



# The Impact of 9/11 and the War on Terror on Arab and Muslim Children and Families

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## Abstract

**Purpose of Review** There is a growing body of work that documents the impact of 9/11 and the war on terror on Arab and Muslim children and families. This review is designed to provide a brief overview and suggest new ways to better understand this understudied population.

**Recent Findings** Several studies show anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments at its highest levels since 9/11. There is strong evidence that Arab and Muslim children and families experience some of the highest levels of discrimination, and as a result, they report higher levels of mental health symptoms.

**Summary** Given the limited data, we need future studies (a) to focus on populations outside of the USA and Europe; (b) to use longitudinal designs; (c) to pay attention to within group variations by race, gender, social class, and immigration status; and (d) to use culturally validated instruments.

**Keywords** Muslim · Arab · Families · Immigrant · Discrimination · Resilience

## Introduction

The term Islamophobia is used to describe systemic discrimination against Muslims and the lived experiences of discrimination against people who are perceived as Muslim [1]. Similarly, led by critics such as Edward Said [2, 3], the anti-Arab sentiment in Western literature is widely documented prior to 9/11. However, the war on terror and the ongoing crisis in the Middle East have constructed Arabs and Muslims as easy targets for both the Western traditional media and social media in recent years. The fear ignited by ongoing terrorist attacks in the USA and Europe only bolstered the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim rhetoric [4]. As a result, several public surveys show that the majority of US and European

populations have more negative feelings towards Arabs and Muslims today than about any other groups measured in the West. We can also see an increase in hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims which are now at higher levels than they were in the years following 9/11 [5]. While children and families experience the effects of war on terror painfully, they respond differently; some with fear and anxiety, others with resilience and optimism.

This review has two specific goals, documenting the level of discrimination and stress Arab and Muslim children and families face, and reporting the pervasive effects of those experiences in terms of mental health with attention to resilience. Reports of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments in the literature have mainly focused on Western societies. Most studies are set in the USA and focus on how discrimination impacts Arab and/or Muslim Americans. Before we move any further in this review, we need to clarify that Arabs and Muslims are two different terms referring to unique groups. The former is an ethnic group originating from the Middle East with a shared language. The latter is a religious group. Not all Muslims are Arabs and not all Arabs are Muslims. In fact, most of the Muslims in the USA are not Arabs, and most of the Arabs in the USA are not Muslims—only a fifth of Arab Americans are Muslims and the majority of them are Christian

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[6]. While there is a growing literature on the Muslim American population, there is a scarcity of research on Arab American children and families. As such, they have been described as the “invisible population” due to the lack of studies as well as society’s treatment of the population [7]. In this review, we will focus on both Arabs and Muslims differently whenever data allows for such distinction.

The anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments have been around for a very long time. However, the 9/11 attacks, war on terror, the ongoing civil war in Syria, and the refugee crisis that followed took those sentiments to a much higher level in the USA and Europe than before. Over the past two decades since 9/11, we have witnessed prominent public figures, politicians, and ordinary people on social media in the west denigrating Arabs and Muslims as the ultimate “other.” Trump’s “Muslim Ban” was one of those examples in which an executive order prohibited travel and refugee resettlement from select predominate Arab and Muslim countries. Although Trump has lost the reelection, his anti-immigrant stance along with his executive orders created a toxic environment for immigrants in general, and Arabs and Muslims in particular, for years to come [8]. What remains in the post-Trump era is the powerful army of people who are ready to create and share falsehoods about Arabs and Muslims. A parallel trend can also be observed in Europe where a similar anti-immigrant sentiment creates a sense of “union” for Europe and European values at the expense of excluding Arabs and Muslims among other immigrant groups [4]. While the politicians’ and traditional media’s bias against Arabs and Muslims is well documented in the literature (see [5] for a review), the more recent phenomenon of social platform effects is not as well-documented. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube now play a more critical role in framing Arabs and Muslims as the ultimate others by equating them with violence and terror [9, 10]. In the following sections, we will first review the evidence of this rhetoric in the lives of Arab and Muslim children and families.

### Anti-Arab and Anti-Muslim Sentiments Stay at Their Highest Levels

Following the 9/11 attacks and the ongoing crisis in the Middle East, we launched a series of studies in the USA to understand the effects of those attacks on children [11, 12, 13, 14]. One of the most unfortunate findings was the degree to which discriminatory acts have woven intimately into the everyday lives of children. Through surveys, focus groups, and a novel drawing technique we called identity maps [15], children and adolescents told us about the burdens of being Muslim in the post 9/11 era and the price they pay in terms of their mental health and well-being. In addition to dealing with worries about growing up as an ethnic or religious

minority in the West, they also had to worry about domestic and international news and learn to cope with political winds that included 9/11 and the following era of the war on terror. In two survey studies with adolescents and young adults, we asked the participants to report the frequency of discriminatory acts they experienced during the previous 12 months. Using a modified version of Krieger and Sidney’s [16] checklist, participants documented the frequency of discrimination experienced at school, while shopping, on the streets, on the playground, and in a public setting *because they are Muslim*. With the younger cohort, ages 12–18, about 84% reported experiencing one or more acts of discrimination during the previous 12 months. The results were slightly worse for the older group, ages 18–25 (88%). In both cohorts, participants experienced discrimination in their schools the most compared to other settings. These alarming statistics are surprisingly in line with the most recent public polling data. Most American adults (82%) report that Muslims are subject to at least some discrimination in the USA today, and this figure was the highest among any other religious groups [17].

Through our focus groups and interviews, we also heard painful consequences of Islamophobia. In both cohorts, participants told us that they were being surveilled, talked about, or suspected in public spaces because of their perceived religious background. One of our female participants said, “we do live in a society that does, you know, not understand us. They do judge us. And it’s very difficult to, you know, try to break away from that.” Similarly, another participant noted that her Arabic name alone may signify an invitation for discrimination,

When people meet me personally, they have a totally different aspect of me [than] when they just know me through let’s say a job application. They wouldn’t probably accept me just by looking at a job application, but if they were to meet me personally, they’d have a better view of who I am. And my last name is Hussein. That’s another problem. They look upon me like, “Oh, my God. She might be related to Sadam Hussein,”... there is a lot of discrimination. There is.

Our sample was based on Muslim Americans, and in a comparative study with 14- to 65-year-old Arab Americans with a similar number of Muslim and Christian Arabs in the sample, Awad [18] found young Muslim Arab immigrants who have lived through the events of 9/11 experienced more stress and discrimination compared to their Christian Arab peers. At the same time, this study showed that Arab/Muslim-based stereotypes and prejudice were not necessarily dependent on actually being Arab or Muslim. Rather, the degree to which one “looks Arab/Muslim” impacted how often they were discriminated against and their own perception of being discriminated against. More recently, Hashem and Awad [19] further demonstrated that Muslim and Christian Arabs held similar levels of religious identification and psychological distress but differed significantly in reports

of negative religious public regard and experiences of discrimination. In other words, Muslim Arabs, compared to Christian Arabs reported higher levels of public disregard for their religious identity and higher levels of discrimination. As a result of some of these differences, there are reports of some tension between these two groups. Kayyali [6] found that Arab Christian adults were skeptical of Muslims and resentful of being mistaken as Muslims.

A review of recent studies conducted in the USA, Canada, and Europe shows that our original findings post 9/11 continue to hold if not are worse since then. For example, in a recent survey of Muslim adolescents in the USA, about 35% of Muslim students ages 11 to 18 reported experiencing cyberbullying with offensive posts about Islam and Muslims [20]. A similar trend was observed in Canada, where Muslim undergraduate students reported being subjected to exclusions from social groups and racist and Islamophobic comments from professors and other students during the wake of terrorist attacks [21]. Elkassem et al. [22] studied a relatively younger cohort, Muslim children from 6th to 8th grade in Canada, and found that while they were taught and believed that their religion was one of peace, others were constantly telling them the opposite creating confusion and distress in their lives. Given these levels of bias and discriminatory experiences, it is not surprising to find low levels of trust in the government and institutions, as well as the tendency to feel like lives are at risk due to hate crimes [23].

The anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments in Europe are also on the rise, and it is evident across several European countries (see [24]). Shirazi and Jaffe-Walter [25], who conducted studies in Denmark, point out that underneath “fantasies of national benevolence, like American exceptionalism and Danish humanitarianism,” (p.16) young Muslim students in Danish secondary schools felt that their inclusion into the school system depended on how well they obeyed and stayed within the invisible boundaries purposefully drawn by the Western school culture. If they spoke up too much, dressed, or acted a certain way that was not accepted within the school environment, they would be excluded by peers and school staff. Muslim children in the Netherlands also reported feeling discriminated against for their religion, and this influenced lower self-esteem and national identification [26].

### Arab and Muslim Children and Families Pay a Heavy Price

There is strong empirical evidence documenting how discrimination bears adverse effects on psychological well-being and physical health. For example, in a meta-analysis by Lee and Ahn [27], discrimination was significantly related to depression ( $ES = 0.29$ ), anxiety ( $ES = 0.37$ ), and psychological distress ( $ES = 0.19$ ). More recently, Carter et al. [28] confirmed

similar findings and found that the direct overall relations between discrimination was strongest for mental health ( $r = .207$ ), substance use ( $r = .159$ ), culture ( $r = .101$ ), and physical health ( $r = .067$ ). However, none of these reviews focused on either Arab or Muslim populations. Samari et al. [29] reviewed 53 articles published 1990–2017 period to understand how Islamophobia as a form of discrimination related to health outcomes for Muslims and Muslim Arabs living in Western societies. While theirs was not a meta-analysis, their narrative review provides clear evidence that Islamophobia was associated with poor mental health, such as elevated levels of anxiety, depression, distress, fear, and anger. They also found poor physical health and health behaviors, such as low birth weight, self-perceived health, chronic disease, and less physical activity. Additionally, they found unfavorable help-seeking behaviors such as limited access to care for themselves and their children. Therefore, studies looking at the relation between discrimination and psychological well-being and physical health have found a negative relationship that is consistent across diverse methodologies and populations.

As the Samari et al. [29] review did not cover studies published since 1997, we conducted our own search for more recent primary studies on this population. Before we outline some of the recent findings, we must note the distinction that is beginning to emerge in this literature between lived experiences of discrimination (i.e., frequency of being targeted as an Arab or Muslim person) and acculturative stress or more specifically discrimination-related stress that one experiences as a result of being a target (see [30] or [31]). While these two variables are related and are predictors of poor mental health outcomes, the distinction is important for methodological and conceptual reasons. Methodologically, the first is typically measured in terms of frequency while the second is measured in terms of perceived stress. Conceptually, the former is a descriptive indicator of discrimination while the latter is a perceived indicator of stress that is the result of discrimination. In our own work, we found significant, moderate to high correlations between both discrimination and discrimination-related stress and psychological withdrawal, somatic complaints, and anxiety-depression [12].

In recent years, there is more evidence showing strong linkages between discrimination and mental health outcomes for Arab and Muslim populations in the West. Specifically, Albhour and her colleagues [7, 32, 33] conducted a series of studies on Arab American youth gathering data from different samples and age cohorts using both qualitative and survey methods. In 2017, they found that all of the 14- to 16-year-old Arab American participants reported experiences of bullying which led to all but one participant reporting feelings of stress and anxiety. In 2019, they found that cyberbullying in 12- to 16-year-old Arab American youth was related to elevated levels of stress and anxiety. In 2020, they showed that

bullying perpetration and bullying victimization led to negative physical and psychological symptoms in Arab American adolescents ages 12 to 16.

For Muslims living in the USA and Europe, religious discrimination is linked with psychological distress. Samari [34] reviewed the trajectories of stress on individual, social, and structural levels for Muslim Americans and reported that the majority of Muslim adolescents in the USA experienced bullying in school, which had negative effects on mental health over the life course. Tahseen and colleagues [35] showed pervasive effects of discrimination and bullying for Muslim youth. Using Achanbach's formulations, these researchers showed that discrimination, particularly direct and indirect bullying in school, puts Muslim adolescents at risk for a variety of mental health problems like internalizing and externalizing problems [36]. The impact of discrimination on mental health outcomes extends to higher education. Alongside mental health problems like anxiety and depression, perceived discrimination in Muslim American college students has been shown to trigger posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [37].

### Arab and Muslim Families Respond to Discrimination in Diverse Ways

Arab and Muslim families are ethnically diverse and do not necessarily converge. However, they might carry similar concerns about the intergenerational transmission of cultural, as well as religious values to their children. Arab and Muslim parents in the USA, who are mostly first-generation immigrants, are concerned about passing on their religious values as well as cultural heritage to their children. In addition, they are also worried about their children being discriminated against at school. We [12] discovered that Muslim American parents may not be aware of their children's struggles and may not be well equipped to help them in dealing with the challenges of this particular moment in history. However, after two decades since 9/11, many families realize the difference in the way their children are being treated by others and are beginning to adjust their expectations and communication with their children [38]. They accept that their relationship with their children is different from their relationships with their own parents.

Similar to other immigrant groups, Arab and Muslim parents have diverse acculturation strategies for raising children. While some choose to rely on their ethnic and religious backgrounds, others may choose to focus more on integrating into the mainstream culture. Teaching Arabic and/or Islamic values is more important for the first group [39]. In fact, a recent study by Hussain [40] revealed the main concerns of parents in the socialization of religion for their children. The main concerns were about the difficulty of teaching Islamic values to their children as there is limited space to provide

positive aspects outside of the home environment. Abdalla [41] conducted interviews with sixteen Muslim mothers to understand their methods of socialization of religion. Their main method of religion socialization was through communications about the goodness of their religion and highlighting the misrepresentations of Islam on the media. As a result of these pressures on Muslim adults and families, a study of 314 Muslim adults in the USA found that parents worried about their children's future about coping in a society that excludes them, and they experienced high levels of stress as a result [42].

At the same time, some Arab and Muslim parents choose to focus on integration with the mainstream culture as a way to shield their children from discrimination and bias in schools. In fact, in our study, we observed a common pattern where children chose to assert their religious identity despite the protest from their parents. Many Muslim girls chose to cover their hair despite their parents' disapproval. There is a reason for this pattern which is heavily based on the concerns that the Muslim parents hold about the rejection of their children by their peers due to their religious identity [42]. Therefore, Muslim American parents protect their children from isolation and rejection by advising them to keep silent when faced with stereotypes [12]. Instead, they want their children to be academically successful to buffer them from the harmful effects of Islamophobia [43].

### Resilience Among Arab and Muslim Children and Families

Although the increased discrimination from 9/11 and the war on terror has shown patterns of negative psychological well-being in both Arab and Muslim youth, they also develop different coping mechanisms to build resiliency. In our two survey studies where we assessed coping using the *COPE scale* [44], we found that while youth effectively utilize a multitude of coping strategies to deal with stress and discrimination, they seem to rely heavily on religious coping more than any other strategy [12]. More recently, Shah [45] found a similar pattern in which religiosity served as a buffer against discrimination for Muslim Americans but not so much for Arab Americans. The study revealed that performing religious practices was a strong predictor of mental well-being for Muslims. Tahseen et al. [35] named religious coping acts as "identity-enhancing actions," such as wearing religious markers and speaking out for the real messages of Islam to correct misinformation. However, as noted before, the display of ethnic or religious identity can also serve as a marker that invites more discrimination. Therefore, while some choose to hide their Arab or Muslim identity as a coping mechanism, others join their ethnic and religious communities as a way of dealing with the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments. Connecting

with others who share similar experiences of discrimination leads to building stronger ties with one's ethnic or religious community, serving as another source of coping [36].

Another source of support for Arab and Muslim children and families is to embrace and bridge national and religious identities with their mainstream identities (i.e., American). Ali [38] defines this dual engagement by merging Western values of activism, protest, and citizenship with values of service that may help Arabs and Muslims better deal with discrimination. This sense of belongingness to two or more identities acts as a resilience factor against mental health problems in several studies including in our own work [12] and in the work of Balkaya et al. [36].

A third area where we see coping emerge is civic engagement and political activism. According to Ghaffar Khucher [46], schools act as a stage to construct and contest the Muslim identity for young Muslims as a part of their political identity even more since 9/11. A similar finding emerged in our quantitative work where we found that community engagement serves as a buffer against discrimination [14]. An overwhelming majority of the young people we spoke to in our focus groups were in full agreement that there must be a big shift within the Muslim community toward integration and civic participation. They are eager for more interfaith dialog and civic engagement with the mainstream US culture to make a difference at local and national levels. Here is how one young man summarized this renewed approach: "Now, you see the sentiment of trying to change society from within. You see Muslims getting more involved in civil rights movements." As Ali and Awaad [47] found through several case studies from community projects conducted in California, civic engagement not only reduces the negative health effects of Islamophobia, but also helps to build resilient communities. [38]

Finally, it is important to note that, though they are faced with discrimination and misconceptions, Arab and Muslim families are also staying positive despite challenges and report receiving support from the mainstream society. In a Pew Research Group [48] survey, 92% of Muslim American adults reported that they were proud to be American and 80% reported being satisfied with the things going on in their own life. The number of Muslim Americans that felt that they received support from someone because they were Muslim also increased from 32% in 2007 to 49% in 2017 [48]. This positive attitude towards mainstream society was also present in our study in which our participants refer to "being American" as the basis for their critique of US policies and practices. "What America means to me is freedom" noted one of our female participants, for example. She later mentioned that

If you take away that freedom, it's not America anymore. This country has these laws and the ways of living and what it represents. It no longer is representing what it was, it's different now.... But have I been pleased with those laws? No. I

don't like the Patriot Act. I'm totally against it. This is America. America represents the American dream—freedom, having a house, having everything, but just be free, you know. Not having anyone track your moves or see what you're doing, who you're sending an e-mail to. Why? This is my life. No one has the right to intrude in my life.

## Future Directions

Based on our review of recent work on Arab and Muslim children and families post 9/11, we see five specific areas of research that demand close attention. First, much of the review of the Arab and Muslim families post 9/11 and war on terror have been set in the USA. There are many reasons for this pattern as 9/11 happened in the USA. However, because the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments are now present in many other countries, we call for researchers to emphasize the dynamic and diverse experiences of the population through conducting studies in other countries. If we focus only on the US setting, we are continuously isolating and silencing the stories of Arab and Muslim families that live elsewhere and have different stories to tell. Along the same theme, researchers should focus not only on the effects of discrimination but on how these families are coping and showing resilience through their uniquely adapted ways of living.

Second, we are still lacking developmental studies that focus on key outcomes over time, ideally using longitudinal designs. What is the developmental trajectory of an Arab or Muslim identity for children and adolescents? How does this identification over time shape their key developmental outcomes ranging from academic engagement to mental health symptoms?

Third, we are lacking large-scale field studies that go beyond religions or ethnicity and illustrate how the intersectionality of race, gender, social class, immigration status, etc. individually and in interaction affects key developmental outcomes from children and families. The nuances, as well as connections between these key demographic indicators, will not only highlight key areas of difference but also perhaps help diffuse grouping large numbers of individuals and families into broad categories. The stories will refuse to paint this population in a deficit-based approach about those who are constantly misunderstood and focus more on how they rise up even among the difficulties they face. Fourth, most of the research methods conducted with Arabs and Muslims are not specifically designed for these populations. How can research instruments be developed/modified to be used with these specific populations at this specific historical time?

Finally, given the increased security concerns during times of war, especially at times when the Muslim ban or Patriot Act is in the news, to what degree can we freely invite Arab and

Muslim participants to our studies? What does validity mean for a community under surveillance? Given the increased number of studies published in recent years, we are hopeful that we will soon be able to answer some of these questions with empirical data gathered not only in the USA and Europe but also in other countries. We also hope for more diverse research designs utilizing culturally validated instruments and paying attention to within-group diversity.

## Conclusions

In this review, we highlighted the context Arab and Muslim families are living under since the attacks of 9/11. Arabs and Muslims experience discrimination through different larger contexts such as through media and politicians but also through individual experiences at school and work. The traditional media's portrayal of Arabs and Muslims has been well documented, but the rise of social media platforms has led to the infiltration of negative sentiments through cyberbullying. Based on our own work and recent empirical studies in the field, we report that the Arab and Muslim families living in the West continue to face high levels of discrimination that did not seem to dissipate more than two decades after 9/11. More importantly, we now have ample evidence showing the psychological implications of discrimination for Arab and Muslim youth who pay the heavy price in terms of elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and PTSD. At the same time, research shows that children and families are finding more effective ways to deal with discrimination that range from religious coping to civic engagement in the mainstream culture. Arab and Muslim children seem to build resiliency through identification with their religion and their ethnic groups as well as with the mainstream cultures.

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