

AMEMSA FACT SHEET

Where does the term AMEMSA come from?

AMEMSA is a *political identity construction* grouping Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian communities together under shared experiences, and to build collective power.

These communities, despite being religiously, culturally, and linguistically diverse, share many common experiences of racial profiling, heightened scrutiny, government surveillance and other forms of oppression based on ‘guilt by association’ prior to, and heightened as the result of the events of September 11, 2001. These experiences continue to persist ten years later, with the growth of Islamophobia, media stereotyping, and the manipulation of the public for political gain. The term AMEMSA caught hold in the San Francisco Bay area in 2003, and is now widely utilized throughout the country by civil and immigrant rights leaders and advocates.

Other terms exist to position these groups and the region, such as MASA (Muslim, Arab, South Asian), SWANA (South West Asia and North African), and AMSA (Arab, Muslim and South Asian).

The Middle East as a term is problematic as it is not a precise geographical area like Europe or Africa and is not a term people in the region gave themselves. Rather, it is a term borne out of a colonial perspective.

Arabs themselves did not refer to their region as the Middle East until the colonial usage of the term became commonplace and remained in use. ¹

Who comprise AMEMSA communities?

Arab Americans:

- ◆ There are least 3.5 million Americans are of Arab descent.
- ◆ Estimates vary because the U.S. Census survey doesn’t specify “Arab” on the short form and population estimates are derived from the language questions on the long form, completed by far fewer respondents. For instance, Arabic-speaking persons who identify as Assyrian/Chaldean, Somali or Sudanese are not aggregated as Arab in Census reports.
- ◆ Arab Americans live in all 50 states, but two thirds are concentrated in 10 states; one third of the total live in California, New York, and Michigan.
- ◆ About 94% of Arab Americans live in metropolitan areas. Los Angeles, Detroit, New York/NJ, Chicago and Washington, D.C., are the top five metropolitan areas of Arab American concentration.
- ◆ Americans of Iraqi decent make up the majority of Arab Americans in Tennessee.
- ◆ The largest Palestinian populations are in California and Illinois.

The Civic Engagement Fund (CEF) supports AMEMSA organizations to increase their individual and shared capacities around issue areas of common concern; to build ownership around their own capacity development; and to better serve their communities through collective action.

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- ◆ There are almost as many Iraqis living in Michigan as there are living in California, even though California is 3.5% larger than Michigan.
- ◆ Arab Americans originate from culturally, geographically and religiously diverse countries. The Arab World consists of 22 countries in the Middle East and North Africa (part of the Arab League): Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. ²

Middle Eastern peoples:

- ◆ Some Arab Americans identify themselves as Middle Eastern, however the Middle East is a diverse region with multiple other ethnicities, cultures and languages (the five main language groups are Arabic, Kurdish, Hebrew, Persian/Farsi and Turkish).
- ◆ The Middle East is a loose term, not always used to describe the same territory. It usually includes the Arab

countries from Egypt east to the Persian Gulf, plus Israel and Iran. Turkey is sometimes considered part of the Middle East, sometimes part of Europe.

- ♦ Iran is not an Arab country. It descended from the Persian Empire and has a different language and cultural history than Arab countries. The dominant language in Iran is Persian/Farsi, not Arabic, although other languages are spoken there as well. 3

- ♦ Iranian immigration to the U.S. has been continuous since the 1980s. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of Iranians in the U.S. increased by 74 percent. The U.S. contains the highest number of Iranians outside of Iran.

- ♦ According to extrapolated U.S. Census data and other independent surveys done by Iranian-Americans themselves in 2009, there are an estimated 1–1.5 million Iranian-Americans living in the U.S., with the largest concentration—about 720,000 people—living around Los Angeles. 4

Diversity of Religions in the Arab World/Middle East

- ♦ Arabs practice many religions, including Islam, Christianity, Druze, Judaism and others. There are distinctions within each of these and some religious groups have created new identities and faith practices in the U.S. Although most Arab countries are predominantly Muslim, most Arab Americans are Christian, though this varies by region.

- ♦ Islam has a strong Arab influence,



as the religion's holiest places are in the Middle East, and the Quran was originally written in Arabic. 5

- ♦ Most Iranians are Muslims. Up to 95% belong to the Shi'a branch of Islam, the official state religion, and about 4 to 8 percent belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. The remaining 2% are non-Muslim religious minorities, including Bahá'ís, Mandeans, Yarsanis, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Christians. Iran is home to the largest Jewish community in the Muslim World. The Bahá'í people, Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority, is not officially recognized, and have been persecuted during its existence in Iran. 5

- ♦ More than half of Arabs who immigrated to the U.S. before 1950 were Lebanese, and 90 percent of them were Christian.

Arabs and Iranians in California

- ♦ California has the largest Arab American population of any U.S. state. There are approximately 715,000 Arab Americans living in California. The Arab and Arab American communities in

California have more than doubled between the 1990 and 2000 census periods. According to the Arab American Institute, the Arab community is represented in 56 of California's 58 counties, with significant populations in Los Angeles, San Diego, and the seven counties around the San Francisco Bay Area. The state's Arab/Chaldean ancestry population grew by an average of more than 60,000 in each decade. 6

- ♦ The largest community of Iranian descent in the U.S. resides in California, concentrated in the Los Angeles and Beverly Hills area. 7

- ♦ Estimates range from 700,000 to 800,000 of former Iranian nationals and their descendants residing in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. In common usage, the term usually refers to the proportionally larger Persian-American subset of Iranian immigrants, many of whom are second generation citizens. This area is now officially recognized by the City of Los Angeles as "Persian Square". 8

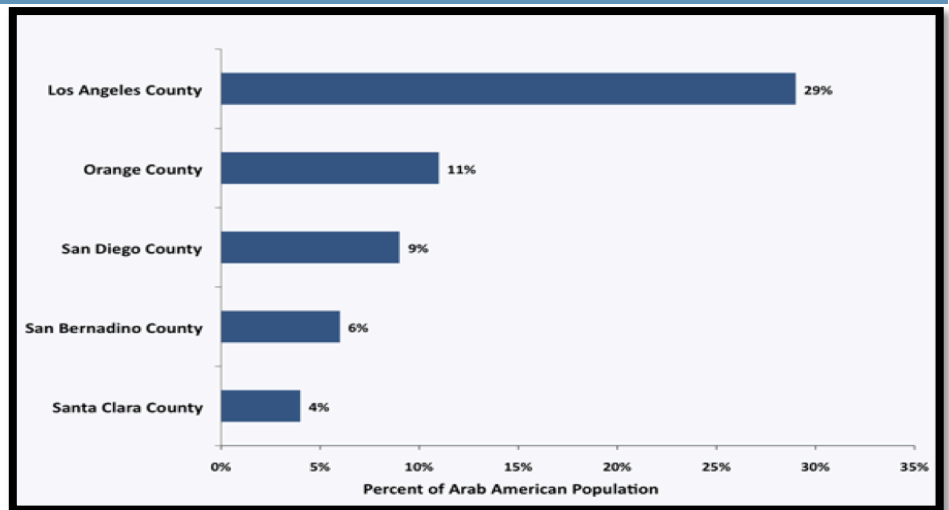
Muslims Americans:

- ♦ Muslim Americans are the most racially diverse religious group surveyed in the U.S.
- ♦ African Americans represent the largest racial group (35%) within the national U.S. Muslim population, more than a quarter of Muslim Americans classify themselves as “white,” and about one in five identify themselves as “Asian.” Another large group (18%) classifies itself as “other,” which may reflect identification with more than one racial group or people’s discomfort with conventional racial categories.
- ♦ The Nation of Islam is an African American religious group closely related to Islam whose history evolved in the 20th Century with some different practices than those followed by most other Muslims. Most African American Muslims in the U.S. are **not** part of the Nation of Islam. 9

Countries with Large Muslim Populations

There are an estimated 1.2 billion Muslims in the world. The ten countries with the largest Muslim population are: Indonesia (170.3 million), Pakistan (136 million), Bangladesh (106 million), India (103 million), Turkey (62.4 million), Iran (60.7 million), Egypt (53.7 million) Nigeria (47.7 million) and China (37.1 million). Of these countries only Egypt is an Arab country.

- ♦ Most Arabs are Muslims, but most Muslims are not Arabs.
- ♦ Of the total Muslim population, 10-13% are Shia Muslims and 87-90% are Sunni Muslims. Most Shias (between 68% and 80%) live in just four countries: Iran, Pakistan, India and Iraq. 10



To be Muslim American ...

“Addressing the divides, be they historical, fabricated, or arbitrary, will be an essential stage in the evolution of our community, an important step in the realization of our agenda. It is an exciting time to be an American. It is a wonderful time to be a Muslim. It is a fantastic time to be a Muslim American. Instead of seeing our differences as negatives, we can experience the full scope of being Muslims in America.”

Tayyibah Taylor, Ph.D.

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world’s Muslims, 80% of the world’s Sikhs and 90% of the world’s Hindus live within South Asia.

- ♦ The Asian Indian population in the U.S. has reached 2,843,391, a 69.37 percent increase from 2000. California’s Indian population climbed 68 percent from 2000 to 2010, making it by far the largest Asian group in CA. 11
- ♦ Sikhism is the world’s fifth largest religion with 25 million adherents worldwide. 99 percent of people wearing turbans in the U.S. are Sikhs from India. Sikhs cover their uncut hair with a turban, following a religious tenant.

- ♦ It is believed that there are at least 500,000 Sikhs living in the U.S., of which more than 120,000 are in Southern CA. 12

- ♦ The Afghan population in the U.S. is around 300,000. While 30,000 reside in Northern Virginia, approximately 65,000 Afghans comprise the diaspora community based in the San Francisco Bay Area. 13

South Asian peoples:

The South Asian region encompasses the states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives. Afghanistan is sometimes positioned within the South Asian region. This region holds great religious, cultural and linguistic diversity, for example about 30% of the

Select Factors Influencing AMEMSA Peoples Migration to the U.S.

Arab

Yemeni men have been leaving their country for centuries to find work in other parts of the world and support their families back home. By 1890, there were a small number of Yemenis in the U.S., and a handful served during World War I. ¹² The first significant number of Arab immigrants came between 1880 and 1920 during the Great Migration, when more than 20 million immigrants entered the U.S. More than 95,000 Arabs came from Greater Syria (present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Israel), and by 1924, there were about 200,000 Arabs living in the U.S. This slowed down drastically because of restrictive immigration laws passed after World War I. Since the 1970s, the number of Arab Americans has increased rapidly due to a change in these laws, and because of wars and economic policies in some Arab countries. ¹⁴

The majority of the six million people of Palestinian descent live in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon (a total of two and a half million), the autonomous territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (two million), Israel proper (approximately 750,000), or the U.S. (approximately 200,000). The greatest wave of Palestinian immigration into the U.S. began after the Six Day War in 1967 and has continued to the present, although it peaked in the 1980s. By 1985 the Palestinian American community was estimated at approximately 90,000; by the end of the decade, the community had nearly doubled. ¹⁵

During the early 1970's, Lebanon witnessed a series of political and economic unrest that exploded into a seventeen-year civil war in 1975. In 1982 the Israeli Army invaded Lebanon and occupied the southern part of the country until 1997. Many Lebanese families left the country seeking a more secure life in Europe, Australia, Canada and the U.S. ¹⁶

Iraqis began fleeing their country in large numbers during the 1990's due to a deteriorating economic and political climate. The heavy cost of the 10-year war between Iraq and Iran in the 1980's; the 1991 Gulf War; the 12 years of economic sanctions that followed; and the repressive regime of Saddam Hussein led to a large wave of Iraqi immigration, which reached its peak in the 1990s.

The number of Iraqi immigrants in the U.S. tripled between 1980 and 2007, from 32,121 to 102,000. Most of this growth occurred during the 1990s. However, Iraqis still constitute less than 0.5 percent of all immigrants in the U.S. Although the U.S. has committed to accepting higher numbers of Iraqi refugees as a result of the war, the actual number of those admitted into the U.S. does not reflect this commitment. ¹⁷

African

During the slave trade, thousands of Africans were captured and sold into slavery. Although scholars and writers differ in terms of how many millions were captured, there is some agreement that at least **10%** were Muslims. We now know that African Americans constitute at least one-third of the Muslim community, and for this and other related issues, it is important to acknowledge this aspect of the Muslim heritage. ¹⁸

Immigration from Sudan and Somalia to the U.S. paralleled immigration from some other Arab countries. Between the 1950's and 1980's, a few came as students. ¹⁹

Over the past decade, State Department officials have increasingly shifted their focus toward Africa as wars there have displaced millions of people. The end of the cold war has resulted in a sharp decline in refugees from the former Soviet Union and Vietnam. Africans are among those filling the gap.

State Department statistics show that Africans made up 3 percent of the refugees resettled in the U.S. in the 1990 fiscal year. By 2001, that figure was nearly 30 percent.

The pace of refugee resettlement has slowed sharply since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Thousands of refugees are awaiting security clearance because they are fleeing countries like Somalia and Sudan, which have been accused of sheltering terrorists. Even so, State Department officials say they hope to resettle more than 1,000 Somalis by September 2011. ²⁰

In the 1990's, the number of individuals resettled into the U.S. increased dramatically as people were escaping internal conflicts, wars and starvation caused by national and political factors. The most significant Sudanese wave of immigration occurred in the

1990's, when decades of civil war reached a climax. The Somali civil war and starvation devastated the country in the 1990's and brought a larger number of refugees to the U.S. 21

Middle Eastern (Iranian)

Iranian are a relatively new population whose migration to the U.S. was concentrated around the years of the Islamic Revolution (1978-1979). Between 1980 and 1990, the number of foreign born from Iran in the U.S. increased by 74 percent.

The number of Iranians granted lawful permanent residence peaked in 1990, with an estimated 24,977 Iranians admitted. From 1980 to 2004, more than one out of every four Iranian immigrants was a refugee or asylee.

Although Iranians have lived in the U.S. in relatively small numbers since the 1930s, a large number of Iranian-Americans are immigrants to the U.S. after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Between 1978-1980, the average number of Iranians entering the U.S. annually increased to more than 100,000. 22

Muslim

Immigration of Muslims to the U.S. during the Great Migration was mostly from the Arab world. These immigrants were peddlers or laborers in manufacturing plants, settling at first in New York, and then migrating to the Midwest. The oldest mosque in America, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, was established by this wave of immigrants in the late 19th century.

As part of the U.S. campaign against the Soviet Union, thousands of university students from the Muslim world were invited to enter the U.S. These people, referred to as "children of the Cold War," were greatly affected by the U.S. and proceeded to build institutions seeking attention and support in the name of Islamic solidarity and Islamic survival in American society. This moment in Muslim history in the U.S. marked by both domestic and international circumstances, created interesting dynamics. Domestically, the migration of blacks from the South coincided with the arrival of Muslim immigrants from the Middle East, South Asia, and Eastern and Southern Europe. Resulting from this encounter was the development and rise of the Nation of Islam in the 1930s and the creation of Muslim student organizations across the country. 23

South Asian

In 1907, around 2,000 Indians, including Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, worked alongside other immigrants from China, Japan, Korea, and Italy on the building of the Western Pacific railway in California. Other Indians worked on building bridges and tunnels for California's other railroad projects. As the demand for agricultural labor increased in California, Indians turned to the fields and orchards for employment.

While all Indian immigrants faced racial prejudice, Muslims from the subcontinent were subject to added prejudice against their religion. Among the common misconceptions of the Islamic faith that existed in U.S. during that time were those that viewed Muslims as polygamists and therefore not suitable people to be allowed to enter the country; there were also calls for the expulsion of Muslims already in the country. Expulsions of Indians from the communities within which they worked were also attempted by other Euro-American workers. The Asiatic Exclusion League (AEL) was organized in 1907 to encourage the expulsion of Asian workers, including Indian Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.

Since Pakistan only came into existence in 1947, any documentation of the life of Pakistani Americans can technically only commence from that year. However, it should be noted that Muslim immigrants from India and the region that is now Pakistan entered the U.S. as early as the eighteenth century, working alongside Hindus or Sikhs in agriculture, logging, and mining in the western states of California, Oregon, and Washington. 24

Sikhs have been in the U.S. for over 100 years. Sikhs arrived in North America in 1897 and played a pivotal role in the opening of the Western part of the U.S. and construction of the Panama Canal in 1904. However, most came in the mid 1980s, to escape persecution in India during the 1984 Anti-Sikh Massacres, which reported a death toll between 10,000-17,000 according to human rights organizations and newspapers reports.

Early Afghan immigrants to the U.S. tended to be from wealthy and professional classes and were relatively educated. Large numbers of Afghan refugees began arriving in the U.S. in 1980 in the wake of the Soviet invasion. Some were officially designated as refugees, while others were granted political asylum. Others arrived through a family reunification program. About 2,000 to 4,000 Afghans arrived every year until 1989, when the Soviet Union withdrew its troops. 26

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