

# Arab American Attitudes Towards Their Heritage and the Middle East

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*Any discussion of Arab Americans must consider, at the outset, both the deep diversity as well as the shared attitudes and concerns that exist within the community. As is the case with most ethnic groups, Arab Americans are not a monolith. They hail from 22 Arabic-speaking countries. They are of different religious traditions. And while three-quarters are native born, some being fourth-generation American born, the rest are foreign-born naturalised citizens. Despite this rich diversity, a recent poll conducted by the Arab American Institute (AAI) revealed a great number of shared attitudes among significant numbers of respondents from all demographic subgroups.*

While it has already been reported that the AAI poll found Arab American voters favouring Joe Biden over Donald Trump by a 59 per cent to 35 per cent, also explored were how Arab Americans viewed a number of Middle East related issues and how they evaluated both candidates' handling of many of these same issues.

Weighed against a list of 14 major policy concerns, only 5 per cent of Arab Americans ranked resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a priority issue in determining their vote for President, the only foreign policy issue included in the list. Nevertheless, 44 per cent of the respondents indicated that resolving this conflict was one of the most important foreign policy challenges facing the US administration. In fact, this issue was ranked the most important of the seven Middle East-related concerns covered in the poll. In second place, at 33 per cent, was "meeting the humanitarian needs in Syria." Addressing the political and economic crisis in Lebanon" was third, at 28 per cent. These were followed by the ending the war in Yemen, improving relations with the Arab World, countering the threat posed by Iran, and stabilising and rebuilding Iraq, seen as important by between 16 per cent to 11 per cent of Arab Americans.

A strong plurality of Arab Americans saw Donald Trump's handling of each of these foreign policy challenges as ineffective. And by a margin of 48 per cent to 32 per cent, the community's voters said they believed that Joe Biden would be best at improving ties with the Arab World.

When asked for their attitudes about "several nations across the Middle East who are playing increasingly important roles", Arab Americans were most favourably disposed toward Egypt, with 73 per cent saying they had favorable attitudes towards that country. Next in line was Turkey, with a 68 per cent favourable rating, followed by the United Arab Emirates at 66 per cent, Saudi Arabia at 56 per cent and Iran at 47 per cent.

Seventy-eight per cent of Arab Americans said they viewed the recently signed UAE and

Bahrain agreements with Israel as a positive development, with 63 per cent expressing the hope that “it may contribute to making the Middle East a more peaceful region” and 57 per cent hoping that “it might contribute to advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace”.

The AAI poll also asked Arab Americans how they are most likely to define themselves, whether by country of origin, religion, or as Arab American. The preferred identity was simply “Arab American” (29 per cent), followed by country of origin (27 per cent), and religion as the preferred self-identity of only 15 per cent. “All three”, Arab American, country of origin and religion, was the choice of 17 per cent.

More than three-quarters of all Arab Americans said they were “very proud” of their ethnic heritage. It is important to note that they maintain this pride despite the fact that 61 per cent claim they have “personally experienced discrimination because of my ethnicity or country of origin”. This fear remains strong, with 70 per cent of all Arab American respondents saying they are “concerned about facing future discrimination because of their ethnicity or country of origin”.

In the end, what emerges from this survey of Arab Americans is that with all of its diversity, it is a community proud of its heritage, concerned with discrimination and sharing many attitudes on a range of issues both foreign and domestic.

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*James J. Zogby is president of the Washington-based Arab American Institute.*

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