

FIELD REPORT FROM MICHIGAN

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

The Arab-American Festival in Dearborn, Michigan could be any county fair in the U.S. There are rides, informational booths, vendors selling t-shirts and costume jewelry – and an Egyptian tabla. The festival is packed with teenagers. Some of the teenage girls are dressed in the latest fashions. Others look like their mothers may still be dressing them.

Muslim women pushing strollers are well covered from head to foot. But many of the teens are wearing headscarves with skinny jeans and tight shirts.

Louise Cainkar, a sociologist at Marquette University, says this has been the tradition for immigrant families.

“This has been going on in the United States for over a hundred years. Parents bring over the culture they know best and respect. They want their children to grow up in that culture. Then the children grow up here and they have a different view of who they should be.”

Rasha Abujaber is 23 years old and from Jordan. She complains about assumptions people make about her.

“I feel like people always assume if you are Arab, you are Muslim. When they find out you are Christian, they are like, ‘Oh, so you are not really Arab.’ ‘No, I am Arab but I am Christian.’ ‘You are? So you were a Muslim and became a Christian?’ ‘No, I have always been a Christian, and I have always been Arab.’ Christ was from the Middle East and he was Christian.”

In fact, most Americans of Arab ancestry are Christian. A 2002 survey by Zogby International shows that contrary to popular perception, just 24% of Arab-Americans are Muslim.

Suha Ahmed is a graduate student at Wayne State University in Detroit and works at the Arab-American Museum in Dearborn. Her family is originally from Sudan and emigrated to the U.S. from Saudi Arabia in 1996.

“I think one of the most important things that people who are not Arab need to understand about Arab-Americans is the diversity that is present in the Arab-American community. I have had people come up to me and ask me where I am from. I would try to explain it as, ‘I am an Arab but then you know where is Sudan, it’s in Africa.’ ‘Well, then you are not Arab, and you are black.’ So for me, that’s been something that I have had to explain over and over again.”

This question “What are you?” is one that Suha herself struggled to answer when she was first asked. She didn’t know.

“I had to actually go back and talk to my parents and ask them ‘What am I?’ because it was confusing. I had never had those questions anywhere. When I lived in Saudi Arabia, nobody asked if I was Arab or African. When I was in Sudan, nobody asked either. I had to go back and ask my parents, ‘How do you see yourself? Because the way you see yourself is the way that I see myself since we are all from the same place.’”

Andrew Daleck remembers first becoming aware of the Arab part of his American identity through a book in his parent’s library about the civil war in Lebanon. His Syrian-American father was born in the U.S. His mother immigrated here from Lebanon in the late 1970s. After the discovery in the library, he became more and more interested in his heritage.

“When I began to wear my Arab identity more on my sleeve, that’s when I noticed a difference in treatment. I especially thought so after September 11. [A classmate] said, ‘You are not even really American. Your family wasn’t even affected by this.’ I said, ‘My uncle was in the building that was kitty-corner to the towers that collapsed, and he actually left the office and walked back to his home in Brooklyn from Manhattan that very day.’ For him to make the assumption that because I am Arab-American that I didn’t feel the same kind of pain and frustration over what happened on 9/11 was... that’s when I noticed that there was a line in the sand that had been drawn where there was an American identity and then everything else was trying to be American.”

In fact, many young Arab-Americans say discrimination against them took a turn for the worse after September 11.

Anwar Alemnain is 17 years old and his family is from Iraq but he was born in California. He remembers taking a trip to Washington, D.C. with his mother and grandmother.

"My mom was wearing a scarf. My grandma was wearing a burka – what you call that black thing. Only her face was showing. Before we even walked in, there was an African-American male sitting. He asked me, 'Where's your turban at?' I didn't know what he was saying. I looked back and he said it again. Right away, my mom turned back and said, 'Hurry up. Let's get back to the car.'"

Experiences like these can be searing for young people, but discrimination suffered by Arab-Americans is certainly not unique, says University of Michigan History Professor Hani Bawardi.

"I don't think there is even the same levels of discrimination as the Irish or the Jews or the indigenous people or blacks – not even close."

Louise Cainkar agrees that young Arab-Americans' experience growing up in the U.S. is very much like that of other minority groups.

"Because they feel – and this isn't true of everybody – that they are not part of the mainstream society. They feel they are looked at differently. Their cultures are characterized in a certain way and that it tends to be negative. The way they are written about in books and described in films. They have a sense that their membership in American society is maybe on the margins. This makes coming to an understanding of what it means to be an American quite challenging."

Understanding what it means to be an American has not been such a great struggle for everyone though.

Dearborn resident Noha Beydoun is 22 years old and just graduated from college with the double major in integrated sciences and English. This fall she will start a master's program in literature. Noha sees herself as absolutely American. She owns a home, drives an SUV, runs errands and likes to shop.

"I am your all-American girl with a little bit of culture, and a side of Lebanese."

Noha is a first-generation American. She and her four siblings were all born and raised in Dearborn. Her mom stayed at home. Her father owned an Allstate Insurance branch, which her brother now runs. They have lived a pretty typical American life and a relatively comfortable one as a Lebanese-American Muslim family, which might be expected when living in East Dearborn. Kids play on front lawns until dark, and veiled Muslim women like Noha go about their daily lives without stares from anyone.

She says she understands why non-Arab-Americans might be afraid of Arabs and of Arab Muslims.

"I just think that the way the popular culture portrays us is so scary to the foreign eye. It's human nature to get scared of what they don't know, of the foreign, of the unseen. I know that just in a couple of minutes, I can change your mind. So I don't mind."

But what she doesn't understand is how anyone can look at her and see her as anything but American.

"I mean I was born and raised here. I am a law-abiding citizen. I love this country. I am grateful for the opportunities that are given me. When I do travel, I am proud to say that I am from Detroit. We are going to give back to this community. We are community activists. Maybe I don't have the flag plastered across my forehead but it's just because I have a veil plastered across my forehead. What about me is not American?"

– Reported by Jordana Gustafson for *America Abroad*