



# Anti-Arab Racism Resource Guide



CANADIAN ARAB  
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# An Introduction to Anti-Arab Racism

## Who is an Arab?

We define an “Arab” as any person who identifies as an Arab and/or claims ethnic or ancestral origins to one of the 23 member states of the Arab league: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Yemen, Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, Comoros, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, and Western Sahara.

We recognize that there are also non-Arab ethnic populations that reside and have a long history in the region known as the Arab world.

## What is Anti-Arab racism?

We define Anti-Arab racism as: Discrimination, profiling, surveillance, stereotyping, prejudice and violence against people of Arab origin that is based on their ethnicity, national origin, language, name, culture, or appearance. Originating in centuries of European academic scholarship, literature, politics, and art, anti-Arab racism can be found today in many aspects of Canadian artistic, literary, academic, political, social and economic life. Anti-Arab racism can be seen today as over-representation of negative stories about Arabs in the news; dehumanising stereotypes about Arabs in film and educational curricula; surveillance of Arab communities and organisations; significantly high rates of unemployment and poverty in comparison to other racial groups; lower average income levels than other racial groups; and support for imperialist foreign policies. Anti-Arab racism is founded on the core belief that the Arab world and the people and culture that originate from it represent values and traditions that are contradictory to the values and traditions seen as acceptable in Canada, thereby posing a direct threat to the “Canadian way of life.” Other common beliefs that constitute anti-Arab racism include:

- Arabs are inherently and unjustifiably violent and hateful, particularly against ethnic and religious groups outside of their own.
- Arabs are a single homogenous group, lacking diversity in race, religion, history, culture, sexual orientation, and political beliefs.
- The Arab world and the people and culture that originate from it are ‘backwards’ and barbaric; they never move forward in history and are always behind Western historical progress and civilization.
- Arab men are oppressive of women. The relationship between any Arab man and any Arab woman is an inevitably abusive and oppressive one with a strong power imbalance. Arab men must be disciplined by the West while Arab women must be rescued/liberated by the West.
- All Arabs are extremely wealthy and prone to extravagant spending.
- Arabs are hypersexual and have unnatural sexual norms.

## History of Anti-Arab Racism

Many falsely assume that 9/11 marked the birth of Anti-Arab racism in North America and Europe. This is a dangerous assumption that completely erases the deeply-rooted anti-Arab racism that has plagued much of Europe and North America for centuries. We trace the beginnings of anti-Arab racism to the late 1700s and identify five main historical periods that have defined, reproduced, and solidified anti-Arab racism over time.

### Period 1: The Rise of Orientalism, Late 1700s

According to renowned Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said's monumental work, *Orientalism* (1978), anti-Arab racism in its modern form can be traced to the late 17th century, when an academic discipline known as "Orientalism" emerged in Europe. Orientalism was the study of "the Orient": countries ranging from North Africa all the way to East Asia, and its practitioners were known as "Orientalists." Claiming to be an expert voice on all matters related to "the East," European Orientalists began to cultivate an enormous repository of art and literature about North Africans, Middle Easterners, Arabs, South Asians, and East Asians.

Unfortunately, while Orientalists claimed that the knowledge they had produced about the so-called East was based on their neutral, objective, and realistic observations of the region, this was simply not true. In his book, Said demonstrates that Orientalists embedded their art and literature with biases, prejudices, and fantasies that reflected their status as citizens of the world's most powerful colonial empires. Often times, Orientalists would imitate one another's work, thereby reproducing the same stereotypical images over and over again. Year after year, thousands of stories and tales were written and sold in Europe portraying the East as a mysterious, sensual, violent, backwards, far-away land of forbidden pleasures where European taboos and moral codes no longer existed. Through Orientalism, a strict binary was built between "West" and "East"/ "Us" and "Them".

In the eyes of the Orientalist, as well as the average European who read, bought, shared, and enjoyed his<sup>1</sup> work, the West was civilised, moral, rational, intelligent, and progressive, while the East was uncivilised, immoral, irrational, stupid, backwards, and overall.. strange. "The East" as it existed (and continues to exist) in European imagination was therefore not an accurate representation of the real region; "The East" was what the Orientalist wanted it to be. And thus, the "Othering" of the East generally and the Arab world specifically was solidified.

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<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of Orientalists were men.



When you imagine an Arab home, neighborhood, place of worship, or street, what do you see? Do the images in your mind resemble Orientalist art?



Figure 1: *The Snake Charmer* (1879) by Jean-Léon Gérôme, The Clark Art Institute/WikiCommons. This image was chosen by Edward Said as the cover of his famous book, *Orientalism* (1978)



Figure 2: *The Fanatics Of Tangier* (1837-38) by Eugène Delacroix, Institute of Arts, Minneapolis.

Figure 3: *The Harem* (1876) by John Frederick Lewis, [Birmingham Museums Trust](#)



## Period 2: Colonization of the Arab World, Early 1800s- Mid 1900s

If Europeans are civilized and advanced, and Arabs are uncivilized and backwards, then the Europeans are automatically justified in their invasion, colonization, and forced governance of the Arab world - or so the British, French, and other European empires argued. "After all," they convinced themselves, "we know them better than they know themselves (thanks to Orientalism!); and therefore, we can govern them better than they could ever govern themselves." And thus, Orientalism had built the building blocks necessary for the justification of European colonial rule of the Arab world - the effects of which are still felt today. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, one Arab country after another was invaded and conquered by European colonial empires:

- **1798:** France colonizes Egypt
- **1830:** France colonizes Algeria
- **1868:** England colonizes Bahrain
- **1881:** France colonizes Tunisia
- **1882:** England invades and colonizes Egypt and Sudan
- **1884:** England colonizes part of modern-day Somalia, declaring it British Somaliland
- **1884:** France colonizes modern-day Djibouti, declaring it French Somaliland
- **1886:** France colonizes Comoros islands
- **1889:** Italy colonizes part of modern-day Somalia, declaring it Italian Somaliland
- **1904:** France colonizes Mauritania
- **1907:** France colonizes Morocco
- **1911:** Italy colonizes Libya
- **1914:** England colonizes Iraq
- **1916:** British and French diplomats Mark Sykes and Francois Georges-Picot draft the Sykes-Picot agreement: A plan to partition Ottoman-controlled territory and divide it into British and French-controlled countries
- **1916:** England colonizes Qatar
- **1917:** British foreign secretary Arthur James Balfour signs the Balfour Declaration, effectively handing Palestinian land over to a growing Zionist population
- **1920:** England colonizes Palestine
- **1920:** France colonizes modern-day Syria and Lebanon
- **1937:** England colonizes Yemen
- **1948:** The State of Israel is created on Palestinian land

From 1798 to 1948, the entire Arab world fell under the control and colonial rule of various European imperialists. As was the case for all other parts of the world that also experienced colonization, the division, de-stabilization, oppression, and violence inflicted upon the populations of these countries changed the region in ways that simply cannot be underestimated. It must be noted, however, that each country bravely resisted and fought against their colonial oppressors, with the majority successfully gaining independence.

### **Period 3: Ramifications of the Arab-Israeli and Gulf Wars, 1960s - 1990s**

When we move from Europe to America, we find that Orientalist stereotypes and racist anti-Arab images had taken quite the stronghold on American public imagination as well. In his book, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2014), Lebanese-American scholar Jack Shaheen found that from 1896 to 2001, 99.93% of American movies that featured images of Arabs or Arab characters portrayed them negatively. Although no comparable study has been done in the Canadian context, there is hardly any evidence that Canadian popular culture offered friendlier images of Arabs.

Though Orientalism and anti-Arab racism have remained a consistent feature of North American portrayals about Arabs for more than a century, scholars mark a significant up-turn in anti-Arab stereotyping in the 1960s, amidst the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. During this period, there was a strong resurgence of anti-Arab stereotypes, a rise in explicit media bias against Arabs, as well as new surveillance programs of Arabs in America.

Beginning in 1967 and carrying on until 1975, the United States government operated a surveillance program to spy on its Arab population. The program was code-named “Operation Boulder” and it allowed 13 federal agencies to collect information on over 150,000 Arabs in the country. Information was distributed to three foreign governments and 17 federal agencies. When lawyer Abdeen Jabara took the United States government to court, it was revealed that the government had been illegally spying on Arab citizens.<sup>2</sup>

The 1990s, which began with the Gulf War, saw anti-Arab racism jump to new heights once again. In her article, “Imperial Whiteness and the Diasporas of Empire,” Professor Nadine Naber writes,

The 1990s Gulf War marked one of the most widespread periods of anti-Arab/anti-Muslim violence in the United States up until that period—from fires that destroyed Arab American businesses to public beatings, hate crimes,

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<sup>2</sup> To learn more about “Operation Boulder,” listen to the following podcast episode: <https://www.faiobserver.com/podcasts/kerning-culture-network-arab-americans-us-surveillance-program-american-news-73494/>



firebomb attacks, bomb threats, and vandalism—contributing to increased representations and treatment of Arab Americans as different from and inferior to persons perceived to be whites.<sup>3</sup>

For Arabs in America who had family members in affected countries, the burden was doubled: not only did they have to deal with news of attacks on their loved ones, but also with personal and state-sanctioned violence right at their own doors.

The 1990s were no less traumatic for Arabs in Canada. With Canada's participation in the Gulf War came organized surveillance of Arab, specifically Iraqi, communities by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Hundreds of Arabs in Canada were randomly visited by the CSIS and interrogated about their faith and religiosity, their connections with people in Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries, their political beliefs and allegiances, their thoughts on the Gulf War, amongst other topics. Arab organizations at the time also received several complaints from people who were shown pictures of other Arab-Canadians and made to answer questions about them.<sup>4</sup>

It is critical to note, therefore, that although surveillance of Arabs in Canada and the United States skyrocketed after 9/11, the foundation for this surveillance, harassment, and profiling had already been laid out far in advance.

“When you were in Iraq, did you ever belong to a political party?”

“Did you ever travel to Iran?”

“Are you Shia or Sunni?”

“Do you practice your faith? Do you attend services?”

“What are your feelings about the [Gulf] war?”

“Do you support the government of Saddam Hussein?”

“How do you feel about Canada's role in participating [in the Gulf War]? In that it [Iraq] is your homeland and the place of your birth?”

“Do you think that Canada should have avoided playing a role in the war?”

These are just some of the interrogation questions directed by CSIS agents to an Iraqi-Canadian in his home in 1991. This man was not involved in any political activity in neither Iraq nor Canada. His only crime was being Iraqi and joining an Islamic study group in Vancouver.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Naber. (2014). Imperial Whiteness and the Diasporas of Empire. *American Quarterly*, 66(4), 1107–1115.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2014.0068>

<sup>4</sup> Kashmeri, Z. (2000). When CSIS Calls: Canadian Arabs, Racism, and the Gulf War. In Kinsman, Buse, D. K., & Steedman, M., *Whose National Security?: Canadian State Surveillance and the Creation of Enemies*. Between the Lines.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## Period 4: Surveillance, Profiling, Torture, and Imperialism Post-9/11

After the September 11 attacks, already rampant anti-Arab discourse reached even newer, unprecedented heights. This built the foundation for a new wave of American imperialism - as well as Canadian imperialism, albeit it to a lesser extent - in the Arab world, as well as new levels of surveillance of Arabs and Muslims in North America. When we examine a timeline of the events that followed 9/11, we find that millions of Arabs living both domestically and internationally were forced to pay the price for a crime they did not commit.

- **October 2001, 45 days after 9/11:** The Patriot Act<sup>6</sup> is passed in the United States, allowing for increased surveillance which primarily targeted Arab and Muslim communities. According to the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), the Patriot Act expanded the government's authority to wiretap and monitor both citizens' and non-citizens' domestic and international phone calls, collect their bank records and credit reports, gather their email correspondences, and obtain virtually any piece of personal information they desired. Once this information is collected, it need not be destroyed, even if the suspect being searched is proven innocent.
  - The Patriot Act also allowed for "[Sneak and Peek](#)" searches, which meant that federal law enforcement agencies could "enter a house, apartment or office with a search warrant when the occupant is away, search through his/her property and take photographs-in some cases seizing property and electronic communications-and not tell the owner until later."
- **October 2001:** Canada passes Bill C-36, the Anti-Terrorism Act, which aimed to freeze the assets of any individual or organization suspected of funding terrorism abroad. The Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions (OSFI) produced and distributed a list of suspected terrorists' names to financial institutions in order to freeze their assets and close their accounts. In her 2003 article, "No Exit: Racial Profiling and Canada's War against Terrorism," Dr. Reem Bahdi notes that racial profiling of Arabs and Muslims was made possible through the OSFI's instructions to financial institutions "to regard with suspicion not only the people whose names are actually on the list, but also anyone whose name *resembles* the name of a listed person."<sup>7</sup> The effect this had on those carrying Arab or Muslim-sounding names was devastating. Dr. Bahdi gives the example of a man named "Abd Al-Hadi Al-Iraqi," whose name was included on the list along with his alias, "Abu

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<sup>6</sup> The implications of the Patriot Act are too many to list here.

<sup>7</sup> Bahdi. (2003). No exit: racial profiling and Canada's war against terrorism. *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* (1960), 41(2-3), p. 302.



Abdullah,” an extremely popular Arab name. Consequently, anyone who was named or who went by “Abu Abdullah,” automatically became suspect.

- Once a financial institution views an individual with suspicion, it becomes obligated to provide their name, address, date of birth, and Social Insurance Number to the CSIS and the RCMP – *even* if the individual proved their innocence to the institution. “Hence,” writes Dr. Bahdi, “the mere fact that someone has a certain common Arabic name in and of itself makes that person the object of suspicion, requires proof of innocence, and draws the attention of security officials.”<sup>9</sup>
- **January 2002:** The U.S. Government opens the infamous military prison, Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. According to ACLU, the prison has been nicknamed the [“island outside the law,”](#) and has become known for its indefinite detention of suspects without charges, trial, or legal representation, and for its inhumane torture techniques. Almost 800 men have been sent to Guantanamo since 2002, the overwhelming majority of which are Arab Muslims.
- **March 2003:** The American invasion of Iraq begins, [resulting in birth defects, cancer, diseases, and miscarriages](#) as a result of chemicals used during American attacks, [inhumane torturing of political prisoners](#), an estimated [one million deaths, and 3-5 million refugees](#).

It can be argued that few other moments in modern history have been more traumatic for the global Arab community than the post-9/11 period.

### **Period 5: The Rise of Global Hate Amidst A Refugee Crisis, Post-2014**

After the birth of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, many have observed and pointed out the substantial difference in treatment of those fleeing Ukraine and those fleeing places like Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and various other countries, Arab and non-Arab alike. While the horrors seen in Ukraine have been widely condemned and have garnered global sympathy and solidarity – rightfully so – many have been left wondering, “Why doesn’t the world react the same way when we’re the ones forced out of our homes?”

In [a CBC article](#) comparing the global response to the Ukrainian and other refugee crises, the writers note that from the Syrian refugee crisis to the Ukrainian crisis, Central European countries’ migrant policies “shifted from ‘We aren't going to let anyone in’ to ‘We're letting everyone in.’” Similarly, the European Union (EU), which has opened its doors for Ukrainian refugees on humanitarian grounds, has previously

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 302-303.

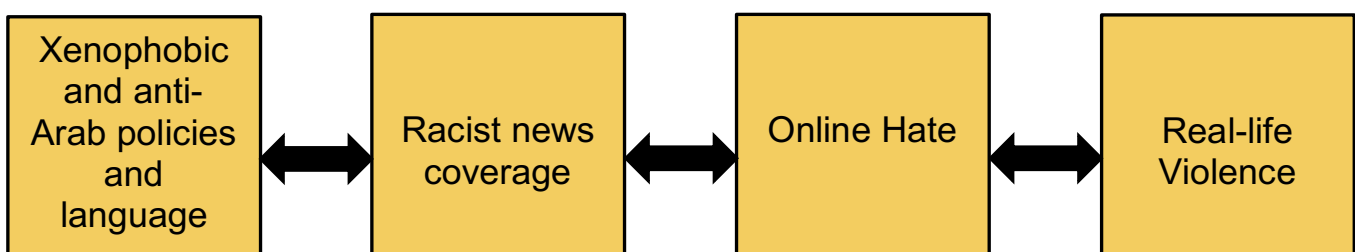
paid Libya to stop migrants from reaching its shores. In Western media, Ukrainian refugees have been described as “prosperous, middle-class people,” unlike their “uncivilized” counterparts in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, when we look back on media coverage of other refugee crises at their peaks, many of which were coming out of the Arab world, we find that an overwhelming majority was negative.

In his [article](#) on UK and Australian newspaper coverage, Samuel Parker (2015) found that Arab and African refugees and asylum seekers were primarily represented as criminals, deviants, and “unwanted invaders.” In another [article](#) on depictions of Syrian refugees specifically, Zahra Mustafa-Awad and Monika Kirner-Ludwig found that dehumanizing metaphors and descriptions of Syrian refugees as economic burdens were often used by American, British, and German news media alike. Depictions of Arab migrants generally also frequently reproduced and further solidified Orientalist stereotypes: Arab men were depicted as violent, savage, physical and sexual threats, while Arab women were depicted as oppressed, helpless, and lacking agency.

In addition to anti-migrant language and policies as well as racist media coverage, the Syrian refugee crisis in particular also saw a significant rise in online hate speech. In Canada, hate speech against refugees and immigrants rose [600%](#) from 2015 to 2016, partly influenced by the election of Donald Trump. In France, far-right figure Albert Camus’ “[Great Replacement](#)” theory - which claims that European populations will soon be ethnographically replaced by majority-Muslim Middle Easterners and Africans - gained traction on French, and later international far-right social media. In Germany, a rise in hate speech against refugees, migrants, and Muslims led to the German government reaching an agreement with Google, Facebook and Twitter to apply tougher penalties on hate speech.

What is most dangerous about online hate speech is that it often leads to offline violence. According to a 2018 German [study](#), “[A]reas with higher Facebook populations saw up to 50 per cent more anti-refugee incidents – mostly violent crimes, including refugees’ homes being set on fire – than the national average.” Additionally, when internet connection was lost, violent hate crimes dropped significantly.

The last decade has seen Arab refugees being met with anti-migrant, anti-Arab, and Islamophobic policies, xenophobic language from politicians, racist media coverage, online hate, and real-life violent hate crimes, all of which feed into one another. After witnessing the international treatment of Ukrainian refugees, what many have known all along has been made abundantly clear: better treatment of refugees, Arab and non-Arab alike, is possible.



## Anti-Arab Racism Today

Understanding anti-Arab racism today requires us to examine both the interpersonal and systemic forms of discrimination, profiling, and violence against Arabs. In this section, we shine a light on some of the most shocking statistics concerning Arab populations in Canada, and share some examples of the ongoing violence and discrimination that Arabs experience in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. We conclude the section by offering some examples where systemic and interpersonal racism collaborate to create especially hostile environments for Arabs.

### Systemic Manifestations of Anti-Arab Racism - Statistics

#### Poverty

- [36.2%](#) of the Arab population in Canada lives in poverty according to the Low-Income Measure after Tax (LIM-AT). This is the highest of any demographic, and nearly three times higher than the poverty rates of White people.

#### Employment Rates

- According 2016 Statistics Canada Census Data, Arab men have the second highest unemployment rate after Black men
- Arab women have the highest unemployment rate of any demographic group; more than twice the unemployment rate of White women
- Together, Arabs as a single group have the highest unemployment rates of all demographic groups in Canada. This is despite the fact that they have the [fourth highest](#) population percentage of those with postsecondary degrees.

#### Income

- Arab women have the [lowest average income](#) of any demographic .
- [75%](#) of the Arab population is in the bottom half of family income deciles, and [26%](#) are in the bottom decile. Both percentages are higher than any other demographic. Only [25%](#) are in the top half of family income deciles, the lowest of any other demographic.
- [76%](#) of first-generation Arabs are in the bottom half of family income distribution, more than any other demographic.

#### Home Ownership Rates

- Arabs have the second lowest home ownership rates in Canada, tied with Latin Americans at [43.4%](#).

#### Financing Businesses

- [26.2%](#) of Arab businesses report finding obstacles in obtaining finances - higher than any other demographic.

#### Likelihood of Being Stopped by Police

- Middle Easterners in Ottawa, the majority of which are Arab, are [3 times](#) more likely to be stopped by police while driving than White people.
- Middle Eastern men between the ages of 16 to 24 are [12 times](#) more likely to be stopped by police while driving than White people.

The fight against Arab racism therefore requires intentional changes on a policy level.

## Interpersonal Manifestations of Anti-Arab Racism – Examples

Before delving into some of the examples listed below, we encourage readers to keep in mind that thousands of hate crimes and go unreported each year. In Canada, under-reporting of hate crimes has been a consistent trend, with some studies estimating the number of reported hate crimes to be only [1-5%](#) of the total hate crimes in the country. Therefore, when it comes to documenting anti-Arab hate crimes, we're hardly scratching the surface.

### July, 2019 – Montreal

- [Woman gets harassed](#) by Francophone man after he hears her speak Arabic. Man calls her a slut and asks her daughter if he can have sex with her mother.

### May, 2021 – Ottawa

- Couple gets [physically attacked](#) for speaking Arabic

### February, 2015 – Detroit

- Man gets [physically attacked](#) after speaking Arabic to his kids; “terrorist,” “ISIS,” “Go back to your country”

### October, 2019 - San Diego

- Syrian refugee teenager gets [brutally beaten](#) on the bus while talking in Arabic on the phone; “F\*ck Arabs,” “What trash are you speaking?”

### 2017, UK

- [Study](#): “**The Racialization of ‘Muslim-Sounding Names’**”: All examples used are people who have Arabic names or get mistaken for having Arabic names
  - **Example 1**: Nurse refuses to tell an English woman with a Moroccan married-surname the sex of her baby - supposedly under the impression that the woman would prefer a boy and would therefore abort a girl.
  - **Example 2**: Man named Naze stated that people have disputed the origins of his first name, arguing that it is not ‘English’ but ‘Arabic’ and that he faced discrimination as a result
  - **Example 3**: Man named “Jamal Hassan Hemdaoui” explains that a hotel receptionist was expecting “[O]ne of those Iraqi terrorists” when she saw



his name. He explains that people see him as Arab and therefore Muslim: “Jamal felt his experiences have been “purely because [people] know the name is Arabic”

## When the Personal and Systemic Intersect

### April, 2016 – LAX

- Arab student [gets removed](#) off of flight for speaking Arabic; “InshaAllah’ may have been the trigger”

### 2015, Chicago

- Two Arab men get [temporarily removed](#) from Southwest Airlines plane after passenger expresses discomfort upon hearing them speak Arabic

### 2019, Cleveland

- Emirati tourist wearing traditional United Arab Emirates (UAE) dress [accused by hotel staff](#) of supporting ISIS and gets detained by police

In each of these cases, while it may be tempting to focus solely on the individuals who expressed discomfort at the sound of the Arabic language or the hotel staff who associated traditional UAE dress and Arabic-speaking with terrorism, it is critical to also reflect on the role that law enforcement and airline companies play in legitimizing the assumption that “Arab-ness” is an inherently dangerous trait worthy of suspicion and investigation.