The Arab American Community in Detroit, Michigan by *Steve Gold*

The events of September 11, 2001, focused attention on Arab American communities. The Detroit area is home to more than 300,000 Arab Americans, one of the largest ethnic enclaves in the United States. Nineteenth-century immigrants from Syria and Lebanon were the first to arrive. With the increased demand for automobiles and the steel to make them at the beginning of the 20th century, more immigrants from the Middle East came to work in Detroit’s many factories. By 1916, the Ford motor company counted 555 Arab men among its workforce. The first Islamic mosque in America was established in Highland Park in 1919. The relationship between Arab immigrants and auto manufacturing endures. Next to Ford’s famous River Rouge plant is Dearborn’s “Arab village.”

Immigrants continue to arrive in Detroit, reuniting families that have been divided across borders and continents. Whether from Iraq, Yemen, or Palestine, they seek economic advancement and escape from the Middle East’s chronic violence. In 1990, more than one-third of Michigan’s residents of Arab origin had been born outside of the United States; about 40 percent had immigrated after 1980. Although all are Arab, their religious affiliations are diverse: Lebanese Christians; Sunni and Shiite Muslims; Palestinians and Jordanians who are Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and Sunni Muslims; Eastern rite Catholic Chaldeans; and Yemenis of different Muslim sects.
The Arab community is also socioeconomically diverse, but the 1990 Census showed them to be generally well-off as a group. College graduation rates are high, and comparatively few are unemployed or struggling on below-poverty incomes. Besides careers in the auto industry, Arab Americans also become professionals, and many are self-employed.

With their new visibility since September 2001, Arab Americans have experienced renewed negative attention. But this, too, has deep roots. Metropolitan Detroit has a long history of racial and ethnic violence, and Arab American residents have become well acquainted with discrimination and stereotyping—from ethnic slurs like being called “camel jockeys” to the more pernicious dominance of European traditions and standards in schools. Neither is this the first conflict in the Middle East for which Arabs were demonized. With a rich community life, Arab Americans have developed a range of organizational supports that provide succor in the face of the episodic but persistent hostilities they face in America.

**Recommended Resources**


