation was also attacked (Slezak).



Family and friends

await news after a shooting at a Sikh gurdwara.

Many non-Middle Easterners, both Muslim and non-Muslim, were also targeted based on their appearance. In 2007, a California couple was charged with a hate crime for the assault of an Indian-American man after calling him and his family “terrorists” and using racial slurs (Egelko). A significant portion of this violence was targeted at Sikhs, a religious group of predominantly Asian descent who were “mistaken for Muslims, because of their religious dress, which includes turbans, beards, and long robes” and threatened, assaulted, and even murdered by those who sought revenge against “terrorists,” “Taliban,” or “Arabs” (“How Many U.S. Sikhs?”, Carbone). This kind of persecution based on phenotype dates back at least to the early 20th century, where those from the Middle East were considered “colored” in certain areas. Some use this as historical evidence that it is inappropriate to continue classifying all Middle Eastern Americans as “white,” since their experience has often been “squarely outside the ‘white’ majority context” (“Not Quite White”).



Alex Odeh, a Palestinian-American activist, who was killed by a bomb in his office.

Due to tensions between the United States and various Middle Eastern countries throughout the years, violence against Middle Eastern Americans was prevalent even before 2001. A 1992 report by the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) estimated the number of hate crimes in 1991 at 191, coinciding with the start of the Gulf War (“Anti-Arab Violence”). In a 1986 hearing before the House Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Representative John Conyers (D-MI) quoted then-FBI director William Webster, saying that Arab-Americans were “in a zone of danger” (United States Cong. House). The hearing was prompted by the death of Alex Odeh, a regional director with the ADC, who was killed after a televised conversation between him and a member of the militant Jewish Defense League (“Former Senator”). In the same hearing, Representative Nick Rahall (D-WV) identified a perception amongst certain groups that “all Arabs are terrorists” which fueled much of the violence, a belief that is unfortunately still held by some today.

In the recent past, racially-motivated violence against Middle Eastern Americans appears to have occurred most frequently because of a perception that they, by virtue of their descent or appearance, are affiliated with those who perpetuate terrorism or violence against others. The image of the swarthy, turban-wearing, Muslim terrorist obviously does not reflect the vast majority of Middle Easterners globally, much less in the Americas, but has taken root in some people's imaginations as the prototype against whom they must extract revenge for various offenses. As a result, both Middle Eastern American-oriented and non-affiliate groups continue to work to educate, inform, and demand action to reduce the amount of violence targeting Middle Eastern Americans today.

Relevant Websites

The American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee: <http://www.adc.org/>

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

Southern Poverty Law Center, Hate Incidents: <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/hate-incidents>

FBI, Hate Crimes: http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/civilrights/hate_crimes

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