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Census 2000

Statistics Portray Settled, Affluent Mideast Community

By D'Vera Cohn and Sarah Cohen
 Washington Post Staff Writers
 Tuesday, November 20, 2001; Page A04

Americans of Middle Eastern descent are richer and better educated than most Americans, a demographic portrait at odds with recent images in the news of young, single, unsettled immigrants.

This population -- a diverse group of Muslims and Christians that traces its ancestry to a swath extending from Afghanistan to North Africa -- has found a comfortable niche in the United States. People in this group are more likely to be married, professional and live in a household with children than is the average American, according to government data compiled by The Washington Post.

The group also is growing rapidly: At least a half-million legal immigrants from the Middle East moved to the United States in the past decade. In the Washington area, one of the top three destinations, the number grew by more than 25,000, mostly in the suburbs.

For the many settled and affluent members of this group, which has largely enjoyed community acceptance, the prospect of being seen as a potential threat is especially unnerving, shaking their faith in the place they felt they had established in this country.

Anton Hajjar, 54, is a third-generation Syrian American who grew up in Brooklyn, N.Y., without much thought about his ethnic heritage. He is a labor lawyer, married, the father of two, and as thoroughly assimilated as any of his

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neighbors in Chevy Chase.

But after his daughter was threatened by another student at Bethesda Chevy Chase High School because of her Arab heritage, he said, "identity came to me."

"I felt like a minority, basically, for the first time," said Hajjar, who is Christian. He told his daughter, "Now you know how Jews feel . . . or what blacks have gone through, or other minorities."

As a suburban, professional family man, Hajjar fits the statistical picture of the typical Middle Easterner in the Washington area and nationally. It differs considerably both from the Hollywood image of the crazed fighter and the news media depiction of the Sept. 11 terrorists as marginal, single men. Although the government does not collect demographic data specifically about Middle Easterners, a portrait was assembled by The Post from surveys and immigration records.

Middle Eastern immigration has come in two waves, with political and economic differences between them, according to experts. Before World War II, new arrivals were mainly middle-class entrepreneurs who came to this country to make money and did not emphasize their Arab identity. Then, as in the second wave, most were Christian.

Since World War II, many immigrants have landed here after uprisings, civil conflicts pushed them out of their home countries. They have been more likely than their predecessors to come from elite backgrounds.

"The only people who can really afford to migrate have to have money," said Sam Samaha, an Egyptian-born demographer in Texas who has studied the Arab American population extensively.

There is some debate over the exact number of Middle Easterners in the United States. A government survey is considered a complete measure of the nation's Middle Eastern population. The Census Bureau's Current Population Survey counts 2 million first-generation U.S. residents of Middle Eastern descent, but that figure does not include those whose families have been in the country longer.

There is no debate, however, over the Middle Eastern population's growth. It has increased by at least 50 percent in the past decade, according to Census Bureau figures compiled by Logan, a sociology professor at the State University of New York-Albany. Logan says that increasingly, the growth is driven by births, not immigration.

But immigration is still a large contributor. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization

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issued green cards to nearly 475,000 people from Middle Eastern countries from 1990 to the last year for which statistics are available. The most common countries of origin are Pakistan and Lebanon.

The community of Middle Easterners in the United States is in flux, in part because of people arriving from a changing mix of countries. Immigration is declining from Iran, Lebanon and Afghanistan. It is rising from Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, Morocco, Yemen and Turkey. They now make up a growing share of new arrivals.

"The continual conflicts in the Middle East kept sending people here, unlike other groups," said Barbara Aswad, an emerita professor of anthropology at Wayne State University in Michigan.

Aswad told a recent conference on Arab American identity, sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, that not only is the community diverse -- "secular to scarfed" words -- but that different parts of it seldom interact.

Now, she said, Christians in Detroit are trying to distance themselves from Muslims. They are large crosses: "I've seen them up to six inches." Divisions abroad follow people here, noting that Lebanese Catholics in Detroit tend to work at General Motors Corp. while Muslims work for Ford Motor Co.

Some immigrants who have been in the country for a long time look down on new "boaters," she said. And even among Muslims, there is a "battle of the headscarves" as different mosques setting different dress codes for women, she said.

Among recent Middle Eastern immigrants, males are a slight majority, either because they have not brought their families yet or they intend to return relatively soon to their home countries. Women of Middle Eastern descent are less likely than other American women to be in the workforce.

Middle Easterners are more likely to be professionals or self-employed than the average American. As with other groups that include large numbers of recent immigrants, they are younger and less likely to work for the government.

Geographically, people of Middle Eastern ancestry are heavily concentrated in a few states. More than half live in California, New York, Michigan, Illinois or New Jersey.

Among metropolitan areas, Washington ranks behind two others in its population of Middle Easterners. The largest is in the Los Angeles area, which has a huge Iranian population. A variety of other groups, including Coptic Christians from Egypt. Second is New York City, with its constantly churning population of recent immigrants and historic Lebanese and Syrian communities in Brooklyn.

Washington's Middle Eastern community was the nation's wealthiest as of the 1990s. It includes a mix of long-established professionals, but the region also has an above-average share of more recent Afghan refugees.

Middle Easterners settling in the area tend to prefer Northern Virginia. Fairfax ranked among U.S. counties in the number of green cards issued to Middle Eastern immigrants.

there in the 1990s. Montgomery County ranks 15th.

Salim Kublawi, a Lebanese-born economist for the Census Bureau who came to the States 41 years ago, has so far found tolerance and -- lately -- sympathy.

Kublawi, a Muslim who was "ashamed and embarrassed" about what the terrorists has been cheered by supportive telephone calls. "All I felt was my American friend me, saying, 'We know how you feel,'" he said.

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