Little Egypt and the North African Community of Astoria, Queens

This timeline has been assembled by members of Malikah and residents of Astoria as an exercise in community history. Drawing from various sources such as public records, oral histories, and information passed down from generation to generation, this non-exhaustive timeline charts a story of the “Little Egypt” neighborhood in Astoria, Queens. It is a predominately North African community, with residents hailing from Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria. The establishment of the neighborhood paralleled wider patterns of North African and Arab migration to the US, referenced here to offer context. Highlighting select events such as litigation affecting migration and citizenship, and the mobilization of national civil rights movements, as well as community-led initiatives to ensure wellbeing for Astoria residents, this offers a lens into a thriving Queens enclave amidst a moment of rapid change and gentrification.

1527 Mustafa Azemmouri, an enslaved Black Amazigh Moroccan, is the first known North African to arrive in part of a Spanish expedition to Florida, to come to what is now the United States.

1892 Mohamed Jeda becomes the first known Albanian person to immigrate to the US.

1915 The first majority Christian immigrant from Syria, argues to be categorized as “white” instead of “Asian” in order to receive US citizenship, responding to stipulations in the Nationality Act of 1917 that declared only white, male property owners were eligible for citizenship.

1934 The first purpose-built mosque in the US is built by Syrian and Lebanese immigrants in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

1957 Sami Boulos becomes one of the earliest recorded Egyptians to immigrate to New York City (NYC). A doctoral student, he planned to leave the country once his visa expiried, but it was extended after he was hired at SUNY New Paltz.

1970s Exclusionary racial quotas are repealed under the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. A result of civil-rights organizing, this revision presents opportunities for working-class Egyptians, Algerians, and Moroccans to immigrate to NYC.

1979 The Egyptian Center, religious organization, is founded in Astoria, Queens. The masjid is led by Sheikh Mohamed Atef, a community leader who has founded many institutions in Queens, including the first Arabic language school, a Quran school, a pilgrimage service, and a halal butcher shop.

1983 Mahmoud Saber opens Mahmoud’s, one of the first halal food stands in Astoria, which mostly serves Muslim cab drivers. Today, it still stands on the corner of 34th Avenue and Steinway Street.

1989 Ali El Sayed, an Egyptian chef, opens Kebab Cafe, the first Egyptian restaurant in Astoria, Queens. The restaurant remains filled with art, paintings, and photographs.

1990s Many working-class North Africans—including several of the women who collaborated on this exhibition—flee economic tensions and military dictatorships and migrate to NYC.

2001 Attacks killing 3,000 people are carried out at the World Trade Center on September 11. In response to the attacks, the USA Patriot Act is introduced, targeting existing immigrant and non-immigrant Muslim populations and paving way to expand The Global War on Terror. These efforts lead to the US invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003.

2004 Astoria is founded as the first Arabic language newspaper published and distributed in Queens.

2005 Majid Dar El-Dawah is founded as an important space serving the North African Muslim community in Queens. It offers services including Arabic classes, Quran lessons, and karate workshops.

2007 Restrictive immigration policies impede the migration of Muslims and Arabs to the US. Simultaneously, motivated deportations of Muslim immigrants occur. The average visitation to the US from people of majority-Muslim countries drops by 2019.

2007 The New York Police Department (NYPD) launches a mass surveillance program on Muslims and Arabs in New York, including those in Astoria.

2008 The US invades Iraq with air strikes in Baghdad. The decision to go to war is not by the largest simultaneous protests around the world.

2010 Malikah is founded by Rana Abdelhamid. It offers receiving community funding from City Council District 22 through participatory budgeting — a process in which New Yorkers, regardless of their immigration status, directly decide how to allocate a portion of the city’s budget to address local needs.

2013 The New York State Legislature introduces laws to disaggregate “North Africa” from a white ethno-racial category on data-collection forms across the state.

2020 Muslim student constituency. The first COVID-19 case in the US is reported in NYC. Working-class immigrant neighborhoods in Queens experience most severe impacts of the pandemic in the country.

2020 The Astoria Halal Fridge is founded by Rana Abdelhamid, Bryant Silva, and Nonya Khedr to address the realities of food insecurity impacting the Muslim community in the neighborhood.

2021 Rana Abdelhamid runs for US Congress as the first Egyptian from Queens to run.

2022 The Halal Food Program is offered in all NYC DOE schools, following advocacy from local Muslim community groups.

2022 Organizers host the first Eid al-Fitr Festival at Astoria Park to bring together Queens communities in celebration.

2022 Rent prices in Astoria increase by 34% on average, the highest change in all of Queens, according to gentrification, luxury development, and displacement of immigrant working-class communities continues across NYC.

2022 Malikah Muslim Women’s Council receives community funding from City Council District 22 through participatory budgeting — a process in which New Yorkers, regardless of their immigration status, directly decide how to allocate a portion of the city’s budget to address local needs.

2023 The New York State Legislature introduces laws to disaggregate “North Africa” from a white ethno-racial category on data-collection forms across the state.

2023 New York Muslim Organizing Collective receives sound permits to play the athan from mosques during the month of Ramadan, the first time the call to prayer is allowed to be amplified on streets in Astoria.

MoMA PS1

MoMA PS1 is a dedicated exhibition space that embarks MoMA PS1’s commitment to community-centered practices with artists and collaborators. MoMA PS1 acts as a platform for exhibitions by partners of collaborators who host curatorial and educational programs affiliated with their respective organizations. Established in 2009, MoMA PS1’s mission is to cultivate excellence in contemporary art and foster an interdisciplinary storytelling project in Homemor, concluding their eight-month residency at MoMA PS1.
Masjid Al-Iman
Al-Iman translates to “the faith” in Arabic. This mosque is one of Astoria’s largest Muslim houses of worship and will soon host a school. During Fridays on Steinway Street, several hundred men leave work and make their way to the jammed mosque to pray with their fellow Muslims. After 9/11, the mosque became a sanctuary for Muslims on Steinway, but it also became a site of police surveillance.

Established: 1988
Location: 24-30 Steinway Street, Astoria, NY 11103

Little Morocco
Little Morocco is a Moroccan-owned restaurant on Steinway Street that serves primarily Moroccan dishes. It is known for its Friday couscous special, which many North Africans are accustomed to eating as a celebratory meal occasion after they are done with Friday prayer.

Established: 2006
Location: 24-39 Steinway St, Queens, NY 11103

Masjid El-Ber
As one of the oldest and most iconic mosques in Astoria, Masjid El-Ber serves as many people’s first connection to the Muslim community in NYC. It also hosted the first Arabic school in Astoria.

Established: 1980
Location: 3805 30th St, Astoria, NY 11106

Mombar
Mombar is a restaurant run by Chef Moustafa El Sayed known for its iconic artwork and stunning exterior. It took Chef Moustafa seven years to complete the artwork on its door. Inside, there is a range of his work that extends from chairs, sculptures, and paintings to the ceiling and floor tiles. Every part of the experience at Mombar, from the music to the food, is a testament to Chef Mostafa’s brilliant artistic exploration.

Established: 2000
Location: 25-22 Steinway St, Queens, NY 11103

Islam Fashion
Islam Fashion is the first Muslim clothing store for the North African community in Astoria. It has carried hijabs and long dresses long since it was almost impossible to locate these items in NYC. The store allows many women to find the clothes that feel authentic to themselves and their traditions.

Established: 1996
Location: 25-31 Steinway St, Queens, NY 11103

Mahmoud’s Corner
Mahmoud’s Corner is regarded as one of the first halal carts to serve New Yorkers. Chef Mahmoud immigrated to New York from Egypt in the early 1980s and has been serving beloved halal bites in Astoria for decades.

Established: 1983
Location: 32-90 34th Ave, Queens, NY 11103

Kabab Cafe
Kabab Cafe is the oldest restaurant in the community. It specializes in Egyptian cuisine and is run by Chef Ali El Sayed, a friendly and eccentric Egyptian chef who will tell customers everything about the history of Egypt and its food if they let him. It’s a pretty small restaurant, but it’s also filled with art, paintings, and old photographs.

Established: 1989
Location: 25-12 Steinway St, Queens, NY 11103