

Arab American Identity: From Unity to Division

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Introduction

During the period of great immigration to the United States between roughly 1880 and 1945, a large and diverse number of groups arrived who are now by many considered to be a backbone of American society. Unlike for instance the Italian, Polish or Jewish Americans, the Arab Americans are generally a lesser known segment of the immigrants from that period. Although Arabs surely immigrated in smaller absolute numbers to the United States than most other groups, the lesser acquaintance with them in general American society and consequently in scholarly work is due to other reasons.

The Arabs did neither emigrate from a nation-state like for instance the Italians, nor did they have a notion of nationalism like the Jews who arrived from the European Diaspora. The Arabs who migrated to America were under Ottoman rule and subsequently under imperialist European rule after the Great War. In other words, they did not have a body of thought of post-Enlightenment era national consciousness, which the European immigrants did have. Therefore the Arab Americans were until relatively recently never visible as a cohesive group on a nationwide level in the United States. The Polish Americans for example were organized in the Sons of Poland since 1903¹, whereas the Arab Americans did not organize on a national level until the formation of the American Arabic Association in 1960.

This paper seeks to examine how the cultural and political ties of the Arab Americans with their region of origin progressed, from the early immigrants until their present day descendants. Intrinsic to this question is the interdependency between immigrant ties with the homeland and immigrant identity. I will address three main developments in order to effectuate the research.

¹ <http://www.angelfire.com/nj/asop/index.html> (16-11-2006)

First I will describe in short the migration of Arabs to America until 1945. This description will consist of immigration data, the socio-religious profile of the migrants, and the causes for migration. Secondly I will focus on the formation of a cohesive group identity among Arab Americans in the years between the end of World War II and 1979. As mentioned, this was the time when Arab Americans did become a distinguishable group within American society. The establishment of nationwide organizations from 1960 on is a manifestation of this growing acceptance of ethnic identity among Americans from Arab descent. The rise of Arab nationalism in the same period immediately comes to mind. Did this international development, or the rise of emancipation movements on a domestic level for that matter, have any influence on the Arab American self-awareness in the 1960s? Finally I will address the question to what degree the emergence of Islamism on a global level after 1979 and the events of September 11, 2001 resonated on Arab Americans as a whole, and if these developments have caused a rift in the unity of Arab Americans which was achieved across religious, albeit not political, lines in the 1960s and 1970s.

When the absence of nationalistic consciousness among the Arabic speaking people during the penultimate turn of the century is taken into account, the use of the term ‘Arab’ itself becomes problematic. The people in question certainly did not use the term to describe themselves, and neither did the American immigration officials who frequently registered immigrants from the Ottoman Empire as ‘Turkey in Asia’ regardless of their ethnic, linguistic or religious make up.² The word ‘Arab’ was rarely used by the immigrants themselves and only to define the language they spoke. Therefore a linguistic approach to the terminology is most valid. The term ‘Arab’, when exploring the great migration period of the United States, will refer to anyone having Arabic as a native language and their descendants, regardless of religion or ethnicity. Only after World War II did ‘Arabs’ start to define themselves as such on an ethnic and political level, both in the Middle East and in the United States. Consequently the use of the term in a post -World War II discourse will be less problematic than in a pre -World War II discourse.

² Alixa Naff, ‘Arabs in America: A historical overview’, in Sameer Y. Abraham and Nabeel Abraham (eds.), *Arabs in the new world. Study on Arab-American communities* (Detroit 1983) 11.

Arab Immigration to the United States

Long before the period of great migration there was interaction between the Arab world and America. When Christopher Columbus undertook his trip to India by a western route, he had among his men a certain Louis de Torres, who was to act as an Arabic interpreter when the meeting with the Grand Khan would take place. Some argue that de Torres was an Arab from Spain, who had converted to Christianity.³ If accurate, an Arab would be among the men who first 'discovered' America.

In 1787 Morocco was the first country to officially recognize the independence of the United States.⁴ It is perhaps in this respect, that the South Carolina House of Representatives decided in 1790 that people from Morocco should be treated according to the laws for white people, not the laws for blacks from Africa.⁵

Immigration data

Arab migration to the United States became significant after 1880. Most Arabs migrated from the Ottoman *vilayets* Aleppo, Syria and Transjordan. These three provinces were part of the *eyalet* of greater Syria. Incidentally, there were smaller numbers of immigrants from Yemen and Egypt. Within the region of greater Syria, the autonomous district or *mutassarifiya* of Mt. Lebanon was the largest source of Arab migrants to the United States.⁶ After the First World War, these formerly Ottoman territories fell under British and French colonial rule and are now part of modern Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel.

Because of the poor annotation by American officials, there is no accurate data about the exact number of Arabs who had entered the United States in this period. The records of the villages in Ottoman greater Syria do not provide any decisive data either, since everyone leaving for both North and South America was noted as 'gone to Mexico'. Therefore, the estimates on the Arab immigration numbers vary widely. However, it is generally agreed upon that the numbers increased exponentially between 1880 and 1890 from a few dozen per

3 Beverlee Turner Mehdi (ed.), *The Arabs in America 1492-1977. A chronology and fact book* (New York 1978)1.

4 Mehdi, *The Arabs in America*, 2.

5 Ameri, Anan, Ramey, Dawn (eds.), *Arab American encyclopedia* (Detroit 2000) 35.

6 Najib E. Saliba, 'Emigration from Syria', in Sameer Y. Abraham and Nabeel Abraham (eds.), *Arabs in the new world. Studies on Arab-American communities* (Detroit 1983) 31.

year to several thousands per year.⁷ After 1890 these numbers continued to rise until 1924, when the United States imposed immigration restrictions. The annual Arab immigration figure to the United States had peaked at about 9000 by 1914.⁸ These figures fell sharply to a few hundred per year during the First World War, and then increased again after the war to a few thousand per year until 1924. The Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 restricted which was since 1899 often called 'Syrian', instead of 'Turkey in Asia', immigration to 100 people per year.⁹ The estimates on the total population of Arab origin in the United States in 1940 vary between 200.000 and 350.000.

The migration of young Arab men from Ottoman Syria to the United States was massive and had profound effects on the towns and villages they came from. According to Samir Khalaf, by 1890 'every village in Lebanon could claim at least one immigrant son'.¹⁰ Some regions were left entirely unpopulated in the first decades of the twentieth century. Of course the United States were not the sole destination for these immigrants. Large numbers also migrated to South America, Australia, Canada and West Africa.

Immigrant profile

The first Arab migrants to the United States were mainly young and unmarried men with low levels of formal schooling and usually illiterate, with the exception of a small educated minority.¹¹ The Arab immigrants were mostly poor farmers, intending to stay in the United States temporarily, until enough money was made to return. It was not long though, until it became apparent that the migration was indeed permanent. Soon women started composing larger numbers of the Arab migrants to the United States. In the 1920s women immigrants even outnumbered the men.¹²

Unlike the immigrants from Europe in the same period, who mostly engaged into industrial labour, the immigrants from greater Syria predominantly occupied themselves with peddling. Peddling was a home-to-home trade in a wide range of goods, from jewellery to bed linens. This was the initial vocation for 90 percent of the Arab migrants, including women.¹³

7 Samir Khalaf, 'The background and causes of Lebanese/Syrian immigration to the United States before World war I', in Eric James Hooglund (ed), *Crossing the Waters: Arabic speaking immigrants to the United States before 1940* (Washington, D.C. 1987) 18-20.

8 Saliba, 'Emigration from Syria', 36.

9 Alixa Naff, *The Arab Americans* (Philadelphia 1999) 33.

10 Khalaf, 'The background and causes', 18-20.

11 May Ahdab-Yehya, 'The Lebanese Maronites: Patterns of continuity and change', in Sameer Y. Abraham and Nabeel Abraham (eds.), *Arabs in the new world. Studies on Arab-American communities* (Detroit 1983) 154.

12 Naff, 'Arabs in America', 15.

13 Naff, 'Arabs in America', 15-17.

The easy identification with peddling is most probably due to the familiarity with door to door selling of products, which was very common among farmers and artisans in Ottoman greater Syria. Furthermore, peddling required little capital and training, and was very profitable. As time progressed, the peddling industry expanded into a network with suppliers, usually veteran peddlers, based in settlements throughout the United States. Newly arriving Arabs could immediately benefit from this expanding system. The relatively large amount of women migrants, in comparison with the other immigrant groups in the same period, can be explained by the nature of peddling. The Arab immigrants realised that women were more suitable for peddling, since it requires free access to homes, and sent for women to join them in the United States.¹⁴ Peddlers were on the road for long periods at a time, covering several states and selling their goods to farmers and city dwellers. Consequently English was quickly learned and new values were acquired through constant contact with native-born Americans. This included the notion of settling permanently in the United States. Peddling gradually made place for middle class entrepreneurship as the main profession among the early Arab Americans, as they attained financial progression and settled down. As a result, the early Arab immigrants generally acculturated rapidly with American society and achieved financial stability, probably more rapidly than the immigrant groups from Europe.

The overwhelming majority of the Arab migrants to the United States during the great migration period were Christians. According to Khalaf the religious affiliation of ‘Syrians’ in the United States by 1924 was, in declining order, Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic or Melkite, Protestant, Shia and Sunni Muslim and Druze.¹⁵ The Muslim and Druze Arabs combined, constituted about 5 percent of the total Arab population in the United States at the time.

The Melkites are former Greek Orthodox Syrians, who around 1724 affiliated themselves with the Roman Church under the influence of French missionaries.¹⁶ As a result the Melkites and the Orthodox share the same tradition but not the same hierarchy. The first Melkite church in the United States was established in the early 1900s in Lawrence, Massachusetts.¹⁷ The Maronites, who claim to have been affiliated with Rome throughout their entire history, have a totally different liturgical system from that of the Melkites and the

14 Khalaf, ‘The background and causes’, 22.

15 Khalaf, ‘The background and causes’, 21.

16 Philip M. Kayal, ‘Arab Christians in the United States’, in Sameer Y. Abraham and Nabeel Abraham (eds.), *Arabs in the new world. Studies on Arab-American communities* (Detroit 1983) 46.

17 Ameri et al (eds.), *Arab American encyclopedia*, 100.

Orthodox. The first Maronite church was established in the 1890s in Boston.¹⁸ There were also many Melkites and Maronites who simply joined the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. Some Greek Orthodox immigrants joined the Presbyterian and Episcopalian churches.

The early Arab immigrants had little concept of social order beyond sect, village of origin, or family. However, the Arabs crossed traditional religious identities, both Christian and Muslim, and slowly started to constitute themselves as an ethnic group in the United States. This occurred despite the fact that separate churches were established by the adherents of the different rites. There were two main reasons for this. The Americans preferred immigrants who were identifiable in ethnic terms.¹⁹ So the Arab immigrants redefined themselves to constitute a collective ethnic group like the Italian, Irish, Greeks, Poles, or Jewish immigrants had done. For the early Arab Americans the forming of an identity based on ethnicity, even if it was only in favour of impression to the non-Arab society, meant they had to relinquish traditionalist and parochial values. Ironically, for many other immigrant groups their cling to an ethnic identity usually meant the opposite. Furthermore, since the Arabs were in smaller absolute numbers than the other immigrant groups in the United States, the outmarriage rate was very high. This marrying outside the group took place not only among members of various Arab rites and religions, but also between Arabs and non-Arabs.

Causes of migration

The vast majority of the Arab immigrants between 1880 and 1940 left their homelands for economic reasons. In the case of Mt. Lebanon overpopulation was also an important factor.²⁰ The catalyst for the emigration to the United States is often cited as being the enthusiastic reports from the Syrians who exhibited Arab goods at the 1876 Philadelphia exposition.²¹ However, the Syrian Arab attitudes and views of the United States had their nascence in the 1820s. This was when American protestant missionaries arrived and set up schools and medical facilities. The missionaries came originally to convert Muslims. When this failed they turned to the 'salvation' of other Christian sects. Despite the fact that the success of the missionaries in their salvatory activities was limited, the Syrian Arab population reacted

18 Ameri et al (eds.), *Arab American encyclopedia*, 99.

19 Kayal, 'Arab Christians in the United States' 53.

20 Najib E. Saliba, 'Emigration from Syria', 36.

21 Naff, 'Arabs in America', 13.

Ameri et al (eds.), *Arab American encyclopedia*, 35.

positively to them. Consequently they were positive to Americans in general and their homeland.²²

Although there were some sectarian conflicts and repressive policies by the Ottoman government in the mid 19th century in Mt. Lebanon, the gradual transformation of the socioeconomic profile in the region during the latter half of the nineteenth century gave more cause for migration. Greater Syria was, in contrast to most other parts of the Ottoman Empire, turning from a subsistence economy to a market economy. This was due to the general laissez-faire policy that the Ottoman authorities followed.²³ The silk industry collapsed in the face of machine-made imported goods. Also, after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 Chinese and Japanese silk became competitive with silk from the eastern Mediterranean.²⁴ The lack of protective tariffs and high domestic taxation further exacerbated the decline of commerce and industry in the region.

Other reasons for the intensification of migration were the military service which became mandatory after 1908 for both Christians and Muslims, and reports from the pioneer migrants in the United States. In letters and money sent home, these early migrants embellished and exaggerated the presupposed opportunities for success in the new world.²⁵

The question remains then why most Muslims did not join the mass migration to the new world, since all the aforementioned conditions applied as well, or sometimes more, for the Muslim subjects in the region. Some scholars point out that because these economic criteria applied even more for Muslims, they were unable to obtain the funds necessary to pay for the passage to America.²⁶ Others point out that Muslims feared religious and cultural obstacles,²⁷ in that they would be unable to maintain their Islamic traditions in a Christian society. It is likely that these factors both contributed to the fact that Muslim Arabs migrated to America in far lesser numbers than their Christian counterparts.

22 Michael Suleiman, 'Early Arab-Americans. The search for identity', in Eric James Hooglund (ed), *Crossing the Waters: Arabic speaking immigrants to the United States before 1940* (Washington, D.C. 1987) 38.

23 Khalaf, 'The background and causes' 26.

24 Yvonne Haddad, 'Arab Muslims and Islamic institutions in America: Adaptation and reform', in Sameer Y. Abraham and Nabeel Abraham (eds.), *Arabs in the new world. Studies on Arab-American communities* (Detroit 1983) 65-66.

Naff, 'Arabs in America', 26.

Saliba, 'Emigration from Syria', 34.

25 Naff, 'Arabs in America', 13-14.

Suleiman, 'Early Arab-Americans', 38.

26 Khalaf, 'The background and causes', 21.

27 Naff, 'Arabs in America', 13.

The Evolution of Arab American Identity

Assimilation

An article in the *New York Daily Tribune* in 1881 describes a typical Arab immigrant family. The father of the family who came to the United States three years earlier in 1878 is said to have ‘...many characteristics of his race. He still adheres to the dress of his native country.....and is not able to converse fluently in English.’²⁸ His sons on the other hand already had mastered English very well, and are very successful in American society. One of the immigrant’s sons is practicing medicine, another is a physician and yet another is a college teacher. The sons, despite being integrated fairly well into American society, display a great interest in the political situation of the region they came from.

An article in 1899 mentions how a group of young Arab immigrants from Ottoman greater Syria formed a revolutionary group called ‘Young Syria’. This group organized a mass meeting in New York where they urged Arab Americans to ‘...write and to arm themselves against the Turkish government.’²⁹

The swiftness, by which the first few Arab generations assimilated in American society, can be demonstrated with the case study by Abdo Elkholy of a first generation Arab immigrant.³⁰ Incidentally, the subject of the case study is one of the few Muslim immigrants of the period. This particular immigrant came to the United States from ‘Lebanon, or Syria as it was then called’ in 1902 when he was 25 years of age. Elkholy interviewed the subject in 1959. The subject states his reasons for leaving his homeland as both political and economic, however Elkholy comments that the main reason for emigration was ‘...the economic misery in his country’. Upon arriving in New York, the Muslim immigrant contacted some Syrian Christians and followed their occupational pattern of peddling. After a short while the subject settled himself in the Christian Syrian community in Detroit, where he was employed in unskilled labour. In 1905 he was informed that some relatives had arrived, and he immediately paid them a visit. He returned from that visit with a 15 year old wife, with whom

28 *New York Daily Tribune*, June 20 1881, *Syrians in America. Experience of the family of Yusif Arbeely* in Beverlee Turner Mehdi (ed.), *The Arabs in America 1492-1977. A chronology and fact book* (New York 1978) 70-71

29 *New York Daily Tribune*, July 29 1899, *Syrians and the sultan. A meeting at which a revolution in Turkey is urged* in Beverlee Turner Mehdi (ed.), *The Arabs in America 1492-1977. A chronology and fact book* (New York 1978) 75

30 Abdo Elkholy, ‘Case history of a first generation immigrant in Detroit’, in Beverlee Turner Mehdi (ed.), *The Arabs in America 1492-1977. A chronology and fact book* (New York 1978) 76.

he eventually had six children, three sons and three daughters. These children were never brought up in an Islamic tradition because the immigrant did not intend to stay in the United States permanently. Hence the children would 'very soon learn about their religion back home in Syria'. Two of his sons and one daughter married Americans when they grew up, his two other daughters married Spanish and Italian men. Many of the subject's grandchildren married Americans as well and drifted away from any religious ties they had.

This case study shows how easily traditional cultural and sectarian boundaries were crossed upon arriving in the United States. Since the subject was one of the very few Muslim Arabs, he had to broaden his perspective and affiliate himself with non-Muslim Arabs. He deferred marriage for three years. Only when the first opportunity to marry a Muslim woman, albeit a 15 year old one, occurred did he commit himself in matrimony. Yet all his children, who were second generation Arab migrants, married non-Arabs.

The first numbers of generations of Arab Americans were fairly remarkable in that they assimilated and integrated very well into American society, and simultaneously maintained strong emotional and cultural ties with their region of origin. As the generations progressed the ties with the homeland steadily declined. As a result of the general economic ambition of the early Arab Americans, they imitated the middle-class course of the non-Arab Americans rather early.³¹ By 1940 most Arab Americans, barring the first generation immigrants, were Americanized in many ways. The traditional patriarchal extended family had broken down into nuclear units. Participation of wives in the family business weakened the paternal authority. Working wives adjusted their domestic roles by having fewer children and cooking fewer time-consuming meals. Covering the head, which was a custom to both Christian and Muslim women in the homeland, was soon abandoned. Even the segregation of sexes at social gatherings and in churches disappeared.³²

Occasionally Arab immigrants in the early period faced problems of discrimination on the part of government institutions in some areas of the United States. The main issue was the juridical question whether 'Syrians' were white. Arabs had been granted citizenship in the United States since 1880. However a certain George Dow was denied citizenship in 1914 by Judge Henry A.M. Smith of Charleston, South Carolina.³³ This denial was motivated by the Judge's supposition that Dow, as a 'Syrian of Asiatic birth', was not a free white person as defined in the naturalization statute approved on March 26, 1790. Only after several appeals

³¹ Naff, 'Arabs in America', 18.

³² Naff, 'Arabs in America', 21.

³³ Suleiman, 'Early Arab-Americans', 44.

in which the Arabs were described by the defending attorneys as ‘the purest type of Semitic race’ and therefore had ‘a better claim upon the White Race than that of any modern nation of Europe’³⁴, the decision was reversed.

Formation

Fairly early on various churches, fraternal alliances and newspapers were established in small Arab communities in America. But it was not until the 1960s that a nationwide institution was established. After 1945 new waves of Arabs migrated to the United States. They differed in many ways from those who came earlier. Most of the new immigrants had high school or college degrees, and were Muslim. Many fled the political turmoil of the Middle East after the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the Arab-Israeli wars in the following decades. The regions of origin were also much broader than before. These were most notably Palestine, Lebanon, Yemen, Egypt and Iraq. Unlike the earlier immigrants, the second wave of Arab immigrants came from independent nations and had a new Arab political consciousness.

Until the 1960s assimilated Arab Americans had little connection with recent Arab immigrants. Both groups lived as virtual strangers.³⁵ But in the 1960s many of these Americanized Arabs started to adopt Arab nationalism as their political outlook. There are different views on the reasons for this. A reaction to anti-Arab bias, which grew in the United States during the Arab-Israeli conflicts, could be an explanation. Yossi Shain in fact states that the Palestinian cause provided ‘the very foundation for pan-Arab ethnic identity in the United States’.³⁶ Naff mentions ‘watching Arabs suffer ridicule and condemnation in the American media and in Congress’ as a cause for the assumption of an ethnic identity by Arab Americans.³⁷

Although the American Arabic Association was the first Arab organization in the United States on a nationwide level in 1960, distinct institutions with a lucid pro Arab American political agenda were established from 1967. The 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the establishment of the PLO coincided with this process. Therefore the claim by Shain that ‘prior to 1967, Arab Americans had no ideological core, national political organizations, or funding’,³⁸ while it is rather exaggerating, holds some merit.

³⁴ Suleiman, ‘Early Arab-Americans’ 44.

³⁵ Naff, *The Arab Americans*, 89.

³⁶ Yossi Shain, ‘Arab-Americans at a crossroads’, in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25/3 (1996) 46.

³⁷ Naff, *The Arab Americans*, 90.

³⁸ Shain, ‘Arab-Americans at a crossroads’, 47.

The Association of Arab American University Graduates (AAUG), founded in 1967 after the Arab-Israeli war, was mostly composed of academics and professionals. The AAUG was a left-leaning organization, which also had many supporters among American adherents of third world movements. According to Shain the AAUG was an isolationist group which did not try to establish itself as an American organization and ‘was largely perceived “as a foreign voice in America”....and regarded the United States as a captive of the Zionist bias’.³⁹ Helen Samhan on the other hand finds that the monitoring of AAUG by the FBI was an example of how growing anti-Arab sentiments led to the stigmatization of Arab American activists.⁴⁰

Another important factor was the civil rights, and other emancipation movements of the 1960s. These laid the foundations for changing social attitudes about diversity in American culture. Consequently there was a rise of minority consciousness among the Arab Americans. The establishment of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) in 1980 was within the framework of minority consciousness. This institution was founded by Senator James Abourezk. The ADC files lawsuits in cases of discrimination against Arab Americans by the government, companies and organizations.

The major Arab American political lobby is the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA), which was established in 1972 and was consciously modelled on the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).⁴¹ The NAAA focused itself almost entirely to presenting a case to the American public in terms of U.S. national interests in order to influence American foreign policy on the Middle East. A new approach initiated by the NAAA was that of Arab American businessmen leading a program that tried to counter the strong influences of the Israeli lobby in the United States government.

Social activism was also a part of the new Arab American identity. In 1972 the Arab Community Centre for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) was founded in Dearborn, Michigan. ACCESS offered new Arab immigrants services to help them adjust to their new life. This included legal services, job placement, family counselling, language training, youth clinics and cultural programs.⁴²

The Arab American Institute (AAI), established in 1985, is the national Arab American organization which focuses itself primarily on domestic issues. The AAI, among other activities, assists Arab Americans in seeking political office.

³⁹ Shain, ‘Arab-Americans at a crossroads’, 50.

⁴⁰ Helen Hatab Samhan, ‘Politics and exclusion: The Arab American experience’, in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 16/2 (1987) 16-17.

⁴¹ Shain, ‘Arab-Americans at a crossroads’, 52.

⁴² Ameri et al (eds.), *Arab American encyclopedia*, 204.

It is evident from the various national Arab American institutions that were established since the 1960s, on all sides of the political spectrum, that Arab American identity was no longer dormant and amorphous. Arab Americans had become an integral American minority group.

Fracture?

In the 1980s Islamism gradually replaced third world leftism as the main political paradigm in the Arab world. Apart from what the geopolitical drifts were that caused this development, the question is how it affected Arab Americans. According to Shain, a growing shift away from Arab to Muslim identity is distinguishable among Muslim Arab Americans.⁴³

Surely some younger Muslim Arab Americans, who might be disenchanted with mainstream American society in the wake of the growing anti-Arab sentiments and stigmatization since the 1970s, turned to Islamist groups. At the same time, this shift toward Islamic identification leaves out Christian Arab Americans. Hence the ethnic identity and unity among Arab Americans across religious lines, which had developed since the 1960s, faces the risk of breaking up. In 1995 Khalil Jahshan, the executive director of the NAAA which was by then near-defunct, stated that ‘The next few years belong to the Islamists....Arab Americans lack the cementing factors’.⁴⁴

It is too early to determine whether the attacks of September 11, 2001, combined with the preceding years of identity wave among Arab American Muslims from nationalism to religion, consolidated a complete rift between Christian and Muslim Arab Americans. As of yet, there has been scarcely any research on this subject.

Kathleen Moore conducted a survey among non-Muslim Americans in October and November 2001, which inquired the willingness of respondents to give up the civil liberties of Muslim Americans before the civil liberties of other Americans when applying the Patriot Act. This survey indicates that the general public by and large does not favour infringement on the civil liberties of Arab and Muslim Americans as a targeted group. However, the survey also supports the hypothesis that familiarity with Arab and Muslim Americans leads to more support for protecting the civil liberties of these groups.⁴⁵

⁴³ Shain, ‘Arab-Americans at a crossroads’, 56.

⁴⁴ Shain, ‘Arab-Americans at a crossroads’, 56.

⁴⁵ Kathleen Moore, ‘A part of US or apart from US? Post-September 11 attitudes toward Muslims and civil liberties’, in *Middle East Report* 224 (2002) 35.

Conclusion

The early Arab immigrants between 1880 and 1940 had rapidly changed their perspectives about identity and adapted themselves in to American society. This occurred out of necessity, coincidence and social compulsion. Since they were in relative small numbers in the United States, it was necessary for the Arab immigrants to seek contact, live among and marry members from the other Arab religious groups, with whom they would have had only superficial contact in the motherland. Coincident with the initial preference for the profession of peddling, which required constant contact with native-born Americans, the Arab immigrants learned English and acquired new American values very quickly. The Americans were keen to ethnically identifiable immigrants. This social compulsion made the Arab immigrants redefine themselves in collective and ethnic terms, regardless of differences in religion. These were however always a-political terms, the mostly used being 'Syrian', since that was the province where many Arab immigrants came from. The collective ethnic identity that was being formed and acquired paradoxically meant that the Arab immigrants had to relinquish traditionalist and sectarian values. The cultural and religious ties with the homeland were initially strong, but gradually diminished as new generations of Arabs grew up in the United States. The relative economic success of the early Arab Americans also accelerated their assimilation into mainstream middle-class American society.

After World War II, several domestic and international developments were ground for the cultivation of an entirely novel, political ethnic identity by the Arab Americans. The new Arab immigrants, who were mostly Muslim, introduced the assimilated Arab immigrants to Arab nationalism and political awareness. The influences of the emancipation- and third world movements as well as growing anti-Arab sentiments among mainstream Americans in the 1960s, as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflicts, only accelerated the forming of a nationalistic identity among Arab Americans. The various nationwide organizations that were established since the 1960s were a ventilation of the new political and ethnic 'minority' identity embraced by Arab Americans. These organizations covered all corners of the political spectrum, but none were oriented on religion. This was consistent with this Arab American identity of the 1960s and 1970s, since it crossed religious lines and emphasized the value of 'being an Arab' above all other attributes. In other words the Arab American identity of the 1960s and 1970s was secular and unifying.

In the 1980s this unity among Arab Americans came under threat. The global rise of Islamism, which gradually dominated other political ideologies in the Arab world, had its effects too among Arab Americans. Christian and non-Islamist Muslim Arab Americans beheld this development with mistrust throughout the 1980s and 1990s. They had a profound fear that the assumption of an Islamic political identity by some Muslim Arab Americans would mean the death of cross-religious Arab American unity. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 marked a turning point for the four decades old secular Arab American identity. It is still unclear which direction the Arab Americans will take in terms of identity and self-perception. It is feasible that they will, because of increasing stigmatization by the American public and mistrust amongst each other, turn back to some form of their pre-World War II sectarian identities. Another possibility is that an eventual increase in discrimination, stigmatization and exclusion by the non-Arab American public will consolidate and strengthen the bond between Arab Americans. Consequently the cross-religious Arab American identity will be strengthened.

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