

Emerging Arab-Americans

There are now about a million Americans of Arab descent; and about 20,000 of them are in the San Francisco area. The Arab-Americans are one of the emerging ethnic groups in this country, and in this city.

A perspective can be gained if we shift world scenery for a moment: think of the Turkish-Americans and Greek-Americans in this time of trouble in that part of the Middle East. There are fewer Americans of Turkish descent than of Greek descent but considerable numbers of both.

How are Turkish-Americans and Greek-Americans supposed to relate to each other? Each of those communities has a strong partisan interest in what is going on in their part of the Middle East. We expect the Greek-American community to do its utmost to persuade the American government to support the Greek cause; and to persuade the mass media to be more helpful to the Greek cause. We expect the Turkish-American community to do the same. That is all part of the free exercise of their American citizenship — and each community is convinced that its cause coincides with the best interests of America.



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But how do we expect them to behave as fellow American citizens; as two American ethnic groups? We would presumably expect them to behave civilly. We would hope that they would not attack each other on the street, that their children would not beat each other up in the schools just because they are respectively of Greek and Turkish descent. If Greek-Americans and Turkish-Americans live in adjoining neighborhoods and have some joint local problem, we would hope that Cyprus would not prevent them from dealing jointly with the problem.

The same kind of dichotomy presents itself when we look at relationships between American Jews and American Arabs. These two communities have a strong prevailing conflict of opinion about certain matters in the Middle East. But they are also going to be living side by side as Americans in this country, and in San Francisco.

The new element is the strong emergence, for the first time, of an Arab American community. Only a few thousand Arabs emigrated to this country in the 19th century. A first wave of Arab immigration came at the turn of the century. They were mostly Christians from Lebanon and Syria. A second, and somewhat different wave of immigration began to occur in the 1950s.

The first wave was relatively unskilled and unlettered. Some became workers, as in the California farm fields, or the Detroit auto factories. But these earlier settlers notably tended to become self-employed peddlers and small store-keepers. Such Arab immigrants continue to arrive; but in the 1950s and 1960s a number of immigrants began to come who were mainly Muslims from various Arab countries, the largest number from Egypt. These tended to be highly skilled professionals from middle and upper class families. In one such group it was found that about two thirds had been college-educated in the United States, almost half of them having PhD's.

There is some parallel to what seems to have developed in the San Francisco area: a large Arab-American base in small business — which has led to the establishment of their own ethnic business association. And now, an increasing base of professional people. And, of course, there is some parallel to the development of the Jewish community. It was such a development in the Jewish community which led to increasing visibility, affluence, influence, and organization to influence public affairs.

Indeed, members of the Arab-American community in San Francisco are now at the stage of becoming more visible, and are beginning to organize in ways that are familiar to the Jewish community. On the one hand, they may become a new force for molding the opinion of the public and of public officials on matters relating to the Middle East. On the other hand, they are a growing body of fellow American citizens with whom San Francisco Jews will have increasing contact on many civic levels.

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Candid Comments

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