

The American Interventions in the MENA Region Before 9/11

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Arabs in America do not constitute a monolithic group; the details about their ethnic and racial background are the keys to a clear understanding of the Arab American identity. This research explores the complicated interplay between interventionist US foreign policy and Arab immigration from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Although bilateral relations between the US and the countries of the MENA region have always been characterized by a power imbalance that has also permeated the religious, economic, and political contexts, this has not dissuaded Arab immigrants from targeting the US in pursuit of economic stability. This paper first addresses American interventions in the MENA region in the pre-9/11 era. Then, it investigates the motivations behind Arabs' decision to move from their countries to the US. Finally, through the application of Henri Tajfel's social identity theory, it analyzes the attitudes developed by Arab Americans within American society.

Despite its short history of discovery, settlement, growth, and development, the United States of America could spread its Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Space Force, and Coast Guard forces in countries from which it accepts immigrants to construct its population and national identity. The American army invasion was spread beyond the Asian and European continents. It set its forces even in the MENA region. The emergence of the United States as a world power is what shaped the US national identity and oriented its nature from civic to ethnic. The focus on ethnicity and the individuals' background did not affect immigration. Reversely, immigration from the MENA region is continuing to the US.

The US interest in the MENA region was divided into two parts: first North Africa, then the Middle East. The US' first foreign policy in the MENA region goes back to the early 19th century with the Barbary war. It was a two-series war led by the US and its allies, Sweden and the kingdom of Sicily, against the North African countries: Morocco, Tunis, Algiers, and Tripoli, successively Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya nowadays. The war aimed to reach an agreement on a maritime dispute. At that time Morocco was the only independent empire while the rest of the North African countries were still under the Ottoman empire's control. In the 19th century, pirates had an effective presence in the Mediterranean

Sea². With the absence of a solid diplomatic maritime relationship between the Mediterranean countries and sending countries of ships, there was a continuous war. A lot of pirates plied the sea and captured many ships. The nations of North Africa began to negotiate treaties with the countries that were sending the ships as a means of regulating maritime relations. These treaties of the day entailed large bribes. The ones who refused to give bribes or gifts were left to be captured by the pirates. The European governments believed that the pirates were sponsored by the Barbary powers³. The diplomatic relationships implied by treaties between the countries were custom-based. There was no actual written law that would regulate trading routes and maritime commercial deals. The first written Convention on the Law of the Sea was signed by 119 nations on Dec. 10, 1982⁴. It was the first UN agreement regarding territorial waters, sea lanes, and ocean resources. It is interesting to realize that since early history, the empires whose territory opened on the sea could create boundaries to foreign ships and organize customary ways which may have been considered as their territorial sea rules.

Before the 19th century, the Barbary pirates were not a serious threat. Morocco was more interested in forging genuine diplomatic and commercial ties with Europe, whereas Algiers, the most powerful nation in North Africa, was preoccupied with its unreliable political situation. The first US maritime communication between the US and the Barbarians was regulated by Britain as the American colonies were still under British control. So, the British and the US colonies were using the same vessels and used to have the same regulations passed in relation to the Mediterranean Sea. After the independence of the thirteen colonies, Britain warned the Barbarians that the US is not anymore under its rule, which would have made the American vessels a target to the Barbarians in case both sides do not reach a compromise and cooperate for a treaty⁵. As the protection alliance with France was rejected by the French government, the US started witnessing the capture of its vessels. In the mid-1780s, the first American vessel was seized by the Algiers

2 Woodward, G. Thomas. "The Costs of State-Sponsored Terrorism: The Example of the Barbary Pirates." *National Tax Journal*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2004, pp. 599–611. Retrieved 30 April 2021, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41790233

3 Ibid.

4 "UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE LAW OF THE SEA." *International Legal Materials*, vol. 21, no. 6, 1982, pp. 1261–1354. Retrieved 30 April 2021, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20692526

5 Woodward, G. Thomas. "The Costs of State-Sponsored Terrorism: The Example of the Barbary Pirates." *National Tax Journal*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2004, pp. 599–611. Retrieved April 30 2021, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41790233.

pirates. Some of the vessels were in the possession of Tripolitans before reaching Algiers, which made both sides negotiate for their own.

During his presidential term, Thomas Jefferson deployed the American naval force in the Mediterranean Sea to bring back the American honor of power as well as to protect neutral commerce against the Great powers Britain and France⁶. According to James R. Sofka Jefferson had three main foreign policy plans: to secure the national trading routes, to protect the natural rights of commerce, and to build a naval force to protect its interest among the Great Powers⁷. As a response to the captured ships, the American Congress constructed big frigates and sent them to the Mediterranean Sea to fight the pirates after which the pirates were suppressed and no longer threatened American and European vessels.

Section two article 1, of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea states that:

1. The sovereignty of a coastal State extends, beyond its land territory and internal waters and, in the case of an archipelagic State, its archipelagic waters, to an adjacent belt of sea, described as the territorial sea.
2. This sovereignty extends to the air space over the territorial sea as well as to its bed and subsoil.
3. The sovereignty over the territorial sea is exercised subject to this Convention and other rules of international law.⁸

This Mediterranean war was the first intervention of the US in the sovereignty of the MENA region. Despite the non-existence of the Maritime Law back in the time, the coastal Mediterranean countries created their maritime territorial boundaries. The war, however, also served American economic and political interests. The US government had the chance to restore its pride as well as guaranteed control over the Mediterranean maritime territories.

After the maritime intervention in North Africa that caused political and economic unrest, the US government was more interested in the Middle East. This interest marked a power imbalance that had also permeated the religious, economic,

6 Sofka, James, R. "The Jeffersonian Idea of National Security: Commerce, the Atlantic Balance of Power, and the Barbary War, 1786–1805." *Diplomatic History*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1997, pp. 519–544. Retrieved 14 May 2021, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/24913335

7 Ibid.

8 "UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE LAW OF THE SEA." *International Legal Materials*, vol. 21, no. 6, 1982, pp. 1261–1354. Retrieved 30 April 2021, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20692526

and political contexts. The first US-Middle Eastern sovereign interference was in Palestine, which created a huge religious conflict between Muslims and Jews.

Although the xenophobic feeling towards Muslims increased in the US, it does not reflect its beginning in the 9/11 era. The hatred towards Muslims was far from non-existent before 2001. Arab and Muslim hatred started during the war in Palestine. The war had two main phases; the first phase was in 1929 when there were a massacre and series of violent demonstrations in Palestine between Muslims and Jews. These conflicts were caused by the 1929 Riot Act⁹. The act stated that Jews can enter the Wailing Wall of Jerusalem which is protected by Muslims and gave them the ability to change the time of Muslim prayers according to the Jews' prayers¹⁰. The second phase was more provocative to Palestinians as it involved other countries' decisions to control the fate of their country. After the British mandatory left the Palestinian empire, the United Nations voted to divide the Palestinian territory into Jewish and Arab Sovereign states¹¹, on the condition that Jerusalem would stay an UN-controlled international zone. The vote was accepted by the Jewish and their ally the American leadership; however, it was opposed by the Palestinian and Arabic leaders. Despite the revolt of Arab states and the huge supportive protests by its citizens, the partition plan was adopted by the UN. Indeed, it was provocative for Arabs and Palestinians how the US, Israel, and other countries who signed the petition named the capital of Palestine *Jerusalem*, whose real name is *Quds*. One of the earliest extra-biblical Hebrew writings of the word Jerusalem is dated to the sixth or seventh century B.C. Its original form is *Yerushalem* or *Yerushalayim* in the Bible's Book of Joshua.

It was also critical how the US government supported Israel with military aid so that Israel maintains a military balance with its neighboring countries as well as gaining control over Palestine¹². Such an alliance resulted in the division of Palestine and the deconstruction of the country's sovereignty. The Oxford Public

9 "Jewish Refugees of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict". Middle East Web, Retrieved 4 May 2021, <http://www.mideastweb.org/refugees4.htm> The Riot Act of 1929 stated that Jews can enter the Wailing Wall of Jerusalem which is protected by Muslims.

10 Shaw Commission (1930), *Cmd. 3530, Report of the Commission on the disturbances of August 1929*, UK National Archives, For further information see the Commission's Wikipedia article at *Shaw Commission*

11 Jewish people were forced to leave their homes on the Jewish land, Europe, and the US. They were deprived of their houses to reside in Palestine, the newly designed home for them. Though, due to the conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, the UN Assembly adopted a resolution on 29 November 1947 recommending the adoption of the Partition Plan for Palestine. The plan divides both communities, each to become a sovereign nation. <http://www.mideastweb.org/refugees4.htm>

12 The US always supported the Israeli government with military aid as much as it serves its interests. https://ips-dc.org/why_the_us_supports_israel/

International Law¹³ defines sovereignty as a forbidden element to be interfered with by any other external government. It states that:

International internal sovereignty refers to the international rights and duties of a State that pertain to its ultimate authority and competence over all people and all things within its territory, and in particular to the correlated principles of territorial and personal jurisdiction and integrity, and of non-intervention.

The interference of the UN assembly, as foreign governmental entities, to divide Palestine into two parts did not ensure any good relationship between the Muslim Palestinians and the Jewish newcomers in Jerusalem. Apart from some scholars who believe that the US support of Israel is an excuse for the US to start spreading its control in the Middle East, the war itself promoted Arab and Muslim hatred, which created an identity crisis specifically within the Muslim Arab American community.

The second American interference in the Middle East demonstrated by America's role in Egypt, namely in the case of the Suez Canal, was more of the economic than religious nature. The Suez Canal Company reflected the granted demand for European economic expansion overseas, especially in Egypt. Unlike the eighteenth century, Europe in the nineteenth century, and especially after World War Two, redefined and rebuilt its economy. European countries became a host for migrants to fill the labor shortage and focused on overseas territories to expand their economy. According to Daniel R. Headrick, the transportation revolution helped the globalization of the European economy¹⁴.

Transportation eased and shortened the distance to transport products as well as people, which made the latter change their minds about the world economy and its difficult routes. Indeed, the countries or regions that were left out of the economic development had the chance to contribute to the international economy. Consequently, the Suez Canal was an important trading route for Europe. In the late 1700s, the founder of Modern Egypt, Mehmet Ali was the first to use the European advanced technology of transport to serve its interest¹⁵. After his death,

13 "Sovereignty". Oxford Public International Law, Retrieved 4 May 2021, <https://opil.ouplaw.com/view/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690e1472#:text=International%20internal%20sovereignty%20refers%20to,and%20integrit%2C%20and%20of%20non%2D>

14 Headrick, Daniel R. *The Invisible Weapon: Telecommunications and International Politics, 1851-1945*. Oxford, U.K., 1991.

15 Sharma, Jagdish, P. "Egyptian Nationalism, and the Suez Canal episode: A Summary." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 57, 1996, pp. 913–915., Retrieved 1 June 2021, www.jstor.org/stable/44133427

Mehmet was succeeded by his incompetent son Ismail Pasha¹⁶. During his reign, Ismail drove Egypt to bankruptcy and western military dominance. By the 1800s, the Suez Canal Company “was under the financial control of France and Great Britain, the owners of 56 and 44 percent of the shares, respectively, and holders of the majority of seats on the Board of Directors. In the period from 1883 to 1914, the Suez Company did not have any reason to deal with the Egyptians¹⁷” (Caroline Piquet, p. 113). After World War Two, the Egyptian government demanded full independence from western countries. The Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser aimed to nationalize the Suez Canal. Nasser’s decision threatened the British and French stock holdings in the Company after which they sought help from the UN. Based on the conclusions of the First London Conference and the Menzies mission’s ideas and suggestions, the United Nations Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld developed a plan, which any settlement in the Suez Canal must follow. These ideas were:

1. There should be free and open transit through the Canal without discrimination, overt or covert—this covers both political and technical aspects;
2. The sovereignty of Egypt should be respected;
3. The operations of the Canal should be insulated from the politics of any country;
4. The manner of fixing tolls and charges should be decided by agreement between Egypt and the users;
5. A fair proportion of the dues should be allotted to development;
6. In case of disputes, unresolved affairs between the Suez Canal Company and the Egyptian Government should be settled by arbitration with suitable terms of reference and suitable provisions for the payments of sums found to be due.¹⁸

In defiance of the UN resolution, Israel joined forces with Britain and France to put an end to hostilities in Egypt. Indeed, there were threats from the Soviet Union against any of these powers if they fail to withdraw from the Suez Canal. So far, the United States of America did not interfere to support Britain, France,

16 Ibid.

17 Piquet, Caroline. “The Suez Company’s Concession in Egypt, 1854—1956: Modern Infrastructure and Local Economic Development.” *Enterprise & Society*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2004, pp. 107–127. Retrieved May 4 2021, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23700381

18 McDermott, Rose. *Risk-Taking in International Politics*. The University of Michigan Press. 1998. P 139-140 <https://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/0472108670.pdf>

and Israel to remain in the Suez Canal, which eased the tensions between the US and these countries. The two main reasons for President Eisenhower's refusal to help may have been considered as a positive interference in Egyptian political decision-making. First of all, the US government did not like the fact it was not informed by Britain, France, and Israel of their attacks against Egypt. Indeed, after the Soviet Union claimed to support Egypt, Eisenhower was more concerned if the alliance between both would result in a third world war. The Russian-Egyptian alliance raised the fear of President Eisenhower as follows in the notes from the policy meeting:

The President said our people should be alert. If the Soviets attack the French and British directly, we would be in war, and we would be justified in taking military action even if Congress were not in session. . . The President asked if our forces in the Mediterranean are equipped with atomic anti-submarine weapons.¹⁹ (Ibid.142)

The decision of Eisenhower was a risk-avoiding plan to declare another world war, but it also risked the American government's alliance with Israel and the Great Powers of France and Britain. It was challenging to the international situation as the Suez Canal would be an excuse to start a war that will concern all the countries. The Suez crisis demonstrated the necessity of developing preventative measures for conflicts in order to avoid them. This economic conflict was the first American intervention that resulted in peacemaking in the Middle East, however, the United States always takes its national interest into consideration. The peacemaking convention proved that the United States is the leading and dominant power in the Middle East.

Contrary to the peacekeeping in Egypt, US deployments in other Middle Eastern countries have not resulted in any coalition agreements, as is the case with the assault on Syria. The first elected president following French independence, Quwatly, Prime Minister Azm, and the previous Syrian cabinet all resigned as a result of a military coup d'état carried out in 1949 on the orders of Colonel Husni Zaim, the chief of staff of the Syrian army²⁰. According to Douglas Little, professor of history at Clark University, the coup d'état was "one of the first

19 Ibid.142.

20 "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, The Near East, South Asia, and Africa, Volume VI, Memorandum by the Secretary of State to the President" Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v06/d1132>

covert actions that the CIA pulled off"²¹. In the beginning, the intervention of the US was measured in reshaping the fledgling Syrian army and providing it with weapons. President Quwatli was interested in the idea of his army being chosen and trained by the great powers to instill patriotism, morality, and loyalty into the Syrian mindset. However, in late 1947, the US voted for the U.N. resolution calling for the separation of Jews and Arabs in Palestine. Syria was against this petition especially since many Syrian refugees went to the Syrian territories asking for asylum.

After the effort put into the Syrian army, the US government realized that the Syrian government may use it against Israel thus Washington ended up canceling the idea of providing training. As a response to the decline of American training, President Quwatli blocked the passage of the Trans-Arabian Pipe Line (TAPLINE) from Saudi Arabia to the Mediterranean through Syrian land and opened the path for a future alliance and cooperation with the Russian government. What is noticeable is that the failure of President Quwatli to protect Palestine creates a civil uprising and disobedience by the Syrian citizens. He also tried to dismiss Zaim by accusing him of cooperating with the CIA to lose the Palestinian war. Despite the denial of Zaim, there were classified records later on that proved Zaim's meeting with the CIA operative Stephen Meade to discuss the Coup d'état plan²² to serve the American interest in Syria. The US intervention proved that the American government has the power not only to interfere in the maritime areas, but it is also able to undermine the sovereignty of a country and to control the political system depending on its interests.

These four main interventions marked the power of the US in the MENA region and gave even more consideration to American actions. However, it has not dissuaded Arab immigrants from targeting the US in pursuit of economic stability. One must understand that the US was not the primary destination for MENA region inhabitants, especially in the aftermath of World War Two. At the time, millions of its citizens were killed or seriously wounded and Europe was in a period of recovery and economic rebuilding. This period of transmission and the continuous growth of Europe attracted many waves of immigrants from the MENA region to western Europe. France was the first destination for Algerians and Tunisians, Spain was the first destination for Moroccans, and Spain was the first destination for Libyans. These North African examples also may foreshadow the fewer difficulties to travel to western Europe. Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco,

21 Waxman, Olivia B. "The U.S. Intervened in Syria in 1949. Here's What Happened", Time. Retrieved 13 April 2017, <https://time.com/4735438/america-syria-war-coup-history/>

22 Ibid.

and Libya were successively colonized by France, Italy, and Spain. Colonialism made these North African countries familiar with the customs of the colonizers and their language which would have later eased the way to integrate into the colonizers' societies. Tunisia and Algeria kept the French colonizer's language as a second language used in schools and administrative offices. Indeed, these western countries were closer to North Africa than to the US, which eased the migration between both continents. Accordingly, MENA region migration to the US was far less compared to Europe.

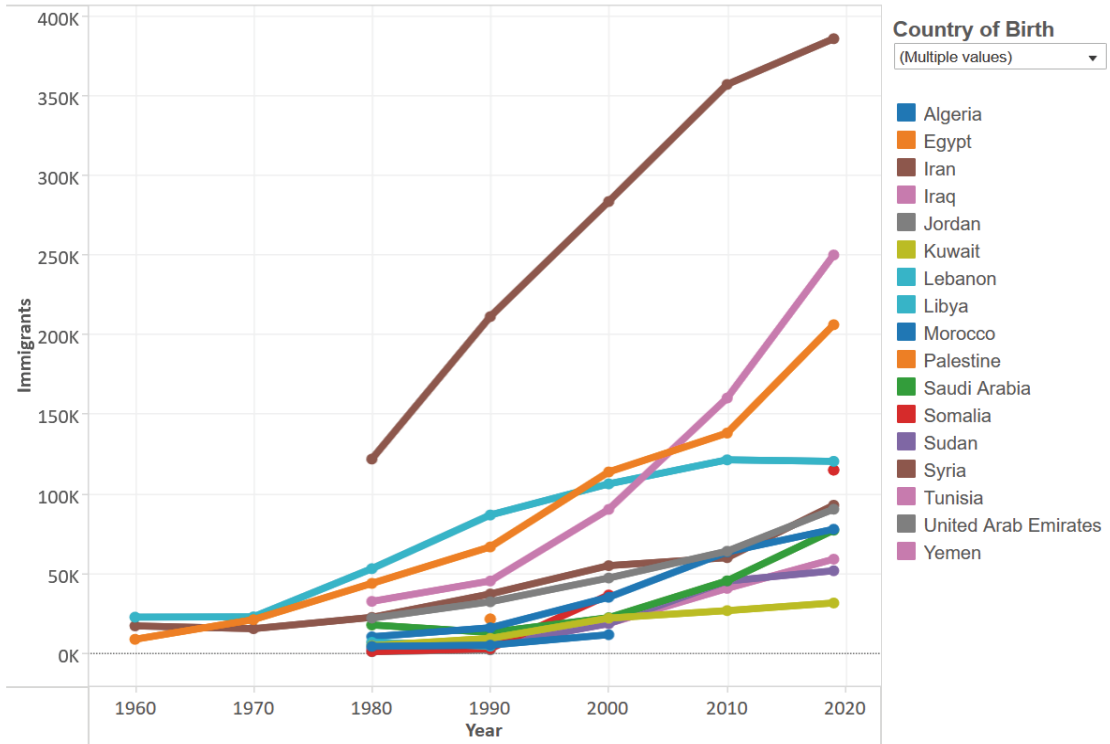
MENA region migration to the US was existent since the 18th century. It started with the American ships bringing slaves, especially from Morocco. The first-generation immigrants from the Middle East to the US started in the late 19th century. Most of the immigrants were from the Greater Syria province of the Ottoman Empire. They were also male Christians who escaped religious persecution in the Ottoman Empire and who were looking for economic opportunities. Some of them became peddlers while others invested in small businesses. By the 1920s, there were an estimated 250,000 Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians in the United States. A lot of these migrants, later on, went back to their countries bringing with them high amounts of money and showing off their success to their families back in their homes.

With the European rejection of excessive migration from the MENA region and the shift of the global economy to Asia, a lot of Arabs in the 20th century were motivated to go to the Asian continent as well as the US. Accordingly, Arabs did not focus on the wrongdoing of the US government in their countries. Instead, some of them were focusing on improving their lifestyle more than thinking about their countries' political matters. Some others thought of the US as the best destination as it is a dominant world power. In the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, there was a huge number of Palestinians, who emigrated to the US. They were ethnically proud and politically aware which helped them, later on, to build the Arab heritage and the sparkling Arab American identity.

Depending on the Homeland Security census²³ the MENA region immigration to the US was increasing. The only decreasing immigration to the US was coming from Iran: in 1986 Iran sent over 16,505 immigrants, which decreased to 11,084 by 1996. However, depending on the Migration Policy Institute, this decrease witnessed later a huge increase such it is shown in the figure:

23 "Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 1996 to 1999", Homeland Security, Official website of the Department of Homeland Security. 1 Mars. 2021. https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/1996_1999

U.S. Immigrant Population by Country of Birth, 1960-2019



Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub
<http://migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub>

The chart also suggested that some countries have a shortcut to immigration to the US such is the case of Somalia. Although the UN accepted Bush’s proposal, and on December 9, 1992, a force of about 25,000 US troops were sent to Somalia, Somali immigrants still immigrated to the US until 2000.

What is noticeable is that ethnic and political consciousness was institutionalized in the late 1990s with the creation of different Arab American organizations, universities, associations, and the Anti-Discrimination Committee. The institutions tried their best to support Arab American rights and to promote a positive image of the Arab culture in American society especially after linking terrorism with Arabs and Muslims.

To reach peace of mind and to believe in their Americanness, Arabs encountered several stereotypes and faced racial discrimination, which made them feel alienated in American society. Notably, in early American history, Arabs were categorized as whites. Being classified as *Arabs*, made Arab Americans

feel alienated and this instilled a feeling of inferiority. The latter suggests one's self-categorization below the suggested mainstream, which points to the social identity approach. In the early 1970s, the British social psychologist Henri Tajfel and his colleagues developed the self-categorization model within the social theory discipline to give a clearer understanding of identity crises. The theory explains how an individual can define himself within society. It suggests the correlation between three psychological processes: social categorization, social comparison, and social identification.

The first refers to how people are conscious about themselves and others within particular categories. These categories are interchangeable and take into consideration the idea of *grouping* rather than the idea of *unique individuals*. As it is the example of Arab Americans: they do not define themselves as individuals living in the American society and ruled under the same supreme law, rather they define their selves by pointing to their ethnicity or *Arabism*. The second refers to the process by which people determine the relative value or social standing of a particular group and its members. For instance, Arab Americans may be seen as having higher social standing than other minorities. Compared with white Americans, Arab Americans can be seen as having lower social standing. The third refers to the fact that people generally own a sense of who they are and how they relate to others, which are also implicated in the way they view other individuals and groups around them. For example, Arab Americans feel inferior because of the stereotypes created upon them, while also their feeling of inferiority comes through believing that other minorities are in a higher social position than them.

All in all, there is always the "us" and the "other": the first asks a question about their background to define their identity and gather within a group to validate their group membership. While the second contributes also to defining the first by giving it a legitimate validation of being different. Accordingly, the Arab American identity was defined through the Arab Americans' knowledge of validating their membership and belonging to their social groups as well as it was defined by the other minorities. Unfortunately, Arab Americans were associated with terrorism after 9/11 which affected their identity. It was difficult at the beginning for Arab Americans to value their culture and background within American society. They accepted the stereotypes and did not act upon them. It is also interesting to notice that even though there were Arab American identity crises, Arab Americans remained in the US to continue pursuing their economic stability. It is only after 9/11 that Arab Americans started to spread more awareness to American society about their culture and racial/ethnic political backgrounds.

Consequently, the American interventions in the MENA region merely served the American interests to gain more power. Yet, it did not stop Arab American immigration to the United States of America. Indeed, it is true that Arab Americans faced difficulties to integrate into American society, however, they need to focus on their Americanness to fight any kind of discrimination and to preserve American liberal values.

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