

# ADC-MICHIGAN



## Summer Intern Perspectives



# Elysa Bryen

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### **Anti-Arab Sentiment as a Global Phenomenon**

Discrimination and hate towards Arab Americans coupled with a sense of Arab otherness seems to be a global phenomenon. I witnessed its border-permeating nature during both my semester abroad in Vienna, Austria and my summer in Dearborn, Michigan.

In Vienna, the situation was dire. One of my Syrian friends rolled his eyes as he explained his inevitable dilemma, “In my German course they tell us to learn by speaking to locals, but no locals will speak to me.” His friend, who had lived in Vienna for two years chimed in with his own frustrations, “You see, we move into an apartment building, and they move out. Now our apartment is all Syrians - it’s a Syrian ghetto.”



Even I felt the tension as I was trying to fix my SIM card at the local phone store and discovered the only mutual language between I and the store clerk was Arabic. I glanced around the store as we began our conversation and my eyes locked with two Austrian women who were staring at us horrified as we began a budding friendship in Arabic. I couldn’t tell if their eyes expressed fear, hate, or both. And the stories keep coming. One of my friends was riding a train from Austria to Italy. She told me the only people who had their passports checked were the “brown” people sitting across from her, who were later removed from the cabin and never returned. I read the news one morning to find out two Iraqis were shot with a pellet gun as they were walking down the street.

And then there was the sense of helplessness. There was a young father who didn’t fight back when the hospital told him he could not name his newborn an Arab name because, “that name isn’t found here.” Whether it was merely a misunderstanding, or an act of intolerance, he now sadly refers to his daughter by two names: the Arab one, and the “European” one.

In Dearborn my experience with ADC Michigan shows the situation too seems dire: Arab-Americans not served in a grocery store when the clerk hears them speaking Arabic, a girl attacked on her school grounds for wearing a hijab, people removed from planes, unlawful arrests, and the list goes on.

Despite the global nature of anti-Arab sentiment, we here in the United States are lucky. Why? The Arab-American voice is loud and proud.

Arab Americans have a rich history of representation and advocacy, a history of politicians, scientists, journalists, teachers, and academics, whose achievements have been put on display by organizations such as ADC. So when talks are held relating to the rights of Syrian refugees, the Arab American community has a voice by way of it's own activists and academics. This is contrary to the talk I attended in Vienna where the only representation by non-Europeans was found by way of the people serving food prior to the event, and those who were put on display in the pre-talk "performance" - a skit objectifying the refugees. And when new immigrants and refugees arrive here, there's a community ready to welcome them. There's a community ready to tell all the new parents they can embrace Arab culture and name their kids Arab names without anyone stopping them. There's a community here ready to call the ADC Michigan if they see someone not being served in a store, being mistreated by the police, or being fired from a job unjustly.

Arab-Americans in conjunction with organizations such as the ADC have built a community of activists, allies, and watchdogs but that doesn't mean the work here is done. Just like in Vienna, where a right wing political party nearly rose to power on the backs of those who fear outsiders, Arabs in the United States face significant threats from Americans who embrace the political rhetoric of fear that dominates our national conversations. As I type this last sentence, the office phone is ringing and I know the caller on the other line is preparing to report another incident. We may be lucky compared to our European counterparts, and we may be supported, but we are far from done.

# Nour E. Sulaiman

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The most fascinating aspect of discrimination is how invisible it is to those that it does not affect.

A black man gets nervous during a traffic stop although he has done nothing illegal, his white passenger is oblivious to this fear. Two friends enter a shop, and only the woman of color is followed suspiciously by the shop clerk. An Arab-American man is afraid to speak Arabic on an airplane. A woman is afraid to walk home alone at night. Black parents, regardless of class, sit their children down to explain that they must be careful around law enforcement. The issue is not whether or not discrimination exists—the issue is whether or not we are willing to admit it to ourselves.



It takes enormous tragedy for the nation to acknowledge that hate is a real issue for many groups in this country—the LGBTQ community, Muslim-Americans, women, African-Americans, and other marginalized groups. It takes a twelve-year-old child shot by a police officer in broad daylight, a massacre in a club, a presidential candidate deeply insulting a Gold Star family. It should not take tragedy for hate to be acknowledged.

Ignoring discrimination only allows discrimination to persist—whether this discrimination is based on homophobia, xenophobia or misogyny. Visibility for marginalized groups is incredibly important. Otherwise, we see the people affected by these discriminations as “Other”—which make it so that we do not see them at all.

We do a lot at the ADC— and one of our most important contributions is to make the “invisible” issue of Arab-American discrimination opaque. Our cases seem to be vastly diverse when looked at holistically—an unjust firing, a child beaten repeatedly by his teacher, a man forced to shave his beard—but they are all indicators of increasing anti-Arab and Islamophobic sentiment in the United States, as they are all directly connected to race or religion.

Although our community has a culture of privacy, we must share the moments in which we face discrimination. We must not be ashamed. We are our only representatives in a political and social climate that is becoming increasingly hostile to Arab-Americans due to misinformation and propaganda. We must stand united with each other, and we must stand with other marginalized groups, as we cannot fight injustice with injustice. I am hopeful for the future, as this country has shown time and time again that it is capable of greatness—and we, as Arab-Americans, can and will contribute to creating a more perfect union.

# Athar Fawaz

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The most misunderstood and the most commonly insulted aspect of Islam is how our religion treats - and in this case, mistreats - our women. This is a very multifaceted topic, one that has been debated by Arabs and non-Arabs for years, one that has been misinterpreted time and time again, one that I cannot fully cover, but it is also one that needs to be set straight. However controversial this topic is, there are truths and there are fabrications, to consider the fabrications as the truth is a disservice to Islam, those who follow it and Arab history altogether. The treatment of women is one of the most important topic when understanding Islam as a religion. Women are often perceived as subjugated, hidden, made to conform and voiceless - all of these could not be further from the truth. Those who believe these to be true are those who look at Islam from the surface, those who are occupied by what the hijab and burqa - which outlined in Islam must only be decided by the autonomy of the one who will wear it - cover instead of what it shows and provides.



In pre-islamic times women were mistreated. They were not considered equal to men, they were denied inheritance, education, to own property, they were denied education, any form of political power was unheard of to them. This was not isolated conditions for women in the middle east; 7th century Europe was not a tenacious advocate for women's rights. Women of many eastern and western countries were not able to do the simplest of things such as choose their own husband or given the chance to remarry. With Islam, the Qu'ran, Arab civilization began to move forward for women.

The development of Islam brought along the establishment of a new standard for women. It had created the prospect of equality between men and women, social, political and property rights, education, and inheritance. Islam had given women the right to choose and the right to a divorce. When discussing inheritance, a daughter is given half of what a son is given if there is no will and testament; he then uses that wealth to help his female relatives who have no means of support. Many women have become political leaders, such as the Indonesian president elected in 2001, Megawati Sukarnoputri, and the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto.

Islam does not force anything upon women, it cannot oppress women when it does not force them to remove themselves from their own free will. The Quran affirms a woman's right to herself, she has the freewill to choose what she is religiously responsible for - as long as it does not challenge God, a God every religion follows and fears. Patriarchal analysis of an eloquent and inclusive text have been manipulated to serve their own agenda's at the expense of a woman's freedom. What Islam is for women is not a hindrance but a guide to a more secure and faithful life and afterlife. The key to understanding what oppression is, is to understand what someone is being forced into rather than what someone is adopting. To say women in Islam are being oppressed for the way they adopt the hijab for religious reasons is the equivalent to saying a nun is being oppressed for making her own life choices.

# Alora Fleenary

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My experience this summer as an intern for ADC Michigan has been a very informative and rewarding one! Growing up in Dearborn, the rich cultural heritage of Arab Americans became an integral part of my hometown. The opportunity to help strengthen and protect a community that is very close to my heart was one I could not pass up.

While the experience has certainly been a rewarding one, it has been humbling as well. As a young, white woman there are really not many arenas in which I feel like an outsider. I can stroll through my campus comfortably, nervously stutter my way out of parking tickets, and to sum it up briefly, exist unapologetically and without fear of discrimination. I am, now more than ever, painfully aware that my experience is not the universal.

I think the most key lesson I will take with me as this experience comes to a close is the importance of individuals who hold a certain set of privileges to work to alleviate the inequalities that work to hold back minorities. Issues of civil rights and discrimination cannot only be of importance to those who are directly disadvantaged, we have a collective responsibility to move towards a more just and fair society. My position on the ADC Michigan team has allowed me to just that.

Ultimately, the issues of bias and discrimination are still so rampant and the increasingly hostile sociopolitical rhetoric against Arab and Muslim Americans only compounds the animosity towards this group. Working alongside Arab Americans in the ADC Michigan office as they lead this movement for acceptance and respect in their communities has undoubtedly been my favorite summer job to date.

