

## Chapter 2

# The Sociopolitical History of Arabs in the United States: Assimilation, Ethnicity, and Global Citizenship

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### Introduction

The Arab American population has been increasing rapidly during the last few decades. It grew by 42 % in the 1980s, reaching over one million in 1990 (Samhan, 2001). Despite the perceived underestimation of the size of the group, the 2000 census indicated that 1.2 million Americans report an Arab ancestry, making Arab Americans one out of 33 ancestry groups with a population over one million (De La Cruz & Brittingham, 2003). Like other ethnic identities in the United States, the formation of Arab American ethnicity took many years to crystallize, and there is much debate on the way it has been historically constructed. According to many scholars, the pan-ethnic identity “Arab American” is relatively new, dating to the early 1970s and resulting from a rise in political consciousness among people of Arab origin (whether immigrant or native to the United States). Orfalea (2006) finds the first appearance of the term “Arabic-speaking American” in the 1946 publication by Habib Katibah and Farhat Ziadeh under the same title and affirms that the term “Arab American” began to be used by the community itself around the same time. Suleiman (1999) traces the construction of the ethnic identity to the 1967 defeat of Arab forces and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. Cainkar (2006) connects the rising political mobilization under the pan-ethnic identity to the US imperial aspirations in the Arab World around the middle of the twentieth century. Both Suleiman and Cainkar draw our attention to the political nature of Arab American identity and its relationship to global dynamics. Like other ethnic categories in the United States, being Arab American is fraught with diverse origins, religions, orientations, and dispositions. People originating in Arab countries are in no way homogeneous; they do not all

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consider themselves Arab (Ajrouch & Jamal, 2007). At the same time, similar to other ethnic labels, an Arab American identity and community are continuously and actively being constructed and reconstructed (Haddad, 2004). Identity formations take place through dynamics internal to the community itself, such as the activities of ethnic organizations, community centers, and political activists (Nagel & Staeheli, 2004), and external developments such as the foreign and domestic policies of the American government, the political environment in Arab countries, and the interactions members of the Arab American community have with other communities around them (Salaita, 2005; Suleiman, 1999). Scholarly works also contribute to the strengthening of such labels and render them meaningful.

In an attempt to depict the sociopolitical worldview of Arab Americans, this chapter traces the development of an ethnic political community among the different waves of immigrants by illustrating the global, transnational and national, social and political conditions shaping the context for the development of the community. The first part of the chapter summarizes the migratory patterns of the members of the community and highlights the dynamics that shaped their emigration, reception, and formation of identity and community. The second part explores the theoretical constructs that shape our understanding of the Arab American experience.

Traditionally, analyses of Arab American communities in the United States have been understood through the assimilation–multiculturalism paradigm. Assimilation refers to the ways members of an immigrant community became absorbed by the dominant society through various mechanisms such as language absorption, socio-economic mobility, and intermarriage. Generally, assimilation is defined as a one-sided process of incorporating migrants into host societies. In the process of adapting to the new setting, migrants are expected to give up distinctive cultural and social attributes so as to become indistinguishable from members of the new society (see, for example Naff, 1985; Truzzi, 1997). On the other hand, multiculturalism refers to a more plural context of reception that allows immigrants to be incorporated into their new societies through multiple paths. Immigrant communities are accepted as ethnic minorities. Multiculturalism emphasizes that ethnic groups retain their distinguishable character (such as language, culture, social behavior, or public sphere) from the majority population within a larger multicultural society (see, for example, Basch, Glick Shiller, & Szanton Blanc, 1994; Castles, 1997; Glazer & Moynihan, 1970; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

This chapter highlights the ways analyses of the Arab American community have either stressed the various processes through which the group has assimilated into the American mainstream or traced the development of an ethnic identity and awareness of difference within the structure of American racial ethnic hierarchies. Next, this chapter extends such analyses by highlighting the growing global awareness that shapes contradictory forms of identification and are best understood through notions of transnationalism and diaspora. Transnationalism often reflects incomplete assimilation and the strengthening of ethnic pluralism in host societies (Morawska, 2008) by drawing attention to the ongoing connection with the immigrants' homeland and involvement in its political life. Diaspora provides a framework through which to understand immigrant integration that moves beyond

traditional sociological models, such as assimilation and ethnic pluralism (Abdelhady, 2006). As an explanatory paradigm, diaspora possesses malleable qualities, such as the awareness of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion that complicates our understanding of immigrant communities and worldviews. The chapter concludes by underlining the contested nature of Arab American identity and the challenges faced by members of the community at present.

## Historical Background and Migratory Patterns

### *The First Wave: 1880–1918*

From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, people from the Middle East have been moving in large numbers to North America. Most of these immigrants came from Mount Lebanon, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire, and the Syrian–Lebanese continue to make up the largest group of immigrants from the Middle East (De La Cruz & Brittingham, 2003; Hourani & Shehdi, 1992). Mount Lebanon was inhabited by heterogeneous groups of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, and a range of push–pull factors varied for each of the groups. Some were driven by push factors such as economic desperation, religious discrimination, or political oppression. Numerous accounts emphasize the importance of economic factors as the strongest in motivating early waves of emigration (see Karpat, 1985; Naff, 1985; Suleiman, 1999). The opening of the Suez Canal and the diversion of trade routes from Syria to Egypt, the inability of the Lebanese silk industry to compete with declining prices of Japanese silk, and rapid population growth which was unmatched by agricultural and industrial productivity are among the major economic factors behind Syro-Lebanese emigration (Suleiman, 1999).

According to Arab-American historian Naff (1994), the first waves of Arab immigrants to the United States were mostly Syrian–Lebanese Christians, farmers, or artisans, relatively poor, and poorly educated.<sup>1</sup> These immigrants were referred to as Syrians or Syrian–Lebanese and rarely Arab, which indicates a lack of a definite ethnic identity (Suleiman, 1999). These immigrants were emphatically sojourners, who have left voluntarily, as they wanted to improve their economic condition and to return home in a short time wealthier and prouder than when they left (Naff, 1994). Early settlers as well as missionaries played an important role in this respect. Both groups helped create the desire for improving material well-being by telling stories of the “entrepreneurial Eden” where “President Ulysses Grant was giving land away for free” (Younis, 1995, p. xiv).

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<sup>1</sup> The religious origin of those emigrating from the Ottoman Empire is not a straightforward matter. According to Middle East Historian Karpat (1985) Muslim subjects were forbidden to emigrate, which may have led some to state that they were of Christian origin on official records. Fear of deportation if their true faith was discovered may have led them to conceal their Muslim origins after arrival.

In addition to the economic reasons for migration, sociopolitical factors played an important role as well. The beginning of the disintegration of feudalism brought about social and political instability to the region in form of communal clashes (which started in the 1840s and 1850s) and triggered large-scale migration from Mount Lebanon. Specifically, the granting of the special administrative status to Mount Lebanon in 1861, which meant relative autonomy from the Ottoman Empire, increased political and social instability and led to the isolation from the more prosperous regions of the Empire as well as more freedom for individuals to migrate (Karpat, 1985). Religious conflict, the imposition of conscription and the spread of foreign education were also contributing factors to migration from Greater Syria (Issawi, 1992; Orfalea, 2006).

Given their self-understanding as sojourners, early immigrants never felt that they belonged to American society (Suleiman, 1994). They mostly settled with co-ethnics and learned barely enough English to engage in back-peddling (McCarus, 1994). Since most early arrivals came with the idea of staying only long enough to accumulate a fortune and return home, they often started their economic activities in the new land as peddlers. With suitcases full of items such as needles, lace, and thread, Arab immigrants got on the road to sell their goods only a day or two after they arrived to the United States (Suleiman, 1999). Naff (1994) stresses that pack-peddling was the only activity Arab migrants had in mind as they had no interest in joining the American labor force or the isolated farm life. The Syro-Lebanese considered peddling as the most appropriate activity upon their arrival. Their lack of capital and limited knowledge of English constrained earning opportunities. Indeed, peddling, often supported by networks of friends and fellow countrymen, was seen as an activity compatible with quick financial rewards and a quick return home, as well as one being dependent almost entirely on individual effort (Truzzi, 1997). According to Suleiman (1999, p. 4), success in peddling required “thrift, hard-work, very long hours, the stamina to endure harsh travel conditions (mostly walking the countryside on unpaved roads), and not infrequently, the taunting and insults from children or disgruntled customers.” These conditions were made tolerable for most early arrivals given their vision of a brighter economic future that would bring about social prestige for the immigrants and their families in the homeland. Suleiman notes that, as soon as they could afford to, early Arab immigrants switched to the “luxury” of a horse and buggy and later to a dry goods store.

Early Arab immigrants arrived in a country in which racial segregation was becoming increasingly institutionalized and nativist movements were pressuring immigrants to assimilate rapidly and to adopt American values and customs (Higham, 1955). Arab Americans were made aware of their racial difference and experienced opposition when using “White only” restaurants and restrooms (Conklin & Faires, 1987). In response to the racism of Jim Crow America and to court decisions labeling them as “Mongolian” or “Asiatic” and therefore not eligible for the US citizenship, Arab American leaders mounted a series of successful court cases between 1909 and 1915 seeking to be officially identified as “white.” The judges who ruled in their favor were persuaded by a set of pseudo-scientific, legal, and religious arguments, including skin color, Christian identity, historic

“contributions to civilization,” Semitic identity, geographic proximity to Europe, and individual social and moral characteristics. While these characteristics do not apply to all Arab Americans and many of them faced resistance, the Syrian–Lebanese were officially included in the Caucasian racial category and were gradually characterized as belonging to the “white” race within American society (Truzzi, 1997, p. 21). Their incorporation within the privileged racial group allowed members of the Syrian–Lebanese community to utilize their “whiteness” and become legal citizens and more “Americanized.”

### ***Inter-War Isolation: 1918–1948***

World War I and the restrictive quotas to immigration that followed isolated early Arab immigrants from the homelands and limited the growth of the immigrant community. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1921 and Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 set quotas on non-European immigration to the United States and limited the number of Arab immigrants permitted to enter the country. Nevertheless, immigration continued as families, mainly women and children continued to join their family members in this country (Naff, 1985). While immigrants were allowed to unite with their families, the replenishment of ethnicity by newcomers (Jimenez, 2009) was still limited resulting in a sense of isolation from the homeland. The sense of isolation had two effects on the Arab immigrant community (Suleiman, 1999). On the one hand, it led to enhancing the sense of solidarity among community members and more calls to end inter-sectarian conflicts that facilitated the emergence of an ethnic identity. The growth in self-help community organizations during the great depression can be viewed as a sign for the weakening of inter-sectarian conflict as they increasingly targeted all Syrian immigrants and their families (Orfalea, 2006). On the other hand, however, it also strengthened the assimilationist trend, especially for the American-born children of the early immigrants. For example, the early second-generation spoke only English and quickly moved away from ethnic churches (Suleiman, 1999) and is often characterized as being the most assimilated of all generations of Arab immigrants to the United States (Orfalea, 2006). The process of Americanization of the Syrian–Lebanese progressed with their incorporation, or rather acceptance, in the dominant white culture. In one example, Najeeb Halaby, who became the first chairman of NATO’s Military Production and Supply Board described:

The first generation of the immigrant Arabs really wanted to be 100 percent American and changed their names and their religions even. They wanted to arrive socially, politically, professionally. And so when you’re raised in that kind of atmosphere, you want to be all-American. Yet... I’ve found in going back to Syria or Lebanon, though the food, the atmosphere, the air, the sights, sounds, you feel a root that just comes without logic or intellectual activity. It just is down inside you (Orfalea, 2006, p. 139)

Halaby is an example of successful assimilation trends that was experienced by early Arab immigrants and their children in the United States. Truzzi (1997)

describes that success in business activities and professional occupations triggered the interest of Syrian–Lebanese immigrants in the United States to participate in politics and take on government positions. The author goes on to stress that “they entered not as Arab-Americans, but rather as assimilated Americans” (Truzzi, 1997, p. 13). Many analysts of early Arab experiences in the United States tend to conclude that members of the first wave of Arab immigrants were “Americanized to the point of extinction” (Kayal, 1995, p. 253).

While Arabic-speaking immigrants were reuniting with their families in their “new country,” political changes were taking place in their homeland that affected the life in the diaspora. Following World War I, the Ottoman Empire crumbled and its rule over Arab communities was replaced by France and Britain (the two great powers at the time). In 1918, the French mandate for Syria and Lebanon was granted by the League of Nations and entailed the incorporation of diverse villages and cities and religious communities such as Christians, Muslims, and Druze into one entity. Under the French mandate, political tensions and religious divisions intensified and were only strengthened by its termination in 1946. The emergence of two separate nation-states from the mandate, first the Lebanese and later the Syrian, caused ethnic or national sentiments and attachments to surface which affected the immigrant community in the United States (Suleiman, 1999). Disturbances in Palestine with Zionist settlers and the British rulers motivated many Palestinians to escape the British mandate and migrate to the United States (Orfalea, 2006).

While most Arab immigrants had left before the creation of nation-states in their homeland and initially adhered to identities based on villages or families of origin, some of them started to encourage distinction from the larger Syrian identification to more nationalist terms such as Lebanese or even Syrian–Lebanese. Names of some social clubs also changed. During the period 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). While many of them could have returned to their homelands having fulfilled their dreams of economic success, many of them chose not to. They opted to maintain a transnational relationship with their places of origin instead and sent remittances to support families, villages, and nationalist struggles (Gualtieri, 2010).

At the same time, Arab Americans strived to remove their differences from the mainstream. They were eager to prove their worthiness to American society, which mostly took the form of shedding their cultural distinction and replacing it with an assimilated outlook (Kayyali, 2006). As a result, Arab immigrants almost lost their common language; with the exception of music and food, they became what Suleiman (1999, p. 9) describes, “an indistinguishable group from the host society.” Their assimilation to white, middle class America was facilitated by their entry into the manufacturing of silk, dry food store ownership, and to a lesser extent intermarriage (Orfalea, 2006).

Arriving to the United States before the creation of modern nation-states, Arab immigrants at the time shared an understanding of difference that was mostly based on religious affiliation. Their encounters with institutions that shaped racial

stratification and growing awareness of white privilege strengthened their desire to identify as white in order to reap such privilege and escape the stigma of otherness (Gualtieri, 2001; Samhan, 1997). Seeking whiteness, however, was often characterized by struggle and discrimination leading to a contradictory sense of identification and ambiguity about their inclusion in American society that lasts until the present (Gualtieri, 2010). Suleiman (1994) asserts that being sick of the outsiders' position, Arab Americans started to assimilate more into the American way of life during and after World War I when they started joining the army and fighting on behalf of the United States (see also Orfalea, 2006). Following the war and realizing that America was their permanent home, those immigrants started to develop a more inclusive community that was not divided along class and religious lines. For the first time, they also started to engage in campaigns to better inform the American citizens and others about their Arab heritage. Philip Hitti's 1924 book on *The Syrians in America* is considered the first attempt to introduce the community to American society. In the process, Hitti aimed to engender cohesion and unity to the community and the way it was perceived by others. Hitti's goals included the desire to establish an interest group that participated in American public life instead of accepting the community's invisibility. While the assimilation of the early wave of Arab Americans was often challenged and contested (see, for example Gualtieri, 2010), Americanization was still an important goal that was pursued by many ethnic organizations. The first wave of immigrants established a number of charitable societies that maintained group cohesion, ethnic ties, and fostered assimilation. Members of the small elite in the first wave started organizations to improve the conditions of other members of the community, such as clubs to learn English, and to promote American ideals and mutual understanding (Naff, 1985). Furthermore, there were societies based on family name and place of origin which were interested in modernizing their respective villages in the homeland and maintaining transnational ties (Naff, 1985).

### ***The Second Wave: Emerging Nationalism (1948–1965)***

According to the various accounts of Arab immigration to the United States following World War I, waves of immigrants were becoming more diverse and sophisticated. Yet, it was only after World War II that the second wave of Arab immigration became distinct (see Abraham & Abraham, 1983, for more information on historical trends of Arab migration). According to Suleiman (1994), by the end of World War II, the Arab American communities nearly assimilated fully and almost lost their Arab identity but this identity loss was reversed because of the Palestinian cause and the influx of new waves of immigrants. The establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948 in Palestine is considered a critical moment in the history of Arab American communities. The resulting expulsion of many Palestinians from their homeland brought many Palestinian refugees to the United States. The expulsion resulted in the allocation of Palestinians to different Arab countries, including but

not limited to Lebanon, Syria, Algeria, Tunis, and Libya. With the passing of the Refugee Relief Act in 1953 and its extension in 1957, many of the Palestinian refugees settled in the United States (Alfaro-Velcamp, 2011), bringing the total number of Palestinians in the United States to an estimated 12.5 % of its total Arab population in 1980 (Seikaly, 1999). The Palestinian cause became a central concern in the ideological and identity questions of Arabs and Arab Americans.

Generally speaking, the post-World War II wave of Arab immigrants consisted of highly educated and politicized individuals and professionals. Unlike the early arrivals, the immigrants of the post-World War II wave were motivated by the desire to escape political deterioration and warfare as opposed to a search for better economic opportunities (Orfalea, 2006). In addition to Palestinians, the second wave of Arab immigrants included Egyptians, Iraqis, Yemenis, Syrians, and Lebanese. These new arrivals came at a time when the Arab countries started gaining, or at least fighting for, their independence from the colonial powers as western ideas of democracy and equality made their way into these countries. These ideas contributed to their political socialization before and after migration as they were fascinated by democratic opportunities and eager to participate in American political and public life (Seikaly, 1999; Suleiman, 1999). Unlike their forebears who came as temporary sojourners (but most of whom stayed), post-World War II Arabs came as immigrants who sought a new life in the United States (Haddad, 1994; Suleiman, 1994). Unlike the pioneer generation, those new arrivals had the education and skills to adapt more quickly to American society. However, they were more interested in homeland politics and possessed political views and religious beliefs that set them apart from other Americans. For many, their Palestinian origin (or pro-Palestinian orientation) and Muslim faith not only alienated them from the majority of American society but from early Syrian/Syrian–Lebanese immigrants who were already fully assimilated to the middle class white strata of American society (Orfalea, 2006).

Despite the divisions between the two waves of Arab immigrants, the creation of the State of Israel and the expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland motivated a growing unity among many Arab Americans, and to an extent a growing awareness of an Arab identity and community. The first attempt to establish a political interest group took place in 1951, when the Federation of Syrian–Lebanese Clubs managed to achieve ethnic unity and met with President Truman (Orfalea, 2006). For many historians of the Arab American community, it was not until after World War II that Arab Americans began to develop an Arab identity to counter the ignorance about the history of Arabs (see Naff, 1994). The emerging Arab American identity paralleled the development of Arab identity itself and reflected the emergence of Arab nationalism that resisted European colonization and political intervention in the region (Naber, 2008). This political identity found articulation in civil society organizations and political activities that aimed at not only educating Americans about Arabs, which was the popular strategy for members of the earlier wave of migrants, but forming a political interest group as well.

### *The Third Wave: Arab Defeat and Political Awakening (1965–2001)*

Since the 1960s, the Arab American population has grown rapidly as a result of immigration policy changes. The loosening of the US immigration restrictions in 1965 allowed for larger and even more diverse numbers of Arab immigrants to move to the United States. Political and economic crises taking place in Arab countries motivated such increasing flows of Arab migrants to the United States. For example, Suleiman (1999) cites regional conflicts (e.g., Palestine-Israel, Iraq-Iran, Iraq-Kuwait) and civil wars (Lebanon, Yemen) as among the factors contributing to the increase of Arab migration. According to the author, the new immigrants were searching for democracy and freedom from their oppressive governments. Suleiman also adds the importance of improvements in transportation and communication as allowing immigrants to perceive of the world as a single unit and thus more accepting of the notion of migration especially to far away places in North America. According to Orfalea (2006), members of that third wave of immigrants are in many ways similar to those of the second: many of them came from Palestine, but others also came from Syria, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf countries; the majority was highly educated and professional; and many of them left due to sociopolitical reasons. Unlike those of the second wave, however, members of the new wave of immigrants were fleeing their homeland due to intra-Arab warfare and an intensified US involvement in the region. While the Israeli aggression on Palestinians continued, the Lebanese civil war which started in 1975 and was intensified with Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Iraq's war with Iran and subsequent invasion of Kuwait that led to the imposition of harsh economic sanctions on the Iraqis, and the rise of religious fundamentalism in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq led many to flee such undesirable conditions and migrate to the United States. All these factors combine to make it less likely for members of the third wave of Arab immigrants to go back home (Orfalea, 2006). Given the political reasons motivating their migration and their dissatisfaction with the US policies in the region, members of the third wave are believed to be more likely to participate in American political life in an attempt to impact American policies in the Arab world (Orfalea, 2006).

While the creation of the state of Israel and the expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland motivated a growing interest in ethnic politics among Arabs in the United States, 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; Hooglund, 1987; Orfalea, 2006; Salaita, 2005; Seikaly, 1999; Shain, 1996; Suleiman, 1994, 1999). In an analysis of the political attitudes of Arab immigrants, Suleiman (1994) notes that the 1967 Arab-Israeli war marked Arab immigrants' political engagement in the United States based on their involvement with issues related to their ethnic community and homelands. Although Suleiman does not use transnationalism as a framework for his analysis, it seems that the 1967 defeat fostered transnational ties in the Arab American community more so than any other event.

Earlier waves of Arab immigrants may have assimilated to the US society by many measures (see, for example Kulczycki & Lobo, 2001; Naff, 1985). Yet, following the 1967 Arab defeat, Arab immigrants have expressed strong interest in maintaining ethnic attachments to their homeland as well as an ethnic community in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The United States' strong support for Israel and partial media coverage of the conflict fostered Arab American unity and the emergence of an ethnic immigrant identity (see Haddad, 1991; Marshal & Read, 2003; Sandoval & Jendrysik, 1993). The 1967 war revived a nationalistic and ethnic identity among the Arab descendants and the newly immigrated Arabs in the United States. Suleiman (1999, p. 10) 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." This assertion led Suleiman to stress that "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'" (Suleiman, 1999). For those who arrived in the third wave (post-1965), ethnic cohesion was sought after for political purposes as well (David & Ayoub, 2002).

According to Salaita (2005, p. 150) "nothing has been of more concern to Arab Americans since 1967 than the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, although Iraq has also been pivotal since 1990." Widespread American political and public support for Israel has infuriated Arab Americans and served to provide a rallying cause and a mobilizing political focus. Despite the diverse and sometimes opposing positions of Arab Americans, the issue of Palestine fostered the formation of Arab American racial identity and "transformed Arab Americans from a rapidly acculturated immigrant group into a radical, anti-mainstream community" (Salaita, 2005, p. 165, see also David, 2007). While Salaita and David's analyses may be accurate depictions of the public political lives of Arab Americans, it should be noted that among members of the Arab American community itself there is no agreement about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, with many not having a position on the subject. In a study of Palestinian Americans conducted in the late 1980s, Barghouti (1989) found that American-born Palestinians were less politically engaged by the Arab–Israeli conflict than their foreign-born counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Analyzing Arab American political attitudes before 9/11, Wald and Williams (2005) find that members of the Arab American community are more attentive to the Middle East but without high levels of mobilization or unanimity. Suleiman's (1994) survey also supports this account

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<sup>2</sup>Bawardi (2009) maintains that Arab immigrants' transnational activities can be traced back to independence movements which started at the turn of the nineteenth century but was accelerated following the second world war.

<sup>3</sup>A more substantial attitude variation was found by Sandoval and Jendrysik (1993) who surveyed Arab Americans about the Gulf War. The study found no difference between Arab Americans and other Americans about Iraq's guilt, the necessity of Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait, and the desirability of disarming Saddam Hussein. However, the authors observe that younger, foreign-born, and Muslim Arab Americans have greater opposition to the U.S. policies relating to the Middle East. More recently, Salaita (2005) remarked that not all Arab Americans oppose the war in Iraq.

and adds that younger Arab Americans have stronger identification as Arabs (as opposed to American-only or based on their religion or national origin), but that such identification is mostly political since younger Arabs are not necessarily devoted to cultural traditions and ethnic practices. Nonetheless, unlike Arab Americans of the earlier waves, by the 1990, Arab immigrants and American-born Arabs alike shared a strong ethnic consciousness and were engaged in expressing their Arab consciousness intellectually and creatively (Salaita, 2005).

## Arab Americans Today: 9/11/2001 and Beyond

In the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, Arab Americans became more visible actors politically, and the interest in political participation is believed to be pervasive among many members of the community (Abdelhady, 2006, 2011a). Most scholars consider the attacks as a turning point in the narrative of Arab Americans. While anti-Arab racism preceded the attacks and the systematic discrimination that followed, their impact on the daily lives of Arab Americans took on new forms and levels (see, for example Naber, 2008). Incidents of discrimination and anti-Arab violence were critical in their political mobilization, but government policies were at least equally significant. The passage of the USA Patriot Act and the broad investigative authorities it gave to government facilitated the detention of hundreds of Arab Americans. Cainkar (2003, p. 1) describes that “the US government’s domestic legislative, administrative, and judicial measures implemented after September 11th have included mass arrests, secret and indefinite detentions, prolonged detention of ‘material witnesses,’ closed hearings and use of secret evidence, government eavesdropping on attorney client conversations, FBI home and work visits, wiretapping, seizures of property, removals of aliens with technical visa violations, and mandatory special registration.” In addition to individual experiences, many philanthropic organizations were shut down by the FBI in fear of their support to terrorist groups. Muslim charities were especially scrutinized, and Arab or Muslim small businesses were threatened by the FBI.

Threat can be a source of mobilization and work to prompt ethnic consciousness engendering political capital (Ramakrishnane, 2005). Research on the 9/11 backlash (Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009) has revealed that the mobilization of the targeted populations was one of the unexpected consequences. Unlike historical precedents (e.g., Japanese internment during World War II or the Iran hostage crisis), Middle Eastern and Muslim leaders across the country rallied their constituents to integrate into the civic and political institutions at the local and national levels. Almost immediately, they stood firm, claiming their rightful place in American society and protested the backlash by the government initiatives as well as the hate crimes and bias incidents. Instead of capitulating to exclusion, many Arab Americans distanced themselves from the terrorist attacks, and many organizations issued official statements condemning terrorist acts. One such attempt was portrayed in the candlelight vigil held in the heart of Arab New York on Atlantic Avenue. Others

focused their efforts on educating the public about Arab cultural diversity. For example, following reports of police racial profiling of Arabs post-9/11, organizations such as the Arab American Association of New York and the American MidEast Leadership Network stepped in to provide cultural sensitivity training programs to officers of the New York Police Department (Millard, 2008). Many other groups organized voter registration, know-your-rights forums, and other activities that aimed at political integration. Bakalian and Bozorgmehr (2009) note the high levels of mobilization. They show that the increased racial profiling and stigmatization of Arabs in the US post-9/11, while remaining comparatively low, motivated many Arab Americans to reinterpret the multicultural structure of American society through participating in public life to shape the ways they wish to be portrayed by others. The mobilization of political capital resulting from the increased stigmatization reached out to many who may have been uninterested in establishing ethnic politics in the past. Rallying around specific issues affecting Arab Americans post-9/11, many have ended up with a stronger interest in addressing unjust policies that relate to the Arab world, and thus mobilized around transnational and sometimes global issues (Abdelhady, 2011a).

Transnational attachments of Arab Americans continue to be visible in post-9/11 political climate. However, as Howell and Shryock (2003, p. 459) note.

In the post-9/11 era, transnational ties that connect the US to Arab and Muslim countries will be acceptable only insofar as they strengthen sites of belonging and social reproduction that are located in America (in the form of “ethnic communities”) or are subject to US sovereignty (in the form of allied regimes).

This observation holds true in understanding the transnational involvement of Arab Americans today. Almost 10 years since 9/11, the pro-democracy movements sweeping many Arab countries today have garnered much support from Arab Americans who are pushing for a stronger support from the United States towards the political transformations taking place in their homelands (Abdelhady, 2011b). Seeing these transformations as threats to the political and economic stability in the region, and by association American interests that are protected by a number of dictators supported by the United States, the American government was slow to express its support to these transformations and in many instances ignored the mobilized efforts of Arab Americans who wished to alter the lukewarm support. Rallying in support for democratization movements in the Arab world, Arab Americans established new ethnic organizations but more importantly joined forces with others that have a more general commitment to peace and justice issues. Groups of Arab Americans that have previously disengaged from political activity in the United States (such as Yemenis, Libyans, and Syrians) partly as a result of the inhospitable climate for Arab Americans post-9/11 are expressing their transnational interests by attempting to impact the US policies towards the Arab world. Importantly, their transnational activities are taking place alongside a more inclusive strategy that aims at engaging with American (mainstream) organizations (such as political parties, colleges and universities, and civil rights organizations). To many Arab Americans, the pro-democracy movements in the Middle East are taken as significant events that can potentially alter the position of Arab Americans in American public life (Abdelhady, 2011b).

## Theoretical Constructs in Understanding Arab American Experiences

Analyses of immigrant incorporation usually emphasize two contradictory trajectories that can be experienced by immigrant groups. On the one hand, assimilation—defined as incorporation into a middle class white majority through social mobility, language absorption and intermarriage—is considered the end goal of incorporation and is both desirable by the immigrant group and the host society. On the other hand, proponents of multiculturalism—who tend to emphasize the multiple paths to incorporation, minoritization, and discrimination—believe that immigrants are not likely to relinquish their ethnic identities and ways of life that add to enriching the fabric of host societies. To a large extent, the Arab American experience has been analyzed within these two frameworks. With very few exceptions, analysts of the Arab American pioneer generation often paint a picture of quick assimilation into a White middle class mainstream. Their Christian religion and desire for material gains, coupled with restrictions on ethnic replenishment are often cited as reasons facilitating their assimilation and adoption of American attitudes and lifestyles. Analyses of later generations often emphasize the ways immigrants from Arab countries gained or strengthened their identification as Arabs, and constructed and maintained an ethnic community in their new settings. Post-9/11 narratives tend to emphasize the nature of political and social exclusion faced by Arab American and in the process demonstrate the ways through which they are precluded from being considered full citizens. While the transnational aspect of the Arab American community (or the mutual strengthening of ties cross the boundaries of homeland and host society) has been traced to the pioneer generations and has been used to describe political participation in subsequent generations, the global effects of 9/11 lead us to draw more emphasis on the global context of reception that shapes the contemporary Arab American experience. The global context, best understood within the framework of diaspora (Abdelhady, 2011a) brings our attention to processes of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion that complicates our understanding of immigrants' communities and worldviews. Importantly, the framework of diaspora highlights forms of identification and community building that move beyond traditional groupings that may be based on ethnicity, nationality, or religion.

### Treading Between Assimilation and Ethnicity

The assimilation of Arab Americans prior to 1967 is well documented in the literature. Suleiman (1999), Naff (1994), Hooglund (1987), Abraham (1994), and Naber (2000) all agree that early waves of Arab settlers in the United States were Christians who tended to assimilate to the predominantly white American middle class strata, even if at times retaining some distinctively Arab (also read Old World) characteristics such as food, religious behavior, family ties, and language. The newcomers

exhibited a lack of ethno-political identity as their identities were rooted in family, regional, and religious affinities. Kayal (1995) explains that for many of the newcomers, “Arab” was a designation that referred to Ottoman Turks, and that Arab identification “marked them as backward, inferior, non-Christian and hostile to the United States,” that they had little desire to preserve ties to their old world and its heritage (Kayal, 1995, p. 252).

The sojourning aspect of early Arab immigrants may have curtailed their assimilation to American society as it strengthened ethnic ties. For example, Suleiman (1999) notes that most newcomers relied on ethnic networks to start their peddling activities. Their interest in accumulating money quickly so that they can help their families and then return to their home villages made them uninterested in American life. Emphasis on the temporary nature of their life in the United States also meant that they were not interested in long-term investment such as buying homes, establishing families, or seeking different kinds of economic activities. Suleiman asserts that early arrivals only established connections with others who belonged to the same sects, town, or geographic region. They formed “residential colonies” especially in New York and Boston, and they strongly encouraged within-group marriage. More telling are the terms they used to distinguish between themselves and the larger American society. The Arab American community described itself as *Al-Nizala*, which means temporary settlement that is separate from and contrasted to “the Americans.”

Despite its appeal to the sojourning aspect of Lebanese immigrants, a number of authors emphasize that pack-peddling was the fundamental factor in the assimilation of Syrian–Lebanese in America (see McCarus, 1994; Naff, 1985; Younis, 1995). According to Naff (1985), peddling forced the early arrivals to learn English quickly because learning English was critical to their success. Peddling further enabled them to see the country and experience its way of life firsthand. As such, it served as a window to new ideas and values and raised the immigrants’ aspirations. Furthermore, Naff argues that peddling spared the early arrivals “a ghetto mentality” as it facilitated the acquisition of taste and manners of the larger society as well as the attainment of social acceptance. Thus, the success in trade and economic activities is emphasized as crucial in facilitating the assimilation of the Syrian–Lebanese to American society as it contributed to the continuous, multifaceted process of “becoming American” (Naff, 1985).

Traditionally the Arab American community has focused on assimilating into the United States mainstream instead of standing up and claiming their political power as a voting bloc. Perhaps the best evidence of this denial of identity is the long-term debate over whether members of the group should classify themselves as white or of Arab decent. Historically, many leaders in the community have campaigned for census surveys not to include an Arab-heritage checkmark, for fear of prejudice and exclusion from the mainstream (Samhan, 1997). For many immigrants being seen as indistinguishable from whites was a feat worthy of praise. To help accomplish this goal, a large portion of the group members even went as far as to make their

names sound more American and less foreign (Goffe, 1999). It was common for Mahmoud to become Mike and Hussein, Sam. Ahmad Shebbani, the editor of the Arab community magazine *Arabica*, says that this pattern is because “People don’t want to feel foreign. They want to imply ‘we are part of you’” (Goffe, 1999). Truzzi (1997) describes that as a result of becoming successful in their business and professions, many Syrian–Lebanese in the United States entered politics and also did well in government, as governors, representatives, advisors to the President, and so on. Their descendants, having been socialized in communities that were not affected by new arrivals due to migratory restrictions, lacked political connections to the Arab world and the pan-Arab mobilization that swept their homelands in the 1950s and 1960s. As a result, they reacted to developments in the Arab world “primarily as Americans and only secondarily as Arabs” (Naff, 1985, p. 21).

According to many analysts, the manner in which immigrants understood their position in American society is an important difference between Arab immigrants of the first and the second wave. While first wave immigrants believed that they were sojourners who do not belong to American society, second wave immigrants were permanent settlers who came with well-defined ideas of democracy and citizenship (Suleiman, 1999). Higher levels of education and social status also motivated new immigrants to participate in American society. Members of the second and latter waves of Arab immigrants either came as university students or were members of the educated elite in their home countries and were more diverse in terms of religion and national origin. More importantly, while economic factors were the most significant behind the migration of the first wave, social and political reasons drove many Arab immigrants of the second wave to the United States.

Civil society organizations reflect the politicization of the Arab American community over the different waves. The first wave of immigrants established a number of charitable societies that maintained group cohesion and ethnic ties. Members of the small elite in the first wave started organizations to improve the conditions of other members of the community, such as clubs to learn English, and to promote American ideals and mutual understanding. For example, the Syrian Society was organized, in 1892, for the purpose of:

Providing an educational and industrial institution for natives of that [Syrian–Lebanese] race, founded on Christian principles, by which they shall be taught the English language and such branches of learning and industry as may assist them to support themselves, and to become intelligent American citizens (Naff, 1985: 136).

The assimilatory mandate of the Syrian Society is clear. It was not until the second wave of migration, however, that community organizations started to promote participation in political or civic institutions, such as the Syrian Democratic and Syrian Republican clubs which were formed in the 1920s (Suleiman, 1999) which may be seen as strengthening political participation along ethnic terms.

## Multiculturalism, Ethnic Politics, and Transnational Connections

While the first wave of Arab immigrants did not face major obstacles to their reception in American society partly due to their shared religious background with other settled ethnic groups, post-1965 immigrants were Muslims who arrived to a political climate that essentialized them as fundamentalist, patriarchal, extreme, and violent (Cainkar, 2006; Merskin, 2004). Marking Arab Americans an outsider Other is best analyzed through the framework of multiculturalism as it highlights the retention of ethnic identity in the new society and the associated discrimination and exclusion that often accompanies such processes. In the case of more recent waves of Arab immigrants, their distinguishable religious identity plays an important role in defining their ethnic identity and also their exclusion from the American mainstream. Research on Arabs in the United States refers to the post-1970 wave of immigrants as one that rejects secularism and Westernization while being more committed to ethno-religious culture and community than earlier cohorts of Arab immigrants (Haddad, 1983, 1994). According to Haddad (1983), this new cohort is mainly composed of Muslim Arab migrants who wished to transfer their strong religious traditions to their new Western environment. As a by-product of the post-1970 Islamic revival, religious identities (both Muslim and Christian) in the Arab World have prevailed over national and/or Pan-Arab identities. Thus, the new Arab migrants tended to assign a more devotional role to mosques and religious organizations, compared with their secular American-born ethno-religious peers of the second and third generation, whose implication in religious networks and mosques, if any, often assumed a social role of community binder (Haddad, 1983). The role of religious networks, especially among Muslim newcomers and their children is crucial in developing a sense of collectivity whose identity is clearly differentiated from the mainstream society (see, for example Jamal, 2005). Such collectivity is constructed through communal institutions that mark social boundaries between the minority group and the mainstream.

Beyond the internal dynamics of the community itself, a number of scholars stress that the racial formation of Arab Americans reflects American foreign policy interests in the region and thus political and economic events in the Middle East are important factors that we ought to take into account when investigating Arab American identity and political mobilization (see, for example Cainkar, 2006; David, 2007; Salaita, 2005). Cainkar (2006, p. 271) argues that “global events and the political agendas of powerful institutional actors” worked to increase the social distance and group distinctiveness for Arab Americans, and thus strengthening Arab American ethnic identities:

Racial projects that moved Arabs into subordinate status began to clearly mark the Arab American experience in the last 1960s and provided momentum for the foundation of pan-Arab American activist organizations. In the 1990s, when Islamist challenges to American global hegemony became more powerful than Arab nationalism, these essentialized constructions were extended to Muslims and became grander; they became civilizational.

The “clash of civilizations” thesis has been used to justify racial profiling, mass detentions and deportations, and war against Muslim countries. The stigmatization of Arabs as the enemy/Other triggered the political mobilization of Arab Americans. Riemers (1992) notes, many Arab Americans felt victimized by negative media portrayals and social prejudice which motivated them to join or establish Arab Americans organizations. Stigmatized as a result of the political climate that demonized Arabs vis-à-vis Israel, Arab Americans tended to share the pan-Arabist identity politics of the Arab world at the time. The most notable Arab American organization that emerged in late 1967 is the Arab American University Graduates (AAUG). The transnational mandate of the organization was clear:

There was special emphasis on the need to contribute the intellectual and professional skill of the Arab-American community to the fundamental transformation and development of the Arab world. The development of an accurate and scientific alternative literature, and an educational-informational program to challenge Zionist distortions and misinformation about the Middle East, were also seen as crucial. Furthermore, a viable national organization would leave the individual Arab-American less vulnerable, less isolated, and would promote cooperative efforts among the community (AAUG, 2001).

Similar to many other organizations that followed, the emphasis of the AAUG was to mobilize Arab Americans towards affecting change in the Arab world and defend against the negative portrayals of Arab Americans in the United States.

Ethnic organizations also reflect the strengthening of Arab American identity post-1967 as they started to develop as pressure groups. These organizations may have intended to reflect the strengthening of ethnic identification of the community and the growing transnational interest as well. Most prominent among these organizations are the Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, which was formed to oppose media stereotypes and negative coverage of the Arab–Israeli conflict, the Arab American Institute, which focuses on affecting foreign policy through lobbying, and the Association of Arab American University Graduates, which was more interested in raising public awareness on Arab and Arab American communities and culture (see Majaj, 1999; Suleiman, 1994). Since these groups were more interested in educating the American public on Arab culture, they were fairly limited in their ability to provide a sense of cohesiveness that is important for maintaining an Arab American ethnic group. After 1967, however, the narrative of Arab American identification shifts. Many Arab immigrants arrived with an already politicized identity of Arab nationalism and political dispossession following the 6-day war. For many, their political identities also meant an opposition to the US foreign policy relating to the Middle East.

Many studies show that, for the descendants of the first wave of immigrants, political interests focus on civil rights and discrimination (Haddad, 2004; Howell, 2000; Nagel & Staeheli, 2004). More recent arrivals, however, focus on homeland issues related to the Arab–Israeli conflict (Howell, 2000; McCloud, 2003; Shain, 1996). Despite this analytical division, it is important to note that various studies point to the diversity in political attitudes among Arab Americans. While political exclusion and discriminatory US policies in the Middle East provide a source for ethnic pride for many Arab Americans, differences in migration experiences, national

origins and religion inhabit a common political agenda and forestall collective action among Arab Americans (Wald, 2009). Nonetheless, the sparse empirical data reveal low levels of politicized ethnic identity among Arab Americans and continuing differences associated with religion and date of immigration (see, for example Barghouti, 1989 on political divisions related to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and Sandoval & Jendrysik, 1993 on attitude variations related to the first Gulf War).

The transnational involvement of more recent Arab activists, however, continues to be seen. These transnational attachments signify that concerns with the Arab world and national integration in the United States are intertwined while simultaneously informing immigrants' political activism. Arab Americans maintain transnational ties with family and friends and may also engage in philanthropic and social activism that relates to the Arab World. At the same time, their transnational engagement does not preclude engaging in the US politics to address issues of discrimination, demand inclusion within the United States, and challenge the US governmental policies and attitudes of Americans towards Arabs and the Arab World (Nagel & Staeheli, 2004). For many Arab Americans, transnational involvement is important to their desire to be active members in their newly adopted country. Some focus their activities on ethnic organizations and politics as they wish to foster ethnic political mobilization for Arab-related issues. At the same time, many participate in mainstream organizations and cultural arenas as they wish to present Americans with positive role models of Arab Americans who are not threatening to the mainstream or challenge these organizations to be more inclusive and multicultural. While working for the benefit of their homelands, ethnic community, and mainstream society, Arab Americans also engage with universal issues of rights and freedoms with the intention to bring about global changes that may indirectly affect their various communities (Abdelhady, 2011a). Recent studies of Arab Americans question the utility of ethnicity as a framework for understanding the political dispositions and identity narratives of Arab Americans altogether. While highlighting transnational attachments, Nagel and Staeheli (2004) and Abdelhady (2011a) illustrate the ways immigrants move beyond traditional basis for membership and identification (national origin, ethnicity, or religion). Instead of navigating the contentious terrain of homeland and host society, Arab immigrants express cosmopolitan forms of identification and membership that also shape their desire to be involved with social and political issues in their current environment.

## **Political Exclusion, Global Politics, and Diaspora**

Like other racial and ethnic groups in the United States, placing Arab Americans within the American ethnic/racial structure has been a source of debate. According to the 2000 census classification, individuals from North African and the Middle Eastern descent are classified as white/Caucasian, and 80 % of Arab Americans identified themselves as such in 2000 (De La Cruz & Brittingham, 2003). While this, together with their predominantly professional occupational status, English linguistic ability and overall socioeconomic success, may be seen as an indicator of

successful assimilation into the white middle-class in American society, the process of Arab American identification and communal belonging is more complicated. It should not be seen within a simple linear, one-way process of assimilation framework. Despite their successful integration, the state and media racializes these same individuals as essentially other, which leads to a contradictory placement of Arabs in American culture (Naber, 2000). At one level, the conflation in the media of the categories Arab, Middle Eastern, and Muslim as mostly violent, backwards and irrational contributes to constructions of an inferior Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern culture and the perception of Arabs as non-white Other. Thus, according to Naber (2000) the media representations emphasize the exclusion of Arabs from American society despite their inclusion among the majority white population. Despite the original debate within Arab American activist circles on the issue of classification and identity, the events of 9/11 marked a new historical juncture and a change in the racial formation of Arabs in the United States (for a report on discrimination against Arab Americans in the aftermath of 9/11, see Ibish, 2003). The new racial formation led many to realize that Arab Americans are undeniably people of color (Naber, 2002). Following the proclaimed war on terrorism, the political exclusion of Arab Americans continues to escalate.

Needless to say, forms of Arab American exclusion preceded the events of 9/11. According to Naber (2008, p. 31), discrimination against Arabs in the United States after World War II was shaped as a result of the interplay between the US military, political, and economic expansion in the Middle East, negative media representations, and institutionalized government policies targeting Arabs which “coincided with the increasing significance of oil as a commodity to the global economy and the United States’ expanding interest in military and economic intervention in the Middle East.” The last 3 decades of the twentieth century were ones of increasing anti-Arab sentiments and policies in the United States as they also brought about further political conflict in the Middle East. The oil embargo in 1973, the Iranian revolution in 1979, the US intervention in Lebanon in 1982, the two Gulf wars in the 1990s, the US bombing of Libya in 1986, and Sudan and Afghanistan in 1998 reflect the US political involvement in the region. These are also events that further strengthened anti-Arab sentiments in the United States and their exclusion from participating in American cultural politics.

Like any other racial and ethnic group in the United States, the political exclusion of Arab Americans took many negative forms. While specific policies, such as the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (commonly known as secret evidence law), highlight the legal discrimination that Arab Americans face, their political exclusion is harder to identify. For example, Arab American political analyst Zogby (1998) describes the negative lens through which Arab Americans are portrayed by political actors:

Sometimes, Arab Americans found that their mere existence had become a campaign issue. A few weeks before the 1985 mayoral elections in Dearborn, Michigan, every household received a campaign mailer from one candidate announcing in thick, one-inch black lettering his solution to the “Arab problem,” xenophobic concerns about the increase of Arab immigration into the city. Dearborn happens to be the city with the highest proportion of Arab Americans in its population—over 20 percent.

Furthermore, in the few incidents when Arab Americans managed to form a quasi-interest group, these groups were not well accepted, as evidenced by the rejection of campaign contributions from Arab Americans to Walter Mondale, Michael Dukakis and Hillary Clinton, all because of the politicians' fear of being connected to a "fringe" group (Hardy, Sentell, & Flores, 2001). This fear was perpetuated because the mainstream's view of Arab Americans was one of condemnation. Numerous accounts point to the ways the media and mainstream institutions stigmatize Arabs, which results in their exclusion from these institutions. Zogby (1998) cites an example:

ABSCAM scandal of 1980 as a sting operation that netted five corrupt congressmen and one senator on charges of bribery and influence peddling. But to many Arab Americans, ABSCAM had an entirely different meaning. We were already acutely sensitive to the stereotypes of Arabs held by many Americans. The FBI surveillance footage—showing an agent dressed as an Arab Sheik corrupting American politicians—fed into the worst of these images. That the FBI would use and thereby propagate such stereotypes left us feeling vulnerable and angry. Unfortunately, the operation also exposed how little real political power we had, and made it even harder for us to gain access to the political process.

Generally speaking, Arab Americans were seen as "Others" who threatened the whole, largely because any success story of an Arab immigrant was kept hidden since that immigrant identified herself as white (Goffe, 1999); therefore, the only experiences with Arabs recognized by the white community were interactions with unsuccessful and often unmotivated immigrants.

The limited interaction between whites and Arabs drastically changed following the political backlash from the events of September 11. Almost immediately after the attacks, FBI agents, under the order of President George W. Bush, requested that anyone of Arab descent come forward to be interviewed about possible connections to terrorist groups (Taylor, 2006). According to Bush, it was "unlawful" for any Arab immigrant to not show himself or herself. This proclamation resulted in 4,793 Arab American legal immigrants being questioned by the Department of Justice in just 1 year after September 11 (Sachs, 2002). Coupled with this staggering figure is the fact that the Arab American community saw 1,200 Arab and South Asian Muslim men detained or arrested within just 2 months (Amnesty International, 2002). Hate crimes against the group increased dramatically, up to 500 % (Withrow, 2006), leading some to characterize Arab Americans as a community under siege (Yonge, 2004).

Increased awareness of exclusion, discrimination, and othering motivated many to mobilize politically and participate in combating existing stereotypes of Arab (and Muslim) Americans (see, for example Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009; Millard, 2008). Such efforts often triggered alliances and political participation that extended beyond ethnic communities and included other immigrants and nonimmigrants who mobilized around issues of general appeal such as those relating to social justice, discrimination, and equality in general (Abdelhady, 2011a). Moving beyond identity politics, Arab Americans are building alliances no longer based on traditional understandings of identity and communal belonging, but now extend to issues of

universal concern and broad global appeal. These forms of identifications and community alliances are best understood through the framework of diaspora, as it allows viewing identities and communities as flexible entities that are formed through processes of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, rootedness and transitory realities, and local and global attachments. As processes of globalization intensify around the world, new forms of diasporic cosmopolitan identities also spread. Our understanding of the experiences of Arab Americans would benefit from incorporating these aspects of globalization in order to understand the ways in which ethnic belonging is changing in the contemporary world.

## Contesting Singular Narratives

Like other groups in the United States, painting a picture of community life and history for Arab Americans is not an easy task. Historians provide contradictory analyses of early experiences as they tend to emphasize the aspects of community life that may resonate best with their ideological and political affiliations. Historical evidence may itself be incomplete, making it even harder to examine different aspects of incorporation and participation in American society. For example, Naff (1985, 1994) perceived of the early Arab immigrant experiences as one resulting in assimilation and integration into a white middle-class strata of American society. Bawardi (2009), on the other hand, perceived that experience as one of transnational connections centered around homeland politics and a rising political consciousness that was mostly concerned with homeland affairs. It is somewhat clear that Naff saw assimilation as a desirable process that prioritized Americanization over other aspects of community life. Gualtieri (2010) moved beyond such prioritization of Americanization and whiteness of Arab Americans to describe the ways the process of assimilation was never complete. She emphasized the ways assimilation was fraught with ethnic exclusion and discrimination from the early waves. The two dominant strands of immigration literature—namely assimilation and ethnic pluralism/multiculturalism—frame the specific questions and aspects of community life that scholars set to analyze and thus limit the kinds of analyses they provide.

In addition to historical and ideological limitations, diversity within the community itself further complicates any attempts to describe the experience of Arab Americans within singular narratives of either assimilation or ethnic identification. Among the many differences that shape the characterization of the Arab American community (see, for example Naber, 2000), generational differences shape identification, perceptions of assimilation and integration, levels of religiosity, and relationship to the homeland in many different ways. First-generation Arab Americans are likely to see themselves as immigrants who do not fully belong to their host society. Whether the same is true for the second and third generations is debatable at best. Furthermore, not all who fall within the objectively defined Arab American category agree on the meaning of the word Arab, and instead tend to define their

ancestry in national terms (tracing it back to nation-states that indeed belong to the contemporary Arab World). Such differences and disagreements make it difficult to define the community under study, therefore instituting challenges for scholars to access respondents who likely portray the diversity of the community.

It has to be noted that such problems are not unique to the Arab American community, but reflect shared experiences of other ethnic groups when attempting to portray a community within singular narratives that stress only one aspect of community life and history. Since the goal is not to reach agreement among scholars of the Arab American experience concerning the “real” nature of the community, it remains important to highlight the diversity of experiences. There are often contradictory aspects that shape communal boundaries and identities. Focusing on diversity and internal contradictions or contestations would allow scholars to provide more comprehensive analyses as well as more nuanced descriptions of the dynamics of ethnicity and belonging in a changing context.

## Conclusion

Transnational linkages, while not new, have taken on new meanings as a result of immigrants’ ability to maintain strong economic, political, and social ties with their homelands as a result of inexpensive modes of communication and transport (Cohen & Vertovec, 1999). Castles and Davidson (2000, p. 127) hold that in the age of globalization “assimilation is no longer an option because of the rapidity and multidirectionality of mobility and communication.” In understanding Arab American transnational social and political activism, it is important to note that early arrivals also formed transnational organizations that took issue with events in the homeland (such as Ottoman persecution, ethnic rivalries, and the development of the social infrastructure). These organizations were intended to address issues in the homeland while strengthening social bonds within the community. Importantly, these organizations also worked to strengthen integration in the United States as they dealt with issues relating to immigration, English language acquisition, and voting (see Al-Qazzaz, 1979; David, 2007; Naff, 1985). Successful assimilation weakened the need for such organizations that were replaced by ones more political in nature and reflected the interests of newer cohorts of Arab immigrants.

Post-1967 waves of immigrants displayed a pronounced Arab ethnic identity that was shaped by domestic interests and the international political climate. The organizations that formed reflected the political interests of these groups of immigrants as they focused on the political mobilization of Arab Americans towards impacting American policy towards the community and its homeland. These organizations, however, did not reflect the diversity of the Arab American community (based on national origin, religious affiliation, age, gender, or general political interests) and for the most part failed to form an Arab American political identity and interest group. During short-lived instances when Arab Americans managed to form a coherent political group, their stigmatization and exclusion by the general political climate

worked to further disenfranchise them. The events of 9/11, however, represent an important disjuncture as it facilitated the mobilization of Arab Americans in face of mass detentions, deportations, and discrimination. Such large-scale mobilization facilitated the strengthening of transnational attachments that, while initially threatened, is on the rise given the major political transformations taking place in the region at present. The long-term implications of these transnational forms of involvement are yet to be determined.

While the identity of Arab Americans and their political involvement are shaped by a host of influences ranging from individual narratives, generational belonging, and involvement with homeland issues, it is rather difficult to arrive at a general understanding of how these individuals identify themselves or are identified by others. The theoretical perspectives discussed above shed light on the importance of accounting for waves of immigration, whether or not Arab Americans are immigrants, second or third generation, and how sociohistorical periods influence their identities and hence interactions with wider society and the institutions with which they interact. As such, understanding the relationship between membership to an Arab American community and health cannot take place without taking into consideration other factors such as age, class, and level of assimilation among other factors. Providing recommendations for mental health professional who provide services to Arab Americans, Erickson and Al-Timimi (2001) stress the importance of the providers' awareness of their own stereotypes of their clients and the need to interpret clients' behavior within the relevant cultural contexts in order to apply interventions that are most appropriate. Specifically, the authors call on mental health professionals who desire to work with Arab Americans successfully to gain awareness of their biases and assumptions about Arab Americans, identify their worldview and the cultural and socio-political factors that affect it, and determine the most relevant intervention strategies and techniques that suit their culture and experiences. The diversity in experiences and identity narratives among Arab Americans yield generalizing among members of the group an unfruitful and undesirable task for all those concerned about the well-being of the community members.

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