Arabs in America: Understanding the Arab American Community
The Arab World
An Overview
The Arab World: An Overview

- The Arab world is made up of 22 countries that are members of the Arab League with a population of over over 400 million
- The Arab world spans from North Africa to West Asia, giving way to diversity in faith, race, and dialects
- The three largest religious groups in the Arab world are Abrahamic: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam
- Faith, family, and community are essential components to Arab culture
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The Arab World can be divided into three major geographical regions:

- The Maghreb (North Africa)
- The Gulf Region
- The Levant

*Palestine is comprised of the West Bank and Gaza. Jerusalem is the contested capital of Palestine and Israel. Western Sahara is claimed by Morocco but disputed territory.
Who are the Arabs?

- Anyone who is a citizen of an Arab country or identifies as an Arab
- Culturally speaking, not everyone who lives in the Arab World sees themselves as Arab
- Not all Arabs are Muslim. Not all Muslims are Arab.
- The Middle East includes the Arab World in addition to other countries
- The majority of Arabs are united by a common language (with different dialects), and a shared identity in Arab history and similar customs
The category “Middle East” refers to a region of the world that is linked by a shared location, but not a common language. Therefore, Arab Americans should not be referred to as Middle Eastern Americans.
Muslims and Arabs are two different classifications of people. In fact, of the top ten countries with the largest Muslim populations, only three are Arab. While Muslims can be found all over the world, they are predominantly found in parts of Africa and Asia.
Central Arab Cultural Elements

Three dominant themes can be found across the Arab World

**FAITH**
Faith plays a very important role in the lives of most Arabs, regardless of their religion.

**FAMILY**
Family is an extremely vital element to the lives of Arabs, not only as a source of support, but also of identity.

**COMMUNITY**
An extension of faith and family is community. It is a connection to culture for enjoyable and organizational purposes.
Diversity of the Arab World

The Arab World is diverse in terms of its people, history, dialects, and local customs. However they share a common language, values, and to some extent, culture.
History of Arab American Immigration
History of the Arab American Community

• The U.S., since its first formation, has had a long history of engagement with the Arab World.
• Changes in immigration law continue to have significant impacts on the Arab American community.
• Arab immigration to the U.S. has existed over 100 years.
• Each immigration wave has its own unique characteristics.
1ST Wave of Arab Immigration to the U.S. Late 1800s – 1940s

The first immigration wave from the Arab World began in the late 19th and early 20th century.

The majority of these immigrants were from “Greater Syria”, which is present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine.
The early Arab immigrants shared a number of common features, which included:

- Primarily Christians
- From rural areas
- With little to no education
- Mainly men, who were then followed by increasing numbers of women
The 2nd wave of Arab immigrants encompassed more diverse characteristics, which included:

- More Muslims as well as more Christians
- From both urban and rural location
- More educated which resulted in a **brain drain** to the homeland
These immigrants came for political reasons as opposed to economic and educational purposes.

- This wave of immigration was the result of the U.S. war in Iraq, civil war in Syria, and continued conflicts in Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine.
Today, Arab (and Muslim) immigration is part of the larger debate on immigration reform in the U.S.

- Much of this discussion is in the context of security concerns, and whether or not increased immigration from the Arab World (even in the form of student visas) should be allowed.
Arab Americans and Religion
Christian Arab Americans

Based on various reports, 65-70% of Arab Americans are Christian.

In the past 10 years, most Arab immigrants have been Muslim as compared to 15 to 30 years ago when they were mostly Christian.

For those who follow the faith of their ancestors, they primarily fall into what is known as Eastern Rite churches.

Some churches, such as the Maronites, Melkites, and Chaldeans, fall under the Catholic Church in Rome. Others, such as the Antiochian Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, and Egyptian Copts, fall under their own religious orders.

Other Arab Americans left their Eastern Rite churches for Roman Catholic churches as a matter of convenience.
A Muslim is a follower of Islam which often is viewed as a singular religion. However, it is a diverse religion that has many important distinctions.

The major distinction is between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims. Like with all religions, the schisms occur as followers devote themselves to the messages of different leaders. A small part of Islam is the Druze which incorporates a variety of belief systems into their theology, described as a gnostic movement.

30-35% of Arab Americans are Muslims. This does not account for all Muslim Americans, as many come from non-Arab nations, or are not of immigrant origins (such as the Nation of Islam).
In Islam, the idea of wearing a *hijab*, or head covering, is rooted in modesty. Whether or not a woman wears a hijab, and the manner in which it is worn, is based more in local cultural customs. Some women will coordinate the hijab worn to match their outfit.

The wearing of the hijab has undergone ebbs and flows in Arab and Muslim society. In the period after September 11, 2001, many more American Muslim women adopted the hijab out of a sense of solidarity to combat the negative reactions aimed at Muslims.

Other women choose not to wear the hijab at all. This can have less to do with a sense of liberation than a personal choice. Also, some wear it in certain contexts only, like religious events or family gatherings.
Arab American Demographics
Who are the Arab Americans?

- Arab Americans are in many ways distinct from American society, and in other ways very similar.
- Not everyone with Arab ancestry identifies as Arab American.
- There are close to 4 million Arab Americans in the United States.
- According to the U.S. Census, Arab Americans are classified as “White” although they come from Asia and Africa.
Arab Americans can be found throughout the United States, and literally in every state. However, there are certain areas that are known to have large Arab American communities. Not surprisingly, these are around major metropolitan areas, such as New York, Detroit, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington, DC. The largest concentration of Arab Americans can be found in Michigan, where some estimate that upwards of 500,000 Arab Americans.
Arab American Culture, Customs, and Traditions
Arab American Culture, Customs and Traditions

- Assimilation and acculturation are parts of the processes through which immigrants go through when arriving to a new society.
- While Arab culture is diverse, there are certain traits that are central to it.
- Most Arab Americans speak English as native speakers.
- Food plays a central part of Arab (American) culture and holiday traditions.
Children and grandchildren of immigrant Arab Americans generally do not speak the Arabic language. However, an emphasis on maintaining Arabic in the household is strong with first generation Arab Americans and new immigrants.

The Arabic language is comprised of 28 letters, and is written from right to left.
Arab Americans can see two general language patterns. For those who are descendants from the early immigration waves, English is the primary (and perhaps only) language spoken.

For more recent immigrants, they can live in a bi-lingual household. Census data indicates that almost 25% speak English less than “very well.” On the other hand, this means three-quarters do speak English very well.

Depending on the country of origin, other languages, such as French could be spoken in addition to Arabic.
Arabic Calligraphy is the art form in which phrases in Arabic, often taken from the Quran, are written in a beautiful script. This is why it is also known as Islamic Calligraphy.

In its modern form, Arabic calligraphy can be found in the logos of companies, and in representations of animals.
Hospitality is very important in Arab culture and this holds true for Arab Americans, as well. Providing food and drink, such as tea or coffee, is typical when visiting a home, or even business.

It is important that this hospitality is accepted and appreciated, as rejecting such attempts is a breach with customs and norms.

Ahlan wa Sahlan
“Welcome”
Greetings in Arab culture can take on a variety of forms, depending on the context and familiarity between people. Often, a handshake in formal settings will be expected, although this can be withheld by persons who follow the religious tradition of not touching members of the opposite sex who are not related. In these settings, a slight nod, a right hand placed above the heart, or bow will be substituted.

For those who are close friends, a kiss on each cheek may occur. This can occur between men and between women. This is even the case between heads of state.

Marhaba--Hello
Ahlan wa Sahlan--Welcome
Assalaam Alaykum—Peace be upon you (religious expression)
Arab American Holidays

Most celebrations for Arab Americans coincide with religious events and national holidays. These combine both Arab and American traditions, food, and family gatherings.

There are also events to celebrate their ancestral heritage and homeland. Such as *mahrajans/festivals* are opportunities for families to reunite, as well as persons of non-Arab ancestry to experience a taste of Arab culture.

Rihanna Harajli, 3, of Dearborn gets her face painted by Manal Alaktama, 19, also of Dearborn, during Sunday’s Eid Festival.

Our Lady of Lebanon Mahrajan, Wheeling, WV

Dearborn Arab International Festival, photo from the festival site

The cross is carried out of Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church in Friday’s Easter service. *Photo: Mal Fairclough*
Food for Special Occasions

As with other cultures, certain foods are associated with certain special occasions. These traditions remain throughout the generations, eliciting fond memories of childhood and homeland.

*Ma’amoul*, pastries filled with dates and nuts, is typically enjoyed during holidays, especially during Easter and Ramadan.

Deep-fried *zalabieh* and *awwamat*, served in syrup, is eaten for all occasions and is often made during Epiphany.

*Mlabbas (Jordan almonds)* are almond candies that are served mainly during weddings.

Many variations of baklawa are enjoyed at all celebratory occasions.
In the Arab American Home

Within many Arab American homes, you can find elements of ethnic pride and ancestral heritage. This might be in the form of artifacts carried by immigrants, pictures of villages, and/or general symbols of Arab identity.
Issues Facing Arab Americans
Stereotypes of Arabs (and Muslims) pervade media in America. In many ways, Arabs are perhaps the most stereotyped group in the media. This is by no means a recent phenomenon, but one that has a long history and legacy.

The portrayal of Arabs and Arab Americans in news and entertainment media can be damaging to the understanding of Arab identity.

The roles of Arabs in film and television as terrorists, villains, or unnamed bystanders killed by US soldiers can perpetuates harmful stereotypes and indirectly relate all people of Arab background to the bad guys they see in the media.

The TV show *Homeland* has been accused of trafficking false images of the Arab world

The film *American Sniper* has been linked to hundreds of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim threats on Twitter
Hate Crimes Against Arab Americans

It can be difficult to know the number of hate crimes that have been committed against Arab Americans, largely because the FBI has only been tracking them since 2015. According to the FBI’s statistics, hate crimes against American Muslims rose at least to 67%.

The Southern Poverty Law Center has also reported a sharp increase in anti-immigrant hate crimes against Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Americans (who are often confused as Arab or Muslim) since the 2016 presidential elections.
For Arab American and Muslim American students, bullying can be an everyday feature of life. This is further complicated by adults who can share in the biases possessed by those doing the bullying. Global events, such as wars, economic crises, inflammatory political rhetoric, coupled with cultural differences create a climate that is ripe for victimization of children.

In the end, group-based bullying is rooted in the larger social and cultural climate. Images experienced in movies, on television, video games, and music, as well as through the words of educators, create a kind of tacit. In some instances explicit approval targeting Arab and Muslim-American students is permissible, even admirable, when those actions are seen as patriotic.
Arab American Professions, Education, and Achievements
While many early Arab immigrants sought opportunity in traditional immigrant routes of industrial work and homesteading, *pack peddling* (or peddling) became a hallmark. Peddlers would travel through the country side door to door, selling general products and ‘novelties from the Holy Land’ to customers. All what they needed was the determination to succeed, and a few goods to sell.

This eventually led to the opening of grocery stores, as peddlers looked for more stationary opportunities. Marriage and families also helped, providing the staff needed to run a store, creating a true family business and the achievement of their American Dream.
As with other immigrants, many Arab immigrants worked in manufacturing. After Henry Ford offered “$5 a day” for work, immigrants flocked to Detroit, Michigan to answer the call of higher wages. This led Detroit, and subsequently Dearborn (Michigan), to establishing a very large and diverse Arab-American community.
Immigrant parents wanted a better and easier life for their children. They *strongly* encouraged them into more professional vocations. Primarily, Arab immigrants looked for their children to become doctors, lawyers, or engineers - jobs that were seen to provide a healthy income, reliable stability, and social status that were part of their American dream.

Doctors, lawyers, and engineers became the calling for many Arab American youth, helping to fulfill the hopes of their parents, and integrating them into American economic life.
Arab Americans have historically placed a very high value on educational attainment. This has resulted in Arab Americans having education rates that exceed that of the general US population.

Census reports indicate that over 40% of Arab Americans have at least a bachelor’s degree, compared to 24% of the general US population.
Throughout their time in the United States, Arab Americans have contributed in significant ways to American society. Whether it be through their everyday work, extended family, broader community networks, and integration into civic life, their presence (along with that of other immigrant groups), has help to form the nation.

This tradition continues today in ways large and small. The following section identifies prominent Arab Americans across a variety of areas.
Notable Arab Americans in Entertainment

Rami Malek
Academy Award Best Actor winner was Egyptian-American Rami Malek for his role in “Bohemian Rhapsody.” He was the first Coptic-Egyptian to receive an Oscar.

Gigi Hadid
Palestinian American, Jelena Noura "Gigi" Hadid is an American fashion model who made her debut, ranking as one of the Top 50 Models in America.

Shakira
Shakira Isabel Mebarak is a Colombian singer, songwriter, dancer, and record producer of Lebanese heritage.

Salma Hayek
Lebanese American Actress Salma Hayek's father, Sami, is Lebanese-Mexican, hailing from the city of Baabdat, Lebanon.
Notable Arab Americans in Politics and Activism

There are very notable Arab Americans who have served in politics and areas of activism. These individuals have contributed to the fabric of civic life through their engagement in political activities and commitment to social causes.

Donna Shalala
US Secretary of Health & Human Services
President of the University of Miami

Ralph Nader
Consumer Advocate
Candidate for President

Ray LaHood
US Congressman
US Secretary of Transportation

Rashida Tlaib
US Congresswoman

John H. Sununu
Governor of New Hampshire
Chief of Staff to President George H.W. Bush
Arab Americans have continued the legacy of advancement in science and advancement known in the historical Arab World. In a variety of fields, Arab Americans build on the culture’s emphasis on education through leading research and discovery.

Elias Jame Corey
Organic Chemist and Nobel Prize in Chemistry winner (1990)

Christa McAuliffe
Teacher and Astronaut, killed in the Challenger tragedy.

Edward Said
Professor and Literary Theorist, Cultural Critic.

George Doumani
Geologist, author and explorer in Antarctica

Jack Shaheen
Professor and Media Analyst, focusing on Arab Stereotypes
Notable Arab Americans in Media and Literature

Arab culture has a long story-telling tradition. Arab Americans are continuing this tradition through literary, journalistic, and other media formats. The stories they tell and the work they do help to reflect social and cultural life.
Notable Arab Americans in Medicine

Danny Thomas
Comedian and actor who went on to found St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital. ALSAC in the title refers to the American Lebanese Syrian Associated Charities.

Michael DeBakey
Renowned cardiac surgeon whose work was instrumental in changing heart surgeries, including pioneering the artificial heart.
Business and entrepreneurship are viewed by Arabs as part of their cultural legacy. Arab American, descendants of immigrants in search of opportunity, still look for opportunities in business. Some of the most notable innovators in their areas of business are of Arab ancestry, fulfilling the American dream that their ancestors hoped.

**Paul Orfalea**
Founder of the Kinko’s copy-center chain.

**Sam Maloof**
Furniture designer, craftsman and woodworker, MacArthur fellowship recipient.

**Farouk Shami, CEO, Farouk Systems,**
Founder of Chi hair products.

**Steve Jobs**
Co-founder, chairman, and CEO of Apple, Inc.
Notable Arab Americans in Sports

Arab Americans have excelled in a variety of athletic pursuits, achieving championship status in their respective sports.

Doug Flutie
Professional football player in the NFL and CFL

Kelly Slater
World Champion professional surfer

Justin Abdelkader
Professional hockey player

Omar Hassan
Professional skateboarder

Bobby Rahal
Champion race car driver