Title
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MIDDLE EASTERN ENTREPRENEURS: AT HOME IN THE MISSION
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While San Francisco’s Mission District is renowned as one of the most distinct Latino communities in America, it is also home to a very different ethnic group from half a world away. For decades, a tight-knit circle of Arab immigrants, Christian and Muslim alike, have run businesses in the heart of the Mission. They came from a swath of Middle Eastern countries extending from Lebanon to Yemen. Now they run many of the liquor stores, grocery stores, tobacco stores, cafés and restaurants on the streets of the Mission that help fuel the area's burgeoning economy. They have become part of the Mission’s fabric.

They came with dreams of supporting their families and owning businesses of their own, while enjoying the American freedoms of speech, religion and economic prosperity that may be all too absent in select regions of their home countries. “They come here, they succeed, they grow and they help their countries back home. They want to see their children live a better life than they did,” says one Moroccan immigrant who works as a barista in the Mission. “They come charged like batteries. They’re not lost. They know what they want,” she adds.
In their home countries, many of these immigrants owned small businesses so it was natural for them to do the same in America. Some Arab Americans are not formally educated, barely making it to high school. They learned from a young age to depend on themselves since their home countries have fewer social programs than America. While Arab Americans are found in every profession, the 2000 U.S. Census found that 88 percent of them work in the private sector. Their spirit of entrepreneurism has remained constant.

Many of them settled in metropolitan areas like San Francisco, and the Mission District was especially attractive because of its year-round warm weather, bus/train lines and foot traffic – ideal for small stores and shops. They have come from over a dozen different countries, and are separated by different religious and national identities, as well as political affiliations. But they also are connected by their histories, language, and ideals, especially the importance of the family in Arab culture.

There is the second generation Palestinian who runs a coffee shop that is the last of a long line of businesses his family opened in the Mission over five decades ago. Down the street is another Palestinian whose ownership of a smoke shop is a symbol of his dream of freedom in America. There is the restaurant owner who serves as the community matchmaker, honoring old
country traditions by bringing single Arab Muslims together. Nearby is the Jordanian storekeeper, coming to grips with her daughter's decision to marry an El Salvadorian man.

There is the corner stone owner making peace with selling alcohol that is condemned by his religion, but that provides sustenance for his family back home. There is the chef who combined a grocery store with restaurant quality food and turned it into a unique chain of businesses. There is a coffee connoisseur who has expanded his businesses one shop at a time all across the Bay Area.

These are the stories about each of these Arab Americans who toil every day at their businesses in the heart of the Mission, balancing their desire to preserve their cultural identity with the demands of assimilating in a new world.

**Source List:**


