

Arab Americans

*An Integral Part of
American Society*



AANM EDUCATIONAL SERIES

This booklet was produced by the Arab American National Museum – the only museum among the 17,500 museums in the United States that focuses on the history and contributions of Arab Americans – with funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

To learn more about the Arab American National Museum, visit www.arabamericanmuseum.org. For information on the Institute of Museum and Library Services, visit www.imls.gov.



Arab Americans

An Integral Part of American Society

Introduction

Arab Americans are among the many ethnic groups that make up the population of the United States. They trace their roots to the Arab World, which stretches from northern Africa to western Asia. Arab Americans are just as diverse as the 22 countries they come from.

Arab Americans have been an integral part of American society since its inception. With an estimated population of 4.2 million, Arab Americans live in every state of the union, in both small towns and large cities, with many concentrated communities in large metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Detroit, Chicago, Houston, Washington D.C. and New York City. Arab Americans practice different religions, work in a variety of fields, and have a range of educational backgrounds and political affiliations. Despite this diversity, Arab Americans have a shared sense of history, language and cultural heritage.

Arab Immigration

The First Arrivals

While there is no accurate information about when the first Arab arrived, records show that some were part of the slave trade. The first recorded Arab slave was Zammouri, also known by his slave name, Estebanico. Zammouri in Arabic means “someone from Zammour,” a town in Morocco. He arrived in North America in 1528. Because the Arab country of Morocco is in Africa, Zammouri is also considered to be the first African American to arrive in America.



Bust of Zammouri, a slave from Morocco thought to be the first Arab to land in North America (Courtesy Arab American National Museum)

Zammouri, the first Arab American, was sold into slavery in Morocco and brought to the U.S., where he eventually became a famous healer, interpreter and explorer. Zammouri was probably captured in 1511, when Portugal invaded his city. He was then sold into slavery and his captors renamed him Estebanico. After 16 years of captivity, he was taken to Florida as a part of a Spanish expeditionary force. Zammouri traveled over 6,000 miles between 1528 and 1536, trekking across the American Southwest. Some accounts say that he and his companions spent the first four years as prisoners of Native Americans until they were able to escape. Other Native Americans took them in and asked them to be medicine men. They were successful and their fame spread throughout the region. From this work, it is said that Zammouri learned six local dialects and was sought after as a translator. In 1539, he was asked to be the chief guide for a Spanish expedition to explore new territory. Unfortunately, on that trip, he met an untimely death when he became a victim of a struggle between Native Americans and European settlers.

While Zammouri is the first recorded slave brought to the United States, there were many more from Arab North African countries who joined the 12-15 million others taken into slavery over the next 400 years. Many of these slaves ended up in the current states of Georgia and North and South Carolina. It is difficult to know how today's Arab Americans are related to these slaves, since slaves were given new names. Like the descendants of other slaves, it is not easy for contemporary Arab Americans to trace their roots to their original families or homelands.

With the improvement of transportation, mostly due to the invention of the steamship, the interactions between the Arab World and the Americas increased rapidly during the 1800s. This improvement in transportation not only made immigration from Arab countries



The Bounassar family of Lebanon were among those Arabs who came through Ellis Island during the Great Migration (Courtesy Arab American National Museum)

to the U.S. much safer and faster, it also made it possible for many Americans to visit the Arab World, especially the Holy Land. It also led to increased activity by American missionaries, who encouraged Arab Christians to seek an education in the U.S.

The World's Fairs, popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s, also attracted many Arab craftsmen and merchants from the countries of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria to come and exhibit their products. Many stayed in the United States and are considered among the earliest Arab American immigrants.

The First Wave (1880s–1920s)

During the period from 1880-1924, known as the Great Migration, an estimated 20 million immigrants from around the globe came to the United States. They were motivated by the dream of providing better lives for themselves and their families. Among these immigrants were a large number of Arabs who came from what was known as Greater Syria, which includes the present-day countries of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Israel. The number of Arab immigrants was large enough to prompt the U.S. government to hire Najeeb Arbeely as a facilitator and interpreter. By 1924, approximately 200,000 Arabs were living in the United States.

The Arbeelys of Damascus, Syria were the first recorded Arab family to come to the United States with the intention of becoming citizens. Dr. Joseph Arbeely, his wife, six sons, and niece arrived in New York on August 20, 1878. A photograph of the Arbeely family appeared in a newspaper with the caption, “Syrians in America.” Due to Dr. Arbeely’s prominent reputation as a professor, the press welcomed the family with open arms. Two of Dr. Arbeely’s sons, Najeeb and Ibrahim, went on to establish the first Arabic language newspaper in America, *The Star of America*, in 1892.

The majority of Arabs who came during the Great Migration period were Christian men; an estimated 5-10% were Muslim. By 1919, half of Arab immigrants were women, a much higher percentage than many other immigrant groups. Most of these immigrants faced economic and political difficulties in their country of origin due to the collapse of the silk industry. Additionally, most Arab countries at the time were controlled by the declining Ottoman Empire, and their people were heavily taxed and forced to join the Ottoman army.

Many Arab immigrants settled in cities such as New York, Boston, Pittsburgh and Detroit, where peddling and the textile and automotive industries promised employment. Some homesteaded in North Dakota. As time passed, families brought their relatives over and communities were established to help new arrivals. Arab



The Founding Women's Club of the American Bekaa Moslem Society, Dearborn, Michigan, in 1938, a time when Muslims were a minority among Arab American immigrants (Courtesy Arab American National Museum)

immigrants, like others who came to the U.S. at the time, provided much-needed labor that helped transform the United States from a semi-agricultural society into one of the world's most advanced industrial powers.

Although it is possible to estimate the number of Arab immigrants who arrived in the U.S. during the Great Migration, it is almost impossible to know the exact number. This is due to two factors, the first of which is the various ways Arab immigrants were classified. Because Arab countries are located in both Asia and Africa, and because Arabs do not have common physical characteristics, Arabs were classified as Greek, Armenian, Turk, Ottoman, African, Asian, White or European. Secondly, before Ellis Island in New York Harbor became the major port of entry, immigrants entered the U.S. through Castle Garden, a facility in Manhattan. During that period, more than eight million people passed through Castle Garden, many of them from Arab countries. In 1897, the buildings at Castle Garden were destroyed by fire, as were all records going back to 1855. Therefore, of the many Arabs who came through Castle Garden, we only know of those whose stories were passed down through families, newspapers or other public records.

While the majority of immigrants during the Great Migration came through New York, some arrived through Boston Harbor. Some also reached the U.S. from South America. These immigrants were either turned away at Ellis Island and went to South or Central America and later immigrated to the U.S., or moved first to South America and later migrated north. By the early 1900s, many Arabs came to Texas via Mexico. El Paso directories of the time list Spanish first names with Arabic surnames. The large number of Arab immigrants required the El Paso Immigration Service to hire two Syrian interpreters, Salim Mattar and Esau Malooly.

Arabs on the Titanic

There were 154 Arabs on the infamous passenger liner, the R.M.S. Titanic, 29 of whom survived the wreck: four men, five children, and 20 women. The Titanic struck an iceberg while crossing the Atlantic in 1912. More than half of the crew and passengers died.

Arab immigration, like immigration from all non-European countries, started to slow down around 1917. The decline in U.S. economic growth during World War I gave rise to popular sentiments against immigrants, similar to what we see today. Between 1917 and 1924, the U.S. Congress passed several laws including the 1921 Quota Act and the Immigration Act of 1924. These laws established an immigration quota system that placed restrictions on immigrants from all countries except northern and western Europe.

The Second Wave (1950s-1960s)

The second wave of Arab immigration occurred in the post-World War II period, and was significantly more diverse than the first wave. Arab immigrants who came during this period included people from a greater number of Arab countries. In addition to Syria and Lebanon, immigrants came from countries such as Iraq, Egypt, Palestine and Jordan. These immigrants were both Christian and Muslim. Many were highly educated and came from urban middle-class backgrounds. Although strict immigration laws were still in effect, the U.S. made exceptions for this desirable group of educated immigrants.

At the end of the World War II, the United States was vying to become a superpower following the demise of European military and political influence. This prompted the recruitment of highly educated people – especially scientists, engineers and doctors – from around the world, including many Arab countries. While these new

professional immigrants from the Arab World (as well as other Asian and African countries) helped build a strong post-war America, their migration to the West took many educated and skilled citizens away from their countries of origin. This phenomenon is known as the “Brain Drain.”

During this period, two other major groups of Arabs arrived in the U.S. Yemenis, who were mostly unskilled, single men, came to work in American shipyards, in the mining and car industries, and as migrant farmers in the valleys of California. Some Palestinians were also allowed to come to the U.S. at this time. Following the creation of the State of Israel and the resulting influx of Palestinian refugees, the U.S. Congress passed the Refugee Relief Act in 1953, allowing 2,000 Palestinian families to immigrate. Another 985 families were allowed to immigrate between 1958 and 1963.

Additionally, during this period, large numbers of Arab students began seeking higher education in the U.S. Many were offered jobs after graduating and ended up staying.

Unlike earlier groups of Arab immigrants who identified specifically with their country of origin, village, church or mosque, this wave of immigrants was much more secular and had a strong sense of a broader Arab identity. They established national pan-Arab organizations such as the Organization of Arab Students, as well the Association of Arab-American University Graduates. It was at this time when the “Arab American” identity started to emerge. This is also when Arab Americans started to become more involved in American politics on both the local and national levels.

The Third Wave (1970s–Present)

In 1965, the U.S. government changed its immigration laws, largely as a result of the civil rights movement. The new immigration legislation, known as the Hart-Cellar Act, ended all restrictions based on national origin. Arabs again joined many other people

from around the world in coming to the U.S. to start new lives. This wave of Arab immigration is the most diverse in terms of country of origin, religion and socio-economic status. What further distinguishes this wave of immigration is its high percentage of war refugees, as many of the new Arab immigrants came from regions devastated by long wars, including those in Palestine, Iraq and Lebanon. This wave also included a large number of highly educated professionals who came from various Arab countries, continuing the “Brain Drain” phenomenon of the 1950s and 1960s.

During this time, immigrants from Lebanon, including those who came from war-devastated areas, were mostly Muslim. Many were urban middle-class merchants and professionals. Additionally, some of the university students who were already in the U.S. during the Lebanese war found jobs and remained. Today, in a number of U.S. cities, there are concentrated Lebanese American communities with a large number of recent immigrants who often come from the same extended families or villages.

In addition to Palestinians and Lebanese, this wave brought immigrants from countries whose people had not historically come to the U.S. This includes Iraqis, who began fleeing their country in large numbers during the 1990s due to the first Gulf War and the continued economic and political hardships that followed. Before the 1990s, the number of Iraqi immigrants was relatively low because many had enjoyed a high standard of living and educational opportunities in their oil-rich nation. The current war in Iraq has produced 4.5 million Iraqi refugees; 2.5 million found their way to Syria and Jordan, with fewer arriving in the U.S. Today, there are sizable Iraqi communities in many major U.S. cities.

Historically, immigration from Sudan and Somalia to the United States has been rather limited. Since the 1990s, the numbers have increased dramatically as people escaped wars and starvation. These communities continue to emerge in Midwestern cities, especially

in the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul in Minnesota. Some have also settled in large cities like Washington, D.C., New York and Boston.

Finally, there have been very few immigrants from the Arab North African countries of Libya, Tunis, Algeria and Morocco. Recently however, more immigrants from these areas have begun to arrive. These immigrants tend to be diverse in their socio-economic backgrounds and settle in major cities like New York, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and Boston.

Religious Affiliation

Although the majority of the Arab World is Muslim, most Arab Americans are actually Christians, both Catholic and Orthodox. According to a 2002 Zogby International survey, 24% of Arab Americans are Muslim, 63% are Christian and 13% belong to another religion or do not practice any particular faith.

Christian Arab Americans

Today, Christian Arab Americans make up 65-70% of the Arab American community. Christian Arabs were the first Arab immigrants to settle in the U.S. As early as the 1850s, Christians from Syria, Lebanon and Palestine began to arrive in small numbers. Their number increased during the Great Migration (1880-1924). Christian Arabs came to the United States with their own denominations of Christianity, such as Maronite, Melkite and Orthodox, all of which originated in the Arab World. Later, some Egyptians belonging to the Coptic Church followed. Since Christianity originated in the Arab World, the oldest churches and earliest Christians are actually Arab.



St. Mary's Orthodox Church, built in Livonia, Michigan in 1976, has attracted many Palestinian Americans from the West Bank city of Ramallah *(Courtesy Arab American National Museum)*

Christian Arab Americans of course, share many of the same values with other Christian Americans. Many, however, celebrate Christian holidays according to the Eastern Orthodox calendar. For example, Christmas is celebrated by many on January 7. Also, for some Christian Arabs, Easter is considered the most important holiday of the year.

Because of their small numbers, early Christian Arab immigrants attended existing neighborhood churches established by other ethnic groups. However, once they became a settled community they began to build their own churches. The first churches built by Christian immigrants from the Arab World were on the East Coast. Between 1880 and 1895, three Christian Arab churches were built in New York: one Maronite, one Melkite and one Eastern Orthodox.

In 1890, a Maronite church was built in Boston. In Michigan, a Maronite church was built in downtown Detroit in 1898. Today, there are thousands of Arab churches in every city and major town in the United States.

Antonius Bishallany was among the early Arabs from Lebanon to visit the U.S. His arrival was facilitated by U.S. Protestant missionaries in Lebanon. Bishallany arrived in 1854 to study, with the intention of going back to his home country and becoming a Protestant missionary. Upon his arrival, he received a scholarship to study at the Armenian Seminary in upstate New York where, in return, he gave Arabic lessons to missionaries preparing to go to the Arab World. Before he could finish his studies, he became ill and died from tuberculosis. Bishallany is buried with a Bible at Greenwood Cemetery in New York City.

Chaldeans are a Christian ethnic minority in Iraq who trace their origins to the ancient inhabitants of Mesopotamia. Although they speak Aramaic, a majority of Chaldeans speak Arabic as well. Chaldeans share basic cultural characteristics with Arab Americans, but many may not identify themselves as being Arab. There are significant populations of Chaldean Americans in Detroit and San Diego, as well as other major cities in the United States. Chaldeans are Christians, and the Chaldean Diocese of the Catholic Church has parishes in Michigan, California, Chicago and Arizona.

Muslim Arab Americans

Muslims comprise 25-30% of the Arab American community today. One reason that the population of Christian Arab Americans is significantly larger than that of Muslims is because Christians have been coming to the U.S. for a longer period of time. Of the first stream of immigrants from the Arab World to the U.S., only 5-10%

were Muslim. The rate of Muslim immigration to the U.S. increased during the second and third waves of immigration.

Before the first mosque in the U.S. was built, most Muslims met and worshipped privately in their homes. By the early 1920s, mosques were built in Highland Park, Michigan (1919), Cedar Rapids, Iowa (1920) and Michigan City, Indiana (1925). Unlike mosques in the Arab World, which serve primarily religious functions, mosques in the U.S. acquired social and cultural roles as Muslim Arab Americans struggled to maintain their Arab and Muslim identity and culture.

Like other religions, Islam has more than one sect (branch). Most Arab American Muslims belong to one of the two main branches: *Shi'a* or *Sunni*. This division occurred shortly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Some Muslims are *Druze*, which is another denomination of Islam found mainly in Syria, Palestine and Lebanon.

Today, many major metropolitan areas are home to sizable Muslim Arab American communities, including Detroit, Chicago, Houston, New York City, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.

Education

Education and learning are highly valued by Arabs and Arab Americans, due in part to a long history of scholarship in the Arab World. Early Arab immigrants (1880-1924) came from rural areas and had very little formal education. They worked long, hard hours in labor-intensive jobs like peddling. They also found work in factories and grocery stores. These early immigrants hoped to protect their children from the financial and physical hardships they endured by providing them with educational opportunities in hopes of a better future. Many Arab immigrants who came after the early 1950s arrived with a college education, and some came as students to obtain college degrees and then remained in the U.S.

According to the U. S. Census, Arab Americans - both native-born and immigrants - have a higher level of educational achievement than the average U.S. population. Eighty-five percent of Arab Americans have at least a high school diploma and more than 40% have a bachelor's degree or higher. Studies also show that 17% of Arab Americans have a post-graduate degree, compared to the national average of 9%.

Work

For early Arab immigrants who arrived in the late 1800s and early 1900s, peddling was the one of the most attractive professions; it required no capital or knowledge of English, and yet it yielded a relatively high income. The popularity of peddling led Arabs to reach all parts of the country as they sold household goods door-to-door in small towns or rural areas. Soon Arab suppliers, usually those who made enough money from peddling, gave up the road and stationed themselves in certain towns along the peddling routes, providing peddlers with supplies and resting places. Others opened grocery stores and produce stands.

Giving up peddling was a major turning point in the development of Arab communities. As store owners settled in one place, they were able to send for family members from overseas and provide work for them in the family store. However, because stores required hard work and long hours, the children of grocery store owners often moved on to other areas of employment. In the meantime, new Arab immigrants began taking over the grocery stores and retail businesses. This was possible largely because many earlier immigrants helped newer immigrants with credit and loans. Today, the spirit of entrepreneurship and owning one's own business such as a restaurant, travel agency or real estate firm has come to be a strong part of the Arab American work experience.



A typical American strip mall in Dearborn, Michigan is populated by businesses appealing to both Arabs and non-Arabs (*Marvin Asuncion II*)

In addition to peddling, many early immigrants found employment in the steel industry in cities such as Birmingham, Alabama; Buffalo, New York; and Pittsburgh and Allentown in Pennsylvania. A large Arab American community was established in the Detroit area to work in the booming auto industry, while many others homesteaded in South Dakota in the early 1900s as the American government was giving free land to those willing to cultivate it for at least five years.

Today, Arab American men and women work in all fields. However, due to a focused priority on education, many Arab Americans can be found in professional jobs such as doctors, lawyers and engineers. Many continue to prefer to own their own businesses, while others work in restaurants, factories and farms.

Family

For Arab Americans, family is the most important social and economic institution. Early Arab immigrants, mostly single men, came to the U.S. in order to support and maintain their families whom they had temporarily left behind. They worked hard and walked miles upon miles peddling in order to save and send money to family members in the “old country.” Once financially secure, they started patterns of chain migration, bringing parents, siblings, spouses, uncles, aunts and cousins, until the whole extended family was reunited in their new home.

Earlier immigrants helped newcomers start their lives. They provided a support system, which helped new immigrants adjust and acclimate to a culture very different from their own. They helped them find employment and provided a place to live until the newly arrived could stand on their own. Also, they introduced them to the area’s social and religious institutions established by earlier immigrants in order to preserve Arab identity and culture. Today, the Arab American extended family continues to thrive

in many neighborhoods. Relatives live together in the same neighborhood and sometimes in the same household. They often work and socialize together, making it easier to preserve the culture and traditions that are so important to them. As a result, the well-being of the community and that of the family are stressed over that of the individual. As second- and third-generation Arab Americans adopt the nuclear-family lifestyle, newer immigrants arrive with strong family ties binding generations together and keeping the extended Arab family structure alive. This structure has helped thousands of Arab immigrants adjust, succeed and thrive.

There is a strong respect for elders in Arab culture; individuals gain status as they age and their advice and opinions become more valued and respected. Grown children are expected to take care of their parents and often, elderly parents live with their married children. Rarely is an Arab American placed in a nursing home, unless the individual requires serious medical care. While families tend to support the young in acquiring education and starting their new lives, the younger generation is expected to take care of their elders.

Generosity and Hospitality

In Arab culture, significant emphasis is placed on being generous to those you associate with, especially to those who are entering your home. Hospitality is considered to be one of the most admired virtues and many times, families are judged by their generosity to relatives and guests. Food plays a key role in expressing this hospitality and it helps to ensure that guests feel as welcome as possible. For example, it is unheard of to go into the home of an Arab without being offered something to eat, along with a hot beverage such as a tea or coffee. Many times, Arab Americans will make extra food “just in case” an unexpected relative, neighbor or a friend arrives. When offering food and drink to their guests, Arabs are persistent in making sure everybody leaves feeling satisfied.

Organizations

When Arab immigrants began coming to the United States in the 1800s, they were a small minority. Like other immigrants at the time, they lived in their own ethnic enclaves and remained fairly isolated from the American mainstream. Their children, who attended public schools, felt pressure to assimilate into mainstream American culture. At the time, becoming a “true” American meant adopting the dominant European lifestyle. Many Arab Americans changed their names and spoke their native language and enjoyed their ethnic food only within the confines of their own homes. However, in spite of this pressure, Arab Americans found various ways to preserve their culture and serve their communities. As early as the late 1800s, Arab Americans created social and political institutions and organizations to meet their needs as immigrants, American citizens, activists, professionals and as people proud of their culture and history. They also established Arabic-language radio shows and newspapers to keep them informed and connected. For example, the first Arabic newspaper was published in the U.S. as early as 1892. By 1930, the number had grown to 50 publications.

Early Arab Americans organized religious and cultural institutions and clubs to socialize with those from their hometown and to help newcomers adjust to life in America. Examples of early Arab American organizations include the Syrian Ladies Society of New York that was established in 1907 and was dissolved only in 2000; the Southern Federation of Syrian Lebanese American Clubs founded in 1931; and the Federation of Islamic Associations of the United States and Canada established in 1952.

As early as 1930, Arab Americans created annual festivals where people came from around the country to spend a few days together. Later, these developed into annual banquets and national conventions. These annual gatherings serve a variety of purposes, depending on the organization’s mission. It is safe to say, however, that a strong component in each convention or banquet



Voter registration drives are among the many programs offered by the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) in Dearborn, Michigan. (Courtesy ACCESS)

is to celebrate Arab culture, and offer attendees the opportunity to socialize and to introduce young adults to each other. The largest annual convention is held by the American Federation of Ramallah, Palestine (also known as the Ramallah Federation), attracting about 4,000 people who trace their roots to the town of Ramallah, Palestine. States with a significant Arab American community, like Michigan, are the home of hundreds of conventions and banquets each year.

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, there has been a significant increase in political and social organizations, both to gain political participation and to better serve the communities in which Arab Americans live. Over the years, hundreds of these federations, institutions, and organizations have played a significant role in preserving culture, raising awareness and serving communities.

One such organization that has made a difference for hundreds of thousands of Arab Americans is the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS). Founded in 1971 by a group of volunteers in Dearborn, Michigan who were concerned for the well being of local immigrants, ACCESS has grown into the largest Arab American human service institution in the United States. Important national political Arab American organizations are the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) and the Arab American Institute (AAI), both founded in the 1980s. Examples of professional organizations are the National Arab American Medical Association (NAAMA) and the Network of Arab-American Professionals (NAAP).

Conclusion

Arab Americans have been an integral part of American society since its inception. They come from 22 Arab countries located in both Asia and Africa. The first recorded Arab came in 1528 from the Arab African country of Morocco. Many other Arabs came as slaves from Arab African countries. Smaller numbers of immigrants came

in the 1700s and 1800s, however this number increased dramatically since the Great Migration period (1880-1924). Arab immigrants who came during the Great Migration were mostly Christian villagers from Syria and Lebanon, with a fewer number from Palestine. Others came after the World War II in the 1950 and 1960s, and were mostly urban educated middle class professionals; this group was more diverse in terms of their religion and country of origin. Since the 1970s, a new wave of Arab immigrants arrived, mostly from Arab counties devastated by war including Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq.

Like other immigrants, Arab Americans came to seek a better life for themselves and their children. Today, with a population estimated at 4.2 million, Arab Americans are an extremely diverse group of people. They are found in every state, and in small and large cities. They are Christians and Muslims, and are found in every profession imaginable, ranging from the white-collar professional to the daily laborer. Arab American women, like their American counterparts, work outside of the home in every profession, while some are stay-at-home moms.

Despite this diversity, Arab Americans feel connected through common values and cultural heritage which give them their shared identity. Arab Americans continue to value extended family and respect of elders, as well as education, family businesses, generosity and hospitality. To stay connected, and to serve their fellow community members, Arab Americans built their own political, cultural and social service organizations. These organizations have continued to help new immigrants adjust to new society, fight against discrimination, and promote the involvement of Arab Americans in the political process. Some are simply cultural organizations that help Arab Americans maintain their culture and stay connected.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Who are Arab Americans?

Arab Americans are among the many ethnic groups that make up the population of the United States. They trace their roots to one of the 22 Arab countries, including Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Iraq. Arab Americans are diverse in terms of their time of immigration to the U.S., and their national, religious, educational and professional backgrounds. Despite this diversity, they do share a language and a cultural heritage that give them a shared Arab American identity.

2. What countries comprise the Arab World?

The Arab World extends from the African shores of the Atlantic Ocean to the Arab/Persian Gulf, spanning the continents of Africa and Asia. The following 22 countries comprise the Arab World: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, The United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

3. How do I refer to somebody from the Arab World?

The correct term to use is Arab, not Ay-rab, Arabian or Arabic. The term “Ay-rab” is an offensive slur and should not be used. The word “Arabian” is not accurate, and should only be used to refer to the breed of horses, or the Arabian Peninsula. “Arabic” is generally used when referring to the language or food.

4. What is the difference between the Middle East and the Arab World?

The Middle East is a geopolitical term created by the British Empire, and it is comprised of both Arab and non-Arab countries including Iran, Turkey and Israel, among others. The Arab World is comprised only of the 22 countries mentioned above.

5. Do all the people of the Middle East speak Arabic?

There are four major languages spoken in the Middle East: Arabic, spoken in the 22 Arab countries mentioned above; Hebrew in Israel, Persian in Iran and Turkish in Turkey. Additionally, there are populations of other ethnic groups who live in Arab countries and have their own languages. These include the Kurds, Chaldeans, Assyrians and Berbers.

6. Who are the Chaldeans?

Chaldeans are an ethnic minority group found predominately in Iraq. Their native language is a version of Aramaic, also known as Chaldean. They are Christians belonging to the Eastern Rite Chaldean Catholic tradition. Metro Detroit is home to the largest population of Chaldean Americans. The Chaldean Diocese of the Catholic Church has parishes in Michigan, California, Chicago and Arizona.

8. What are the gender roles among Arab Americans?

Gender roles vary considerably among Arab Americans. This variation is due to a number of factors such as education and socio-economic status. While there are a large number of Arab American women who are working in a variety of jobs and professions, just like American women, some are stay-at-home moms.

9. Are all Arab Americans Muslim?

No. Although Islam is practiced by the overwhelming majority in the Arab World, most Arab Americans are Christian. This is due to the fact that a high percentage of Arabs who migrated during the first wave of immigration were Christian.

10. Which state has the most Arab Americans?

California has the largest population of Arab Americans, although Michigan has the largest concentration. Other states that have large Arab American populations are New York, New Jersey and Florida.

Key Terms

Peddling – selling household goods from door-to-door. Peddling was the most attractive profession for Arab Americans who arrived in the United States during the first wave of immigration.

Brain Drain – the phenomenon in which developing countries lose their most educated citizens and professionals to western countries, including the United States

Chain Migration – the act by which one person migrates to a new country and gradually, relatives and fellow villagers or people from home follow

Islam – a monotheistic religion which began in Mecca by the prophet Muhammad in the 7th century

Qur'an – the holy book for Muslims. Its original language is Arabic.

Druze – a small branch of Islam. It developed in the 11th century. The largest *Druze* community in the Arab World can be found in Lebanon.

Immigration Act of 1924 – an act passed by the U.S. Congress restricting immigration from all countries with the exception of those in parts of northern and western Europe

Immigration Act of 1965 (Hart-Cellar Act) – the act passed by the U.S. Congress that lifted earlier strict immigration standards from non-European countries

The U.S. Homestead Act – an agreement between the United States government and immigrants desiring citizenship. The immigrants were required to live on and cultivate farmland for five years in exchange for a 160-acre land deed.

Castle Garden – the port of entry for immigrants prior to Ellis Island. Until it was destroyed by fire in 1897, eight million people entered the U.S. through Castle Garden.

Timeline

- 1528** The first recorded Arab lands in the U.S. as a slave from Morocco
- 1875** Arab immigration to the United States begins in significant numbers
- 1876** Philadelphia hosts the Centennial Exposition celebrating 100 years of U.S. independence. The city invites people from all over the world to participate in the exposition. Many Arab merchants arrive and end up staying.
- 1880** The age of peddling begins in the United States
- 1892** The first Arabic-language newspaper in the U.S., *Kawkab Amrika* (*Star of America*), is published
- 1893** Chicago's Columbian Exposition attracts many Arab merchants
- 1899** The U.S. Bureau of Immigration acknowledges that most of the increasing flow of "Turks from Asia" are in fact Arabs from Syria and adds the classification "Syrian" to its records.
- 1907** Syrians win a case against a judge who denied citizenship to a Syrian, claiming that Syrians belong to the "yellow race"
- 1912** Many Arab textile workers participate in the Bread and Roses Strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. They win, but a young Arab boy named John Ramey is killed by a federal militiaman.

- 1920** The Pen League, an Arab American writers group, is founded in New York City
- 1920s** The first major Hollywood portrayal of an Arab character is Rudolph Valentino's role in *The Sheik*, a movie that distorts Arab culture and promotes stereotypes
- 1923** The first Arab mosque is built in Highland Park, Michigan
- 1924** The Johnson-Reed Quota Act passes, setting a limit on how many people can immigrate from certain countries to the U.S. Each Arab country receives a maximum quota of 100 new immigrants per year
- 1931** The Southern Federation of Syrian and Lebanese Clubs is founded
- 1936** Palestinians hold a six-month strike protesting British support of the Zionist movement in Palestine. The number of Palestinian immigrants in the U.S. exceeds the number of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants for the first time.
- 1952** The first Federation of Islamic Associations is founded and calls on Muslim communities in the U.S. and Canada to organize themselves into local associations to administer to the religious needs of their members
- 1957** The American Lebanese Syrian Associated Charities was founded; since then, it has been the fundraising arm for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

- 1960** Arab American actor Danny Thomas opens St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, which is considered today the leading U.S. hospital in children's cancer research
- 1965** A new immigration law, the Hart-Cellar Act, removes the immigration quotas which resulted in the increased number of immigrants coming to the United States, including Arab immigrants
- 1967** The third Arab-Israeli war breaks out. Israel occupies the Palestinian territories of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. Israel also takes over parts of Syria and Egypt. This war results in increased immigration of Palestinians to the United States.
- The Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) is formed
- 1971** The Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) is founded in Dearborn, Michigan
- 1973** Nagi Diafullah, a young Yemeni American, is killed while participating in a United Farm Workers protest
- The National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA) is formed
- 1974** Congress passes the Equal Educational Opportunity Act, making bilingual education available to public school students whose primary language is not English
- 1975** Civil war breaks out in Lebanon, greatly increasing the number of Lebanese immigrants to the United States

- 1980** The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) is founded by former U.S. Senator James Abourezk to fight discrimination against Arab Americans
- The Arab American Institute (AAI) is formed to encourage the participation of Arab Americans in electoral politics
- 1987** Arab Americans win acknowledgment from the U.S. Supreme Court that they are protected, under existing U.S. civil rights legislation, from discrimination based on ethnicity
- 1988** The Arab Network of America (ANA) is created and begins operations as a national radio broadcaster
- 1991** The Arab Network of America (ANA) TV is inaugurated
- 1996 & 2000** Ralph Nader, an Arab American, runs for U.S. president
- 2001** September 11 attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C.; many Arab Americans felt pressure and feared reprisals
- 2005** The Arab American National Museum opens to the public
- 2009** Two Arab Americans were appointed by U.S. President Barack Obama to high positions. George Mitchell was appointed as the Special Envoy for the Middle East and Ray LaHood to the cabinet position of Secretary of Transportation.

Additional Resources

Telling Our Story: The Arab American National Museum, Anan Ameri, 2007

Arab American Encyclopedia, Anan Ameri and Dawn Ramey, Editors. Gale Publishing, 2000

How Does it Feel to be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America, Moustafa Bouyami, Penguin Group, 2008

Arab American Institute: www.aaiusa.com

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee: www.adc.org

“100 Questions and Answers about Arab Americans: A Journalist’s Guide” by the *Detroit Free Press*: www.freep.com/jobspage/arabs/htm

Arab American National Museum Library & Resource Center:
www.arabamericanmuseum.org/Library-Resources.id.37.htm



13624 Michigan Avenue
Dearborn, Michigan 48126
(313) 582-AANM
www.arabamericanmuseum.org