

Handout # 1 (Lesson # 2): Who Are the Middle Eastern American Immigrants?

There is disagreement on which countries should be considered part of the Middle East. The following countries are generally accepted to be part of the Middle East: Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine (West Bank and Gaza,) Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait. This list also includes the North African countries of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. In addition, Afghanistan is classified as the Middle East by some and part of South Asia or Central Asia by others. The Sudan and Mauritania are also sometimes considered part of the Middle East.

The term Middle East did not originate from the people who live in this region. In the 19th century, European geographers gave the area this name because they saw it as half way between Europe and Asia. Not all the nations of the Middle East are part of the Arab world. Arabs are people who speak Arabic. Iranians speak mostly Persian, Israelis speak Hebrew, and Turks speak Turkish, therefore they are not Arab. While the majority of the people of the Middle East follow the religion of Islam, Jews and Christians have communities in the region even after the advent of Islam.

It is difficult to count the number of Middle Eastern Americans or analyze their attitudes and experiences because data on these populations is scarce. The government uses the **census** to generate such information on all persons living in the United States every ten years, but persons of Middle Eastern background are classified as white, thus not visible statistically. Even if an immigrant from Egypt, for example, identified herself as an Arab on the census form, her answer will be changed to white when processed. The ancestors of Middle Eastern Americans petitioned the U.S. government at the beginning of the 20th century to be called Caucasian or white because they wanted the privilege to own property, travel and vote.

The first wave of Arab American immigrants came from the Ottoman Empire in the 1880s. People move from one country to another for a variety of reasons. These reasons are divided into two types: **push factors** (things that occur in the home country that make it necessary for people to leave, such as wars or lack of jobs and opportunities) and **pull factors** (things that exist in the receiving country that make people want to go there, such as the presence of family members, or an abundance of jobs and prospects for economic advancement). The vast majority of the early immigrants from the Middle East were Christian; Arabs from present-day Syria and Lebanon and Armenians from present-day Turkey. They were leaving their villages and towns because of economic hardships and the political instability in the Ottoman Empire in its waning years. There were also a small number of Muslim Arab immigrants who arrived in America to escape the military draft that was imposed only on majority Muslim populations. Many Armenians, who survived the 1915 genocide perpetrated by the Young Turks who overthrew Ottomans, came to the U.S. after the First World War.

Middle Eastern immigrants showed great entrepreneurial spirit. They were self-reliant and started their own businesses. Syrian/Lebanese immigrants were known for becoming peddler merchants. They traveled the U.S. on foot or buggy, and later by car, selling silk, buttons, jewelry, household items and religious articles from the Holy Land. Arabs and Armenians also worked in factories throughout New England, New York, New Jersey

and the Mid-West. Most of these pioneers dreamed to be self-employed. And they did as soon as they were able to save enough money to set up their own grocer, hardware or ice cream shops. Many Armenians became photographers, and craftsmen such as tailors and shoemakers and jewelers.

In 1924, Congress passed the National Origins Act. This law made it hard for immigrants who were not from Northwestern Europe to come to the U.S. The laws led to a great decline in the number of new immigrants to the United States from the Middle East. Finally, in 1965, Congress repealed these laws, opening the doors for a second wave of immigrants from the Middle East. This wave was much larger than the first and more diverse in its composition.

The push-pull factors of the second wave of Middle Eastern immigration were also different from the first. Major political and economic transformations in many Middle Eastern countries throughout the 20th century pushed many to emigrate. Several nations, including Egypt, Iraq and Syria, had adopted socialist policies in the 1950s that allowed the government to confiscate private property including factories and businesses. The well-to-do, including Jews, Christians and ethnic minorities such as Armenians, felt in danger and departed.

There were many wars, revolutions and repressive regimes in the Middle East during this period, such as the Arab-Israeli War (1967), the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the Iranian Revolution (1978-1979), the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Desert Storm (1991), the U.S. invasion of Iraq (2003), to name a few. Wars and political crises disrupt normal life and have serious economic consequences. Consequently, they create emigrants and **refugees** (people who ran away from their country because of danger to their lives and are unable to return). The United States has witnessed the influx of Middle Eastern immigrants after each one of these disasters. Those coming from Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan have sought **asylum** in the United States, claiming that if they go back to their home country they will be jailed or subject to physical abuse.

Coming to the United States to pursue higher education is a new push factor for post-1965 immigrants from the Middle East. The increasing wealth of the Persian Gulf countries from gasoline yet the inadequate capacity of institutions to prepare future professionals, forced governments to send young people to U.S. universities. In the late 1970s, the largest number of undergraduate and graduate students from the Middle East in the United States was Iranians. Many of these students stayed in America after finishing their education.

The pull factors have not changed much in the 20th century: economic opportunities, political stability and a government that obeys its laws. However, the immigration law favored certain categories of people. During the period between 1996 and 2005, Egyptians and Iranians came to the U.S. in large numbers because they ranked high on higher education and skills such as engineers, scientists, and physicians. On the other hand, Yemenis who arrived in an earlier period to work in agriculture in California and automobile and steel factories in Michigan ranked low after the new law. Nonetheless, the largest category was newcomers who were sponsored by a close family member who was already a U.S. citizen.

How do Middle Eastern Americans define their identity? Do they see themselves as immigrants from a particular country or from a certain region? Do they view themselves as members of a specific religious group? The answer to these questions varies according

to each group, time in history; it may even change in a person's lifetime or the specific situation. When asked: Who are you? Where do you come from? Most people of Middle Eastern descent say, "I am Iranian," Palestinian, Syrian, Arab or the name of **ethnic group** they feel they belong to. Members of ethnic groups share language, cultural traits (e.g., music, food, and traditions), history and sense of community. Israelis and Armenians are examples of **ethno-religious groups**. What people call themselves and what outsiders call them may differ. After 9/11, the media lumped all people from the Middle East, except those from Israel, into one category. They were called Middle Easterners or Muslims. Often this reference had negative connotations.

Early immigration laws excluded certain **rac**es. A race category is composed of men and women who share biologically transmitted traits that members of a society believe are significant such as black, Asian, Caucasian. The race category is often misleading because it reveals political ideas that justify inequality among groups. Until 1943, Asian immigrants were prevented from becoming citizens. In 1914, a court in Charleston, South Carolina, ruled that immigrants from Lebanon/Syria are to be considered part of the Caucasian race. A series of rulings in other courts in the beginning of the 20th century confirmed that groups from the Middle East (e.g., Armenians) are Caucasian or white. In a twisted way, since 9/11 the media and many individuals in the public sphere erroneously label persons of Middle Eastern descent as "terrorist" or "the enemy," thus not white. Identifying American ethnic or ethno-religious groups as "the other" breeds prejudice and discrimination. In response, some Middle Eastern Americans have rejected the white identity, saying that there is a contradiction between their label and their actual experiences of inequality.

According to the census, the number of persons who trace their ancestry to the Middle East is about three million. Arab Americans comprise the largest group (the Lebanese are the largest sub-group, followed by Syrians and Egyptians). The second largest group is Armenian Americans followed by Iranian Americans. Within these groups there are large numbers of foreign-born immigrants. The groups in which the foreign-born are the majority include Iraqis, Egyptians, Iranians, Jordanians, Israelis, and Turks. Middle Eastern immigrants and their descendants are concentrated in a few large states. Arab Americans are mainly located in California, New York and Michigan. Southern California has a heavy concentration of Armenian and Iranian heritage populations. The majority of Israeli Americans have settled in New York City and Los Angeles.

Middle Eastern immigrants have proven themselves as successful **entrepreneurs**, that is, people who thrive in business. Some of these immigrants came with money they could invest in small enterprises, or worked for others and saved enough money to buy a business. After 1965, many came with a high degree of education and became professionals in medicine, architecture, engineering, and the sciences. They have a rate of self-employment much higher than that of other foreign-born immigrant groups. Although Middle Eastern immigrants are more likely to be in higher paying occupations, there are exceptions. The area around Detroit has many working class Arab Americans employed in the service industries. Overall, Middle Easterners who immigrated to the U.S. in the post-1965 era have achieved remarkable social mobility. This means that they have obtained a higher economic status in a relatively short time.

Source: Anny Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr. 2009. *Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Chapter 3)