

From Silent Minority to Problem Minority: Middle Eastern Arabs and Muslims in the United States in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

This paper looks at the ways in which the post-9/11 so-called “War on Terror” affected communities of Middle Eastern origin in the United States, and how the deployment of a pervasive security apparatus to address internal threats deeply affected their civil rights and human dignity in the United States in the two decades that followed. It discusses how Arab and Muslim migrants to the United States in the twentieth century were placed in an “in-between” racial status that had grave repercussions on their quest for naturalization and assimilability to the American mosaic, arguing that their contested status in the United States predated the terrorist attacks of 2001. It finally asks whether national perceptions of Arab and Muslim communities in the United States as “problem,” rather than “model” minorities are bound to change, also in light of recent geopolitical developments.

Key Words: Arab and Muslim Americans; civil rights; naturalization and assimilation; twentieth and twenty-first centuries

The publication in July 2004 of the *9/11 Commission Report*—the 592-page long document of findings by the congressional body tasked by then-President George W. Bush to provide a “full and complete account” of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the circumstances surrounding them¹—provided conclusive evidence that the 9/11 attacks had been the result of government negligence on many fronts, including intelligence, diplomacy, and security, among others. One particularly perplexing finding was that the nineteen terrorists (all from Arab countries) that attacked New York and Washington had entered the United

¹ See <https://www.9-11commission.gov/#:~:text=Bush%20in%20late%202002%2C%20is,to%20guard%20against%20ofuture%20attacks.>

States legally on student, tourist, or business visas—their identities, motives, and whereabouts largely unknown to the U.S. authorities up to that moment. The American public found in the *Report*—an immediate bestseller (Warren 536)—substantial proof that the attacks of 9/11 had been the result of a colossal failure of national security and flawed immigration policies and demanded bipartisan congressional action to address those failures in the years and decades that followed.

The United States responded to the attacks of 9/11 by waging some of the longest wars in its history—all of them in faraway places. In 2017, for example, the United States had active antiterrorism operations in eighty countries around the world (Savell). At home, the U.S. government assembled, institutionalized, and maintained an unprecedented architecture of mass surveillance that contributed to a severe erosion of civil liberties in general, which targeted certain minority communities in particular—most notably minority groups of Middle Eastern origin.

Law enforcement's racial bias, which since the War on Drugs of the 1980s and 1990s had focused mostly on Latino and African American minorities (Alexander 120-24), was repurposed to target American Arabs and Muslims in particular, who soon became, in the words of Moustafa Bayoumi, the “the new ‘problem’ of American society,” two groups “virtually unknown to most Americans prior to 2001” and now holding “the dubious distinction of being the first new communities of suspicion after the hard-won victories of the civil-rights era” (*How Does It Feel* 2-3).

In this paper, I look at the ways in which the post-9/11 so-called “War on Terror” affected communities of Middle Eastern origin in the United States, and how the deployment of a pervasive security apparatus rendered participation in civic life and freedom of assembly highly problematic for these groups in the quarter century that followed. I discuss how the stereotyping of the “Islamic terrorist” conflated Orientalist and Cold-War era tropes of the “enemy within,” and how that image was quickly extended to include *all* Arab / Muslim—or Muslim-looking—individuals. I conclude by asking if the recent resurgence of Arab and Muslim American activism will endow Middle Eastern minorities in the United States with renewed social and political agency.

“They Hate Our Freedoms”: Who Are Arab and Muslim Americans

Nine days after the 9/11 attacks, then president George W. Bush delivered a now famous speech to Congress, in which he spoke avowedly for the entire nation: “Americans are asking [—he said—] ‘why do they hate us?’” and answering: “They hate our freedoms—our freedoms of religion, our freedoms of speech, our freedoms to vote, and assemble, and disagree with each other” (“President George W. Bush Address”). In Bush’s presumption of American innocence as opposed to the ene-

my's guilt, "they" was a coded marker to identify an adversary at large that went well beyond al-Qaeda, the actual perpetrators of the attacks. "They" very quickly expanded, by association, to all, or most, Muslims, both outside and *inside* the United States. In the months and years following the attacks, Islamophobes from all walks of life ignited a constant, high-intensity demonization of Arabs and Muslims in the United States. On the far right of the American political spectrum, many ended up blaming 9/11 on Islam itself (Ackerman 58).

In fact, the vilification of Arabs and Muslims in the United States predates the attacks of 2001. By the early 1990s, there was already much fertile ground for an all-out ideological attack on Arab and Muslim Americans. Its roots lay deep in the dynamics of the Cold War. Much of that ideology was based on crucial misunderstandings concerning the nature of Middle Eastern immigration to the United States, the vast majority of which, at least up to the 1960s, was not even Muslim.

The so-called "Arab Americans," approximately 3.7 million individuals according to the Arab American Institute, or 1% of the U.S. population,² represent a plural, culturally complex group, originally mostly of Christian background—but also including Muslim, Jewish, and secular people. They originate from a vast geographical area extending from the Middle East to North Africa and are united primarily by a common language. Only 25% of Arab Americans are Muslim, a fact that is little known to most Americans and that places the wholesale demonization of Arabs in the United States after 9/11 in an even more sinister light.

American Muslims, on the other hand, are harder to account for. The Pew Research Center estimates that there were about 3.85 million Muslims living in the United States in 2020, making up about 1.1% of the total population (Mohamed). If compared to Arab Americans, the ethnic mix of American Muslims is more complex: 75% are immigrants or children of immigrants from the Middle East, South Asia, Indonesia, and elsewhere, while the remaining 25% are African Americans (Dias). Only one quarter of U.S. Muslims are Arab. Demographic projections place Muslims in America at 2% of the national population by 2050, which would make Islam the second largest faith group in the country, potentially surpassing Jews (1.7% of the population), Buddhists, and Hindus (Mohamed).

Arabs came to America beginning from the mid-1870s, and by 1914 they were a small minority of approximately one hundred thousand individuals (Naff 2). Many became peddlers; others found work in factories; others still made a living as farmers. When the Johnson-Reed Quota Act of 1924 nearly ended immigration from the Middle East and Africa, there were Arab (then known as "Syrian") communities in cities large and small from New York to San Francisco.

The Muslim presence in the United States is more layered and complex. Whereas over 50% of today's foreign-born Muslims arrived in the United States only after 2000, in the wake of the 1965 Immigration and

² See <https://www.aaiusa.org/demographics>. The Arab American Institute, which defines itself as "the civic engagement arm of the Arab American community," tracks, through census bureau surveys, the demographic developments of America's Arab minority.

Nationality Act which removed de facto discrimination against Asians and other non-Western and North European ethnic groups, Muslims are by no means a recent addition to the American ethnic mix. There has been a continuous presence of Muslims in America dating back to colonial and slave trade eras. Tens of thousands of African Muslims came to America as slaves in the colonial and antebellum periods (GhaneaBassiri 16), and Islam emerged as a major element of identity formation in the early twentieth century among those African Americans who had escaped racial violence in the South and sought new beginnings in northern industrial cities through the Great Migration.

Today, Arab and Muslim Americans live in all states of the union, with significant concentrations in New York City (Brooklyn and Queens especially), California, Texas, Illinois, New Jersey, and Michigan (Haddad 9-10). The Detroit suburb of Dearborn, home to the world headquarters of the Ford Motor Company, began attracting Yemeni, Palestinian, and Lebanese immigrants in the 1910s (Gabriel) and has grown into a national center for Arab American life. Familiarly known as “the Middle East of the Midwest,” or “Little Lebanon,” and with over half of its 110,000 residents of Middle Eastern or North African descent (two-thirds of whom are now Muslim; see Warikoo), Dearborn is home to the Islamic Center of America, the nation’s largest mosque, and the Arab American National Museum.

While referring to “Muslim Americans” in this paper, I mainly refer to non-African American Muslims. When discussing the pre-1965 migration to the United States I mostly refer to “Arabs,” who made up the majority of migrants from the Middle East. When discussing post-1965 migration developments, I mostly use the more inclusive “Arabs and Muslims” label to reflect the increase of Muslim migrants from the Middle East and elsewhere. I avoid more technical acronyms of geographical origin at times found in specialist literature, such as MENA (Middle East and North Africa) or SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa).

Contested Whiteness

The history of Middle Eastern minorities in the United States is one of constant oscillation between assimilation into the White majority and denied civil rights. Neither White nor Black—the only racial categories for which naturalization was admissible up to the 1920s (Lucioni 17-19)—Arabs in America found themselves in a racial limbo where guarantees of equal social opportunities and equal protection under the law remained highly contested. In the first half of the twentieth century, Arabs were often seen as belonging to those “other” or “in-between” ancestries, like the Japanese, Chinese, and other Asian immigrants who—along with Native Americans—were excluded from citizenship by law.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which had declared Chinese immigrants ineligible for naturalization, had deep repercussions for many

non-European immigrant groups, including Arabs. In her seminal study of early Arab immigration, *Becoming American* (1985), Alixa Naff points out that peoples from the eastern Mediterranean (which included Syrians, Palestinians, and others) became directly drawn into the controversial relationship between national origin and naturalization when the U.S. Census Bureau classified them as “Asiatics” in 1910. Matters were further complicated for naturalization seekers of Arab origin the next year, when a Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization directive ordered court clerks to reject applications for first papers from “aliens who were neither white persons nor persons of African birth and descent” (Naff 253).

In the early twentieth century, “Syrians” were overtly discriminated against in specific parts of the United States, especially in the South, where prejudice ran high against Arab immigrants. John L. Burnett, congressman from Missouri in the first decade of the century, proclaimed Syrians to be the “most undesirable of the undesirable peoples of Asia Minor,” and supported the exclusion of Asians and restrictive literacy test for immigrants (Naff 249–50).

Discrimination against Syrian immigrants in America was not unlike discrimination against African Americans, since it often centered on race and racialization. But whereas for African Americans it pertained to key areas of civic life and participation—such as voting rights, education opportunities, and access to public spaces and services—discrimination against Arab immigrants hinged primarily on their right to naturalization, which in many ways is a precondition for all other rights. In the 1910s and 1920s, when Americans became most concerned about the “foreign element” in the country, many Arab immigrants had to fight through the court system—at times all the way to the Supreme Court in Washington—to claim their right to become citizens, amid an inconsistent and often contradictory web of statutes and practices that made it particularly hard for Arabs to be naturalized.

Up until World War II, Arabs found themselves in a vast gray area where citizenship was granted or denied based on discretionary decisions of the courts, which adopted “shifting standards of whiteness” on a case-by-case basis (Bayoumi, *This Muslim American Life* 49). In *Between Arab and White*, historian Sarah M.A. Gualtieri has thoroughly documented how naturalization decisions for Arab immigrants in the first half of the twentieth century depended on the assessment of their position within America’s racial hierarchies. Because at that time naturalization was limited by law to “aliens being free white persons, and to aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent,”³ the contest was a racialized one: for Arab immigrants, acquiring citizenship depended on successfully claiming that they were White, and assessment of their Whiteness was predicated on a complex range of criteria that depended on the ways in which each individual judge decided to frame the proceedings. These criteria included: “ocular inspection”

³ *Revised Statutes of the United States*, second edition (1878), section 2169 (see Gettys 70).

(i. e., determination of skin color), ethnological disquisitions over the applicants' belonging to the "Caucasian race," linguistic nitpicking over whether the applicants spoke an "Aryan language," whether "common knowledge" placed these individuals as White, and finally, arguments over what was actually meant in the notorious 1790 formulation by the U.S. Congress of "free white men" (i. e., debates over so-called "congressional intent"; Gualtieri 52-53).

In the 1920s, religion emerged as yet further ground of prejudice against Arab Americans, who were either discriminated against by Protestant Whites for being mostly Catholic, or were sometimes misidentified as Turks, and therefore Muslim. Epithets including "camel jockey," "black," or "dirty Syrian," and more often "Turk" are cited by historians as commonplace usage especially against children in that decade (Naff 251-52).

Some scholars have argued that the racial status of Middle Easterners in the U.S. was determined by a process of "selective racialization," a complex "hermeneutics of whiteness" according to which assessments of "racial performance" often prevailed over the application of pseudo-scientific categories of race as such (Tehranian 39). Middle Easterners in the United States were granted broader civil rights—including the right to citizenship—based on their willingness to assimilate to the rest of society, i. e., their readiness to submit to what John Tehranian has defined as a "racial dramaturgy" choreographed by the White majority (184). This entailed demonstrating a willingness to assimilate into the mainstream by westernizing their looks, giving up religious practices and other elements of their culture, and enacting a strategic covering of their Middle Eastern identity—a textbook case of racial passing.

Political Activism in the 1960s and 1970s

After World War II, in a period when the victories of the civil rights movement pushed dominant U.S. discourses towards emphasizing racial integration and, to a large degree, assimilation, Arab Americans began enjoying "a general proximity to whiteness and a sense of acceptance within white middle-class America" (Naber, *Arab America* 26), cementing their status as "model minority" within the larger American ethnic mosaic. The "model minority" paradigm entered a crisis in the second half of the 1960s, when the resurgence of Arab nationalisms, in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, drove Arabs in the United States, especially younger ones, to identity politics and pan-ethnic activism in response to the one-sided, pro-Israeli attitude of the U.S. government in that conflict. Amid the civil rights movement's intense activism of that decade, Arab American associations, and especially student organizations, promoted a swell of Arab American activism, openly protesting Israeli policies in the Middle East and raising public attention to the Palestinian question.

While pursuing separate political goals, which often differed from those of other minority organizations, Arab American activists used tactics that mirrored those of the civil rights movement. For example, during protests in and around Detroit following the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, Arab American auto workers successfully pressured the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) to divest its Israeli bonds and recognize its Arab American workers' positions on Palestine. Their reasoning drew analogies from Black militancy, claiming that they regarded the purchase of Israeli bonds "similarly as a UAW investment in racist South Africa would be regarded by black workers" (Pennock 1).

In *The Rise of the Arab American Left* (2017), Pamela E. Pennock has shown that, in spite of their differences in demography, histories, and racialization processes, Arab Americans' radical activism in the 1960s and 1970s shared significant similarities with the activism of other marginalized minorities of that period, such as Latino Americans and Asian Americans. Within sweeping political activism in the late 1960s, and "influenced by black nationalism and an escalating ideology of global solidarity among people of color" (Pennock 12), Arab Americans agitated not only for the Palestinian cause, but also for workers' rights, against urban renewal plans and the dismantling of ethnic neighborhoods, and to counter government surveillance and harassment (12).

Among all activist Arab American organizations, the Association of Arab American University Graduates (AAUG), established in 1967 shortly after the Arab-Israeli War of June 1967, quickly rose as the most prominent Arab American organization of the 1960s and 1970s, with a focus on promoting the Arab point of view in the United States and challenging the prevailing Orientalist stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims in America. Their radical advocacy of Palestinian nationalism in the American public arena, which they helped elevate to the status of a "premier universal human rights issue" (Pennock 24), was placed in the larger context of Third-World anti-imperialist solidarity, and specifically alongside the struggle, in the words of one of their early presidents, of "our Black Brothers in the United States" (Pennock 35).

The emergence of Arab American political activism did not go unnoticed, and people of Middle Eastern descent suddenly became the target of discourses and policies of exclusion, questioning the tenability of the White, assimilationist paradigm. Arab Americans were placed under FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) and CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) surveillance and debates emerged on the assimilability of Muslims to the "American Way of Life" (Kundnani 44-46). In the 1970s, the 1972 attack on the Munich Olympics by the Palestinian terrorist group Black September, the Yom Kippur War of 1973, and the subsequent oil crisis further exacerbated anti-Arab sentiment. The Iranian revolution of 1979 represented in many ways the last straw, when Islam in America became—in the words of Edward Said—synonymous with "bearded clerics and mad suicidal bombers [...] unrelenting

Iranian mullahs, fanatical fundamentalists, and kidnappers, remorseless turbaned crowds who chant hatred of the US, ‘the great devil,’ and all its ways” (47).

As international tensions grew between Arab nations and the United States, the cultural climate for Arab Americans continued to deteriorate in the 1980s. Conflicts in Lebanon and Libya, hijackings and other acts of terrorism abroad all heightened widespread suspicion and denigration of Arabs in America. Media and Hollywood depictions of Arabs grew increasingly hostile (Shaheen; Carosso). Government harassment and vigilante violence against Arab Americans escalated (Pennock 201). In the 1990s, the Clinton administration authorized law enforcement agencies to arrest without evidence and deport also “on the basis of secret evidence” selected aliens from eight Middle Eastern countries suspected of “abetting terrorism” (Kundnani 45). Further violation of human dignity and human rights was provided by the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, which introduced the doctrine of the “material support statute,” and became the basis for prosecution of Muslim Americans for expressing an “ideology” (47). These policies translated into practice notions of cultural essentialism that historians such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington had been promoting since the end of the Cold War: that the West and Islam were, in fact, incompatible, because they were based on opposite and entirely irreconcilable world views.

An iteration of specific modes of marginalization of minorities that have marked key moments in U.S. history—from slavery and racial segregation since the Reconstruction era, to anti-Semitism, to the backlash against Asian immigrants in the twentieth century and the recent criminalization of Latino migrants—this pattern of “assigning derogatory meaning to particular bodies distinguished by ethnicity, nationality, biology, or geography” is defined as *racialization* (Alsultany 208). Postulated on the assumption that “all Arabs are Muslims and Islam is a cruel, backward and uncivilized religion” (Naber, “Ambiguous Insiders” 52), the racialization of Arabs and Muslims—usually known as Islamophobia—is a form of cultural essentialism that creates “a race out of a religion” (Bayoumi, *This Muslim American Life* 56) by assuming that, by virtue of an inner, fixed cultural essence, Muslims are morally inferior and potentially violent.

After 9/11: Model Minority under Siege

9/11 was the perfect catalyst to raise America’s Islamophobia to a whole different level. As George W. Bush proceeded to declare the War on Terror as nothing short of a religious war, a “crusade” against “evil” (Bush, “Remarks”), the obvious enemy of this war became thousands, perhaps millions of Muslims around the world. At home, this resulted in the social construction of the Arab / Muslim / Middle Eastern minority

as related to terrorism, in a transitive logic postulating each Arab and Muslim as a potential threat to national security. Commentators—not limited to those on the right—pathologized Arabs and Muslims, whose critiques of America seemed to be proof of their conspiratorial thinking, and turned them, in the eyes of some Americans, into dangerous outsiders, no longer qualified for participation in U.S. society.

Hate crimes against Muslims—or those, like Sikhs, *perceived* to be Muslims—skyrocketed. By January 2002, four months after the 9/11 attacks, CAIR, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, reported that it had received 1,658 claims of discrimination, profiling, harassment, and physical assaults against persons appearing Arab or Muslim, a threefold increase over the prior year (Cole 47). A *USA Today* / Gallup poll from 2006 showed that 39% of Americans admitted to holding prejudice against Muslims and believed that all Muslims, U.S. citizens included, should carry special IDs—obviously a violation of civil rights under U.S. law (Grewal 8).

Congress, the FBI, the NSA (National Security Agency) and other governmental agencies acted on those biases. The first targets were non-naturalized immigrants. On October 25, 2001, six weeks after the attacks, the USA PATRIOT Act was promulgated, granting law enforcement sweeping authorities to detain noncitizens without charge for a week (and, in certain cases, indefinitely).⁴ By “circumventing the Fourth Amendment’s protections against unreasonable searches and seizures” (Ackerman 30), the PATRIOT Act and related legislation introduced a suspension of the ordinary legal order, a “state of exception” (Agamben 15) from constitutionally guaranteed protections that became America’s post-9/11 standard *modus operandi*. The strong arm of this exceptional state was the newly instituted Department of Homeland Security (DHS), a massive government apparatus devoted to countering domestic terrorism. In September 2002, the DHS enacted a Special Registration Program, the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS). It mandated that men aged sixteen to sixty-four from twenty-five countries (all majority-Muslim countries except one, North Korea), who were present in the United States or planning to enter on nonimmigrant visas, be interviewed under oath, fingerprinted, and photographed by a federal official. As 200,000 individuals underwent special registration, the DHS stated that these nationalities were singled out because they were deemed a risk to national security (Ackerman 263).

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Arabs and Muslims in America endured egregious forms of harassment: in the months after 9/11, the U.S. Justice Department detained tens of thousands of Muslim, South Asian, and Middle Eastern men through various programs, and thousands were deported for minor violations, such as an expired visa. At least a thousand were jailed without charges, tens of thousands of U.S. citizens of Arab and Muslim ancestry were questioned by the FBI, and hundreds of thousands were placed under surveillance. As of

⁴ An acronym for “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism,” the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 had the stated goal of dramatically tightening U.S. national security, particularly relative to foreign terrorism.

2004, at least 100,000 Arabs and Muslims living in the United States had personally experienced one of the various post-9/11 state security measures, which included: arbitrary arrests, secret and indefinite detentions, prolonged detention as “material witnesses,” closed hearings, the production of secret evidence, government eavesdropping on attorney-client conversations, FBI home and work visits, wiretapping, seizures of property, removals for technical visa violations, and mandatory special registration (Kundnani 63-64).

Extensive measures of surveillance and racial profiling of American Muslims and Arabs were deployed in almost all areas of public life, including airports, train stations, the workplace, and the media, spawning among these communities “[a] state of uncertainty and peril more common to refugees living on the borders of war zones and global migrants without documents” (Cainkar 3). Women wearing headscarves were especially at risk of harassment and discrimination, since, after 9/11, the hijab came to directly signify that the person wearing it was friendly with the enemy and therefore disloyal. In the ten years following 9/11, the FBI established a network of fifteen thousand informants, operating in mosques and infiltrating businesses and communities, thus “demonstrating the conditional nature of First Amendment protections for Muslims after 9/11” (Ackerman 31). Special digital surveillance programs were put in place by the NSA, with almost no resistance from the private telecom giants that granted access to their infrastructure (35), to spy on ordinary people in the United States and abroad. Code-named STELLARWIND, PRISM, UPSTREAM, and MUSCULAR, these post-9/11 digital surveillance programs especially targeted Arabs and Muslims in America and abroad (32-36) and hinged on the collection of data from the servers of the major telecom and web operators. PRISM, the largest of all, launched in 2008, allowed the NSA to access, without warrant, global and domestic data from Apple, Facebook, Google, Yahoo, and other tech companies, in a symbiotic interaction involving government and the social media and data giants that had emerged at that point in history.

Testing the Boundaries of Citizenship

In the summer of 2021, as the media was inundated with coverage marking the twentieth anniversary of 9/11, the American disorderly retreat from Afghanistan reminded the world that 9/11 and its fallout were not yet relegated to the history books. Although three U.S. Muslims now sit in the U.S. Congress and American Muslims are prominent in most walks of American life (from politics to academia, from the entertainment industry to sports, from the arts to business and beyond), the perception of Middle Easterners as a problem within the American mosaic still persists. Under Donald Trump’s presidency, aliens from Arab and Muslim countries, as well as Latinos and other

immigrants from Third World “shithole countries” (as per Trump’s infamous rendition of 2018; Dawsey) came under new, bigoted scrutiny. Trump had already capitalized on America’s latent Islamophobia in his presidential campaign of 2015–2016 when he had repeatedly called for a “Muslim ban,” a “total and complete shutdown” of Muslims entering the United States. Once in the White House, Trump enacted the ban, barring travelers from 13 mostly Muslim countries, from entering the United States. A ban Trump is yet again committing to in the 2024 presidential campaign, while his opponent Joe Biden alienates Arab voters in a key swing state such as Michigan because of his refusal to condemn Israel’s recent atrocities in Gaza (as of July 2024).⁵

Networks of Arab American and Muslim American organizations have been crucial in countering the burden of the post-9/11 backlash and helping to bridge some of the misunderstanding that separate Arabs and Muslims from the rest of American society. Although I lack the space for a detailed discussion of these groups (an online directory of charities and nonprofit organizations lists over 1,200 Islamic groups active in the United States, most appearing since the 1990s; Haddad and Smith 36), mention should be made of the Arab American Institute (AAI), an advocacy organization for the interests of Arab Americans, and of the above-mentioned CAIR, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, America’s largest Muslim civil liberties organization headquartered in Washington, D.C., promoting social, legal, and political activism among Muslims in America and, since 9/11, focusing on the political consequences of the War on Terror and the rise of Islamophobia.

As Moroccan American novelist Laila Lalami has recently claimed in the *New York Times*, “[o]ver the last three decades, the United States has repeatedly tested the boundaries of citizenship: when it built a warrantless surveillance system that targeted certain communities; when it debated changes to its immigration system; and when it elected to the presidency a man who promised a ‘total and complete shutdown of Muslims’ entering the country.” Quoting from personal experience, Lalami explained that “[n]early 30 years after arriving from Morocco, after building a life and family here, I still hear: ‘Go back home!’” Two decades after 9/11, America remains unwilling—as Nadine Naber has argued—to explore the “root causes” of its anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment, and its repercussions in the country’s never-ceasing military involvement in the Arab world and the racialization of Arabs and Muslims at home—in Naber’s words: “the global war on Arabs and the domestic war on Arab Americans” (“Including”).

Recent geopolitical developments confirm that the war—at home and abroad—rages on. Israel’s invasion of Gaza following the Hamas attacks of October 2023 has reignited the old playbook of unilateral U.S. support for Israel, leaving Arab and Muslim communities at home yet again in the throes of resurgent Islamophobia and deprived of political representation. A crucial voting bloc in swing states such as Michigan, Arab Americans

⁵ The ban was revoked by President Biden in 2021 on his first day in office, making good on one of his campaign promises.

appear now unwilling to continue to support Joe Biden in the 2024 elections, following the outrage they are experiencing at the president's unfettered support for the country and people of Israel (Salam).

Arab American life may be at a historical turning point. Post-9/11, the "invisible minority" paradigm seems to be superseded by growing activism from several fronts of the Arab and Muslim minorities. The hyperscrutiny of the War on Terror era has produced increased awareness by citizens of Arab descent of their minority status within American society. As Arab American culture, literature, and scholarship have recently emerged as an explicit choice to represent rather than be represented, so has political activism. In the years leading up to the 2020 census, Arab American political organizations lobbied for an "Arab American" ethnicity box to be added to the census form. They argued that only via official recognition as a minority could Arab Americans finally aspire to better social justice and true political agency, since it would open the doors to recognizing the community's special needs in areas as diverse as healthcare, political representation, and education. Although unsuccessful, the effort for census recognition did indeed establish a point of no return: a new quest for visibility, a pursuit of previously denied social and human rights, a claim for a rightful place in the long arc of the moral universe bending toward justice.

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