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# ARABS IN AMERICA: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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This paper discusses the three different immigration waves of Arabs to the United States. It provides a historical perspective about the Arab diaspora in the United States and discusses the particular characteristics, challenges and factors that had an impact on the formation of their cultural identity.

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## ARABS IN AMERICA: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

This article focuses on the history of Arab American in the United States. Such a historical overview provides clues about the challenges they faced, the success they accomplished and sheds light on other factors that influenced the formation of their cultural identity. Arabs' immigration to the United States can be divided into three waves. The first extended from the 1870s to World War I; the second was almost insignificant, it started in 1924 when the National Origin Act was put in effect and reduced the quota of immigrants from the Middle East to 100 persons per year. The third wave started post World War II and extends to the present. Each of the major two waves had its own particularities and significance for the Arab American experience in the United States.

### The Early Immigration

Most of the early Arab immigration that started in the 1870s came from the Arabic speaking region of what was then known as the Syrian Ottoman region (Friedhelm, 1985; Haddad, 2004; Hitti, 1923; Naff, 1985, 1994; Suleiman 1994, 1999; Younis 1995). At that time, the U.S. immigration and census books recorded all immigrants arriving from that region as immigrants from "Turkey in Asia" (Hitti, 1923; Naff, 1985, 1994). Thus, at the early stage of immigration, records did not distinguish between the different ethnicities of the immigrants coming from the Ottoman Empire and other areas around the Mediterranean,

consequently, Greeks, Arabs, and Armenians were all combined into one category (Suleiman, 1999). It was not until 1899 that immigration officials recognized the Arabic-speaking immigrants as “Syrians.”

This identification referred to all of those who immigrated from Mount Lebanon and later from other Arab countries such as Palestine and Syria. However, this identification was not a nationalistic one, because at that time an independent Syrian political sovereignty did not exist, rather it was viewed as a cultural identity that identified those Arabic speaking individuals coming from that region (Naff, 1985, 1994). Nevertheless, some scholars stress that such identification was accurate because it distinguished these individuals from other Arabs, Turks, and Assyrians (Hitti, 1923). Although scholars agree that most of the early immigrants were Christians, there is no consensus among scholars regarding the reasons behind the migration of these “early birds.” Naff (1985) asserted that the real reasons behind the first wave of immigration were neither religious persecution nor a poor economic situation in Mount Lebanon but rather a search for adventure and quick economic gain. On the other hand, Hitti (1923), Suleiman (1994, 1999), and Younis (1995) identified a combination of economic, political, and religious reasons for the migration. Hitti (1923), who highlighted the political and religious reasons over the economic, said, “The fact that most of the Syrian immigrants are Christians, whereas in

Syria most Syrians are Muhammadan, seems to indicate that the religious situation has been a factor in their emigration” (p.52).

Yet, researchers agree that the first wave of immigrants came to this country without the idea of making it their permanent home; their aim was to work for two or three years, collect some wealth and then to return to their country of origin where they would share their newly acquired wealth with their families and gain some prestige (Hitti, 1923; Naff, 1985; 1994; Suleiman 1994, 1999).

Thus, the early immigrants were mainly men who were joined later by their spouses. Consequently, the immigration by the end of the 19th century became a family movement (Hitti, 1923; Naff, 1985, 1994). The early immigrants who returned to their countries of origin idealized social, political, and economic life in the United States and thus, unintentionally promoted immigration to the States (Hitti, 1923). Those who did not return did the same thing by means of writing letters of praise and sending money to their families in the old country. Other factors that stimulated and facilitated immigration were tourists, steamship agents, and missionaries (Hitti, 1923).

Most of the early Arab immigrants engaged in peddling; many congregated in major metropolitan areas such as New York, Boston, Detroit, Washington, Cleveland, and Chicago. However, these immigrants made it to every state in the union and almost every town of

5000 people or more (Hitti, 1923). As their families joined them, those immigrants settled down and became shop owners. Their shops became family businesses where men, women, and even children after returning from school would work (Banks, 2003; Hitti, 1923; Naff, 1985, 1994). However, during and after World War I as the Latin American import trade diverted from Europe to the United States, some Arab Americans engaged in the export business and only a few were workers in industry and/or farmers (Hitti, 1923).

As communities grew and more people immigrated into the 'new country' different churches and social groups were organized reflecting the religious diversity and even the city or village of origin of the immigrants. At the beginning of the 20th century, some Arabic immigrant literature was produced and circulated among Arab Americans. In 1923, Hitti documented four daily newspapers, two periodicals and two monthly magazines in addition to the only religious Arabic magazine at that time, *Al-Asr Al-Dhahabi*, now *Awake*. Naff (1985) mentioned that from 1896 to 1910 at least 21 Arabic printed newspapers and magazines circulated among the 'illiterate majority' of the Syrian Arab immigrants.

As these early immigrants recognized that America had become their permanent home, they were on their way to assimilating into the mainstream American culture. However, the dream of returning to their

*'blad'* (country) remained alive with them. About 7 Per cent of the Arab community (referred to as Syrian at that time) served in the American army during World War I. In some areas 100 Per cent of the Syrian youth who were eligible for service volunteered for service even before draft laws were issued (Hitti, 1923). Economically, those early immigrants were doing very well. Indicating their economic prosperity, Hitti, (1923) wrote "Correspondence with boards of charity and departments of public welfare in the spring of 1920 failed to reveal any dependent Syrians" (p.76).

The first wave of immigration originated from the Ottoman Empire. The political, social, and economic situations in the Ottoman Empire help explain the identity of this wave of immigrants. The Ottomans used to appoint a "mutassarif" governor, to take care of the administrative responsibilities. By the second half of the 19th century, European interest was growing in that area and different western European countries offered alliances and protection for the different religious sects in it. The three dominant religions of that area were Christianity, Islam, and Druze. Most of the early immigrants though, were Christians with a few Muslims and Druzes (Hitti, 1923; Naff, 1985, 1994; Suleiman 1994, 1999).

However, the religious scene was not one of unity even among those who gathered under the same religious umbrella. Followers of

each religion were divided into different sects with the exception of Druze.

Arabic language united the region and was the tongue of all its occupants. As for the economic structure, it was mainly based on agriculture and the silk trade with very minor and primitive industries. Thus, it would be understandable that the identity of the first wave of immigrants had much to do with the family, religion, and city or village from where they had immigrated (Hitti, 1923; Naff, 1985). However, all early immigrants, despite their diverse backgrounds, acknowledged their common Arabic roots; they referred to themselves by the cultural rather than political or national term, 'awlad Arab' meaning 'sons of Arabs.' Nevertheless, before 1920, those early immigrants preferred to distinguish themselves as Syrians rather than Arabs (Hitti, 1923; Naff, 1985, 1994; Suleiman 1994, 1999). At that time, the United States' influence in that Syrian Ottoman province was almost nonexistent in both the political and economic arenas except for the few missionaries who started some schools and churches (Naff, 1985).

During that period, most of the Arab immigrants' encounters in the United States were positive. However, a few incidents proved to be the seeds of what these immigrants were going to face in the future. In 1905, Hitti (1923) reported exaggerated newspaper stories regarding riots in "Manhattan colony" which resulted in one murder and a few



cases of stabbing. However, Hitti (1923) stated that both the *New York Herald* and *The New York Times* reported the incident as national notoriety for Syrians. This exaggerated reporting was an early negative portrayal of this group, a portrayal that was going to intensify in negativity in years to come.

During this period as well, the “whiteness” of these immigrants was challenged and they had to prove their “White” identity. In 1909, the United States District Court in St. Louis and later the Southern District Court of New York refused to naturalize Arabs because they were classified under the category of aliens other than white; however, these decisions were challenged at the Circuit Court of Appeals and the latter reversed the decisions of the lower courts (Hitti, 1923). Similarly, in 1914, a South Carolina District Court refused to grant citizenship to a “Syrian of Asiatic birth” on the ground that he did not belong to the White race. The counterargument was that Arabs belong to the Semitic race and thus they are of a pure White race (Naff, 1985; Saliba, 1999). However, this identification was not designed to raise the consciousness of “Arabness” as much as a strategic move toward gaining access to the privilege of the White classification in the U.S. Another recorded incident that equated Arab Americans with the prejudice and racism against African Americans and other minority groups during that period took place in 1920. Then, an official running for a position in Birmingham, Alabama circulated a printed campaign bill that

mentioned the disqualification of African Americans, “Negro” as the bill said, and included the following message, “The Greek, and Syrian should also be disqualified [from voting]. I DON’T WANT THEIR VOTE. If I can’t be elected by the white men, I don’t want the office” (Hitti, 1923, p. 89).

As the above-mentioned incidents show, although Arab Americans by the 1920s had almost assimilated, they were not totally accepted in the “melting pot” culture of the United States of that time. Their racial identity was questioned and such questioning had an effect on the construction of their cultural identity.

#### Between the Two World Wars

Many scholars do not consider the period between 1924 and the Second World War to be a significant immigration period for Arab Americans. Thus, some of them talk about two immigration periods, the early one and the one post World War II (e.g. Friedhelm, 1986; Naff, 1985; Suleiman 1994, 1999).

From 1924 to World War II, the immigration quota act limited the number of Arab immigrants permitted to enter the United States. Nevertheless, immigration continued as families, mainly women and children continued to join their family members in this country (Naff, 1985).

While Arabic speaking immigrants were reuniting with their families in their “new country,” political changes were taking place in the old one, changes that affected the Arabic speaking diaspora in the United States. Following World War I, the Ottoman rule over the Arabic speaking region in the Middle East ceased, and the League of Nations divided the previous Ottoman Syrian province between the two world powers at that time, France and Britain, giving them mandatory power over the region. As a result, the mostly Christian Mount Lebanon was enlarged geographically to include what later became Lebanon. With this enlargement and incorporation of other villages and cities outside the former Mount Lebanon, this newly French governed region became a reflection of the religious constituents of the area including Christians, Muslims, and Druze. In 1926, the French government proclaimed Lebanon a republic with a French created constitution that France altered and suspended any time it desired until the independence of Lebanon in 1946. The political situation during that period created some tension in the region and intensified the religious divisions in it. The creation of two separate republics, first the Lebanese and later the Syrian, caused ethnic or national feelings to surface. This affected the Arabic speaking diaspora in the United States (Suleiman, 1999).

This development in the previous Ottoman Syrian province had its impact on the immigrants as some of them started to encourage

distinction from the bulk Syrian to more representative term such as Lebanese or even Syrian Lebanese. Names of some social clubs changed. However, that nationalistic movement didn't have great success (Suleiman, 1999). During the same period, Arabic language usage declined among the assimilating migrants and some of their media started to publish in English (Naff, 1985; Suleiman, 1999). In addition, a group of literary elite writers formed the infamous "*arbitah al qalamiaha*," literally meaning the union of pen-men including the famous Gibran Khalil Gibran, Michael Naimy, Nasseb Arida, Rasheed Ayaoub, and Ameen Rihani among many others (Younis, 1995). At that period as well, a major concern of Arab American immigrants was the role their women played in the new country and the kind of work appropriate for them (Suleiman, 1999).

Arab Americans' racial identity was challenged again when, in 1942, a Yemeni Arab was declined citizenship in Michigan on the basis that Arabs are not White. However, the decision was later reversed in favor of the Yemeni immigrant (Naff, 1985; Saliba, 1999; Suleiman, 1999).

Between the two World Wars, Arabs in America "functioned as a collective of communities whose bonds of solidarity beyond the family were mainly related to sect or country affiliation" (Suleiman, 1999, p 7). Striving to remove their differences from the mainstream, Arab

immigrants at that time almost lost their common language; with the exception of music and food, they became as Suleiman (1999) puts it, “an indistinguishable group from the host society” (p. 9). However, as World War II ended, changes in the “old countries” were shaping ideology of a new wave of immigration that was going to leave its impact on the “indistinguishable group” of Arabs who made America their home.

### The Third Immigration Wave: The Shift

The post World War II wave of Arab immigrants was different from the previous waves. The difference was not only in the geographical origins of the Arab immigrants but also in their religious affiliation. The previous immigrants were predominantly Christians from the Levant, whereas immigrants during this third wave were more religiously diverse and came from various Arab countries including North Africa (Suleiman, 1999). The new arrivals came at a time when the Arab countries started gaining, or at least fighting for, their independence from the colonial powers as the western ideas and ideology of democracy and equality made its way into these countries. Thus, not only were the post World War II immigrants more educated but also they were more politicized and fascinated by democratic opportunities. As a result, they came to the U.S. determined to participate in its political and public life (Seikaly, 1999; Suleiman, 1999).

Another critical development to the Arab world and Arabs in the U.S. during that period was the establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948 in Palestine and the resulting expulsion of many Palestinians from that region. This resulted in the allocation of Palestinians to different Arab countries, including but not limited to Lebanon, Syria, Algeria, Tunis, and Libya. It also resulted in the later migration of many Palestinians to the United States, bringing the total number of Palestinians in the U.S. to an estimated 12.5 Per cent of its total Arab population in 1980 (Seikaly, 1999). The Palestinian issue, or cause as it later came to be known, was going to become an integral concern in the ideological and identity questions of Arabs and Arab Americans.

During that period, western and American media started portraying the Arab world in a negative way (Ayish, 1994, cited in Hamada, 2002). Nevertheless, it was not until after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war that the Arab American community became visible in the United States (Abraham, 1994; Banks, 2003; Friedhelm, 1986; Hooglund, 1987, Salaita, 2005; Seikaly, 1999; Shain 1996; Suleiman, 1994, 1999).

The 1967 war revived a nationalistic and ethnic identity among the Arab descendants and the newly immigrated Arabs in the United States. Sueliman (1999) asserted that the “older and newer Arab-American communities ...were dismayed and extremely disappointed to

see how greatly one-sided and pro-Israeli the American communication media were in reporting on the Middle East” (p.10). As a result, Suleiman added, “members of the third generation of the early Arab immigrants had started to awaken to their own identity and to see that identity as Arab, not ‘Syrian’ ” (p.10).

To fight the perceived bias in American media and lobby for awareness and support of more balanced American policies in the Middle East, some Arab American organizations were born. The first of those was the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) (Seikaly, 1999; Suleiman, 1994, 1999). The incidents in the following years and the intensifying stereotyping and negative views about Arabs exposed that this group of immigrants was far from being fully accepted into the American mainstream as it had once thought it was.

In 1972, the tragic massacre of Israeli Olympic athletes by a Palestinian commandos group accomplished nothing other than fueling the already intensifying stereotyped image of Arabs, as the media in the U.S. “played up the Arabs’ supposed sadism” (Kayal & Kayal, 1975. p. 216). The following years witnessed more developments on the political scene in the Middle East front. Among other events were the 1973 Arab Israeli war and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, killing hundreds of

Lebanese and leading to the Sabra and Shatila massacres in which thousands of civilian Palestinians were killed.

During that period, for Arab Americans in the United States, the 'Palestinian cause' provided a unifying terrain for the differently oriented Arab Americans as did the other events that took place in the Middle East (Shain, 1996). On the other hand, American emotions toward Arabs in general were negatively fueled by the U.S. 1973 energy crisis, although the U.S. imported only 2 Per cent of its oil from Arab sources, the American media blamed the energy crisis on the Arab Oil embargo (Terry, 1975).

In the late 1970s the Abscam scandal represented what could be called an institutionalized harm to the image of Arabs (Abourezk, 1989). Accordingly, it can be said that the image of Arabs shifted in the last three decades of the 20th Century from idiot oil gurus obsessed with wealth, harems and sex to dictators, criminals and terrorists obsessed with killing and committing offensive acts against the west and humanity (Shaheen, 2001; 2004).

While all this was taking place, the U.S. witnessed the birth of many Arab American organizations that wanted to defend and advance Arab American interests and causes within the United States. In addition to the Arab Republican and Arab Democratic clubs, the established organizations included The National Association of Arab



Americans (NAAA), founded in 1972; the American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee (ADC), founded in 1980; the Arab American Institute Foundation (AAIF), founded in 1985; and the Arab American Political Action Committee (AAPAC) founded in 1998. Other service oriented organizations were the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) established in 1970 and the Arab American and Chaldean Council (AACC) founded in 1979, in addition to many other organizations that are functioning nationwide.

However, the Arab activism in the United States did not alter the continued stereotyping, prejudice, and even hostility and violence at times (Abraham, 1994). Although some Arab Americans were elected to office such as James Abourezk, Mary Rose Oakar, and Nick Rahall II who made it to the U.S. congress; not forgetting the well-known consumer advocate Ralph Nader, Arab American activists always faced difficulties and opposition because of their ethnic background (Suleiman, 1999). Ralph Nader, to provide only one example, was called “dirty Arab” by a Nixon cabinet officer (Abraham, 1994, p.196).

In spite of these few examples, Arab Americans have been denied full participation in public life. Some forms of such denial, especially in the 1980s, took the form of returning donations made by citizens of Arab descent by those running for offices and some candidates refusing to accept Arab American participants in their campaigns (Abraham,

1994) in addition to aggressive and negative propaganda against them (Suleiman, 1994). All of these factors influenced the ongoing process of identity formation of Arab Americans in the United States as they had not only face discrimination and refusal from the host society, but they also needed to assert their Americanism. All the mentioned factors contributed to where Arab Americans are today.

### Arab Americans Today

In 1999, Suleiman asserted that Arab Americans in the U.S. are doing well on the economic, professional, and educational level. He pointed out, however, that too many of them have to hide or de-emphasize their origin because of racism, asserting that their full integration and assimilation will not be achieved until Arab Americans can stop “struggling to be accepted in the American society” (p.16).

Arab Americans today are, as they were in 1923, present in all 50 states. Haddad, (2004) reported that two-thirds of the Arab Americans are living in 10 states and over a third of those are living either in California, New York, or Michigan and about 50 Per cent of the population lives in 20 large metropolitan areas. It is also believed that approximately 75 Per cent of the Arab Americans are Christians. The remaining 25 Per cent are Muslims (Sunni and Shiite), Druze, and a small Jewish minority (Haddad, 2004).

The diversity of the Arab American population today is reflected not only in this population's different religious affiliations, but also in its different national backgrounds with what 'national backgrounds' mean in the realm of various racial, tribal, and sectarian affiliations. On the linguistic level, although "*fusha*" that is Modern Standard Arabic, unites the Arabic speaking people, the different regional dialects of colloquial Arabic are mainly used in daily communication and add to the diversity within this group. However, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 75 Per cent of Arabs in the United States either spoke only English at their homes or spoke English very well (U.S. Census Bureau Special Reports, 2005). The Census Bureau (2005) reported that the four largest Arab groups are of the following ancestries: Lebanese (29 Per cent), Egyptian (14.5 Per cent), Syrian (8.9 Per cent) and Palestinian (4.2 Per cent).

In addition, the Census Bureau (2005) reported that the majority of the Arab population is male (57 Per cent). It reported that the proportion of the Arab population with a high school diploma or bachelor's degree was higher than the national average. The same was true regarding the median income of Arab men, women, and families.

In addition to the Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian, and Palestinian ancestry, the heterogeneous composition of Arab Americans today includes people who came from Jordan, Iraq, Morocco, Yemen, Algeria,

Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Kuwait, Libya, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain. It also includes some who reported Berber, Kurdish, Bedouin, and Alhuceman background in the 2000 Census.

### Conclusion

This historical perspective about the different immigration waves of Arabs to the United States showed that the factors that had an impact on the formation of their cultural identity in their new home away from home; it showed that they were not disconnected from the events taking place in their original homeland and that these events played a major role in their life. Taking that into consideration, the major question this article raises is how the events taking place in the Arab countries would, particularly the so called "Arab Spring" is going to affect this the Arab diaspora in the United States. Other areas of scholarly investigation would be a comparison of the historical factors and challenges associated with the immigration of Arabs to other European and Western countries.

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