

Who Are Arab Americans?

By Helen Hatab Samhan

Arab Americans constitute an ethnicity made up of several waves of immigrants from the Arabic-speaking countries of southwestern Asia and North Africa that began arriving in the United States during the 19th century. Their regional homeland includes 22 Arab countries, stretching from Morocco in the west to the Arabian (Persian) Gulf in the east. Although a highly diverse U.S. group, Arab Americans descend from a heritage that represents common linguistic, cultural, and political traditions.

Identity and Values

Arab Americans are as diverse as the national origins and immigration experiences that have shaped their ethnic identity in the United States, with religious affiliation one of the most defining factors. The majority of Arab Americans descend from the first wave of mostly Christian immigrants. Sharing the faith tradition of the majority of Americans facilitated their acculturation into American society, as did high intermarriage rates with other Christian ethnic groups. Even though many Arab Christians have kept their Orthodox and Eastern Rite church (Greek Catholic, Maronite and Coptic) affiliations, which have helped to strengthen ethnic identification and certain rituals, their religious practices have not greatly distinguished them from the Euro-centric American culture. Roughly two-thirds of the Arab population identifies with one or more Christian sect.

Due to the steady increase of immigration since the 1950s, Arab Muslims represent the fastest growing, albeit still minority, segment of the Arab American community. Muslim Arabs in America have many more religious traditions and practices that are unique to their faith and may compete with prevailing American behavior and culture. The beliefs of Islam place importance on modesty, spurn inter-faith marriage, and disapprove of American standards of dating or gender integration. Religious practices that direct personal behavior - including the five-times-daily prayers, the month-long fast at Ramadan, beards for men, and the wearing of the *hijab* (see JAB or headcover) - and that require accommodation in such places as work, schools, and the military, make Muslims more visible than most religious minorities and often vulnerable to bigotry. Concern for retaining customs among their mostly U.S.-born children has prompted Arab Muslims in large communities to open private Islamic schools.

Another strong motivation for private schooling is so that the Arabic language can be incorporated into the curriculum. Since the retention of any foreign language beyond the first U.S.-born generation is a challenge, and since Arabic is required to study the Qur'an, Muslim families look to private schools or weekend programs to keep the language alive. In 1998, the public school system in Virginia's Fairfax County joined Dearborn, Michigan, in offering Arabic as an accredited foreign language.

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Print and broadcast media that carry Arabic or bilingual material are expanding in such large population centers such as Detroit, Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C. In 1991, the Arab Network of America (ANA) became the first to produce and nationally broadcast Arabic programming. While bilingualism is disappearing in the most assimilated subgroups, nearly half of Arab American households report some Arabic use.

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Politics is another area where Arab Americans are diverse. Party affiliation is roughly evenly divided among Republicans, Democrats, and independents. Voter registration and education efforts in recent years have improved participation, with polls showing Arab Americans more likely to vote (69%) than the citizenry as a whole. Recognition of the Arab bloc vote is recent. Clusters in key battleground states such as Michigan and Ohio have brought attention to an otherwise invisible constituency. In 2000, both major presidential candidates held meetings with Arab American community leaders, and the Democratic and Republican parties each sponsored appeals to Arab voters in key states.

Arab Americans hold public office at all levels. Four have served in the U.S. Senate, including George Mitchell (1980-1995) of Maine, and six currently serve in the U.S. House of Representatives. Arab Americans have served in the cabinets and other high offices of Republican and Democratic adminis-

trations, including Chief of Staff John H. Sununu under President George Bush, Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala under President Bill Clinton, and most recently, Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham and Office of Management and Budget director Mitchell Daniels under President George W. Bush. Arab Americans have been governors of Oregon and New Hampshire and have served in state legislatures. More than thirty have been mayors of U.S. cities, among them Bridgeport, Conn., El Paso, Tex., and St. Paul, Minn. Most of the Arab Americans in public office, including scores on city councils and school boards, descend from the earlier wave of Lebanese/Syrian immigrants.

The shape and intensity of ethnic identity varies widely between the first and second waves of Arab Americans. For all generations, ethnic affinity is resilient in food, extended-family rituals, and religious fellowship. Those immigrating since the 1950s and most Muslim families are likely to relate less with the white majority culture and more with subcultures in which religious, national-origin, and language traditions are preserved. For those who live in ethnic enclaves, intra-group marriages, and family businesses often limit outside social interaction.

Although the U.S. census classifies Arabs as white along with the European majority, a sizable number believe they are not treated as whites, but more like such other minorities as Asians Americans and Hispanic Americans. Not surprisingly, there is no consensus among all generations of Arab Americans on this question, nor is there yet a move in the federal government to measure Arabs separately. In some arenas, however, such as higher education, some health agencies, and even in market research, Middle Eastern ethnicity is classified separately, a trend that is likely to expand to other institutions.

Contributions to American Culture

Despite these challenges in the areas of political and civil rights, Arab Americans continue to make lasting cultural contributions. Among prominent writers, the Lebanese-born poet-artist Kahlil Gibran is perhaps the most widely read and appreciated by American readers, and



William Blatty (*The Exorcist*), children's author and poet Naomi Shihab Nye, and Edward Said are also noted in literary circles. Dean of the White House press corps Helen Thomas and consumer advocate Ralph Nader are legends in public affairs.

In the field of entertainment, Arab American stars have included the actor-comic Danny Thomas, actress Kathy Najimy, and Tony Shalhoub, singers Paul Anka and Paula Abdul, and Casey Kasem, "America's Top 40" disc jockey. Sports icons include Doug Flutie and Jeff George of the National Football League. Such business giants as J.M. Haggart (the clothing manufacturer) and Paul Orfalea (founder of Kinko's photocopy stores) are also among the many Arabs who have made their mark in America.

Stereotypes and Civil Rights

Some of the divergent identity options chosen by Arab Americans can be traced to the treatment of Arabs and their culture in the United States. In both popular culture and government policy, anti-Arab stereotypes since the 1970s have affixed a stigma on Arab ethnicity in America. The first wave of immigrants did confront nativism, ignorance, and anti-foreign sentiments of the prewar period, but they were rarely singled out. This changed with the development of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which created a highly-charged political arena in which the United States became a strategic player and a strong supporter of the state of Israel. Because public exposure to Arab history and culture was often shaped only by old stereotypes of Arab sheiks, harems, and camels, it was not difficult for this cultural bias to deepen in direct proportion to U.S. interests in the Middle East.

New negative stereotypes emerged in and permeated advertising, television, and movies, particularly those of the nefarious oil sheik and the terrorist. The Arab as villain has been a favorite scapegoat of popular American culture, thereby setting the stage for acts of discrimination and bigotry that have affected Arab Americans at home and resulted in a range of reactions. In the most assimilated circles, personal pride in Arab heritage did not always reach the public realm, where the stigma of unpopularity and controversy motivated some to mask their ethnicity, particularly in such arenas as the entertainment, media, and academic fields.

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Stereotypes also seeped into public policy. Beginning in the 1970s a number of government investigations, executive orders, and legislative provisions aimed at combating terrorism had an impact on Arab American activism and violated the rights of some Arabs living in the United States. A more activist response emerged as Arab-born intellectuals, students, and professionals coalesced to counter the bias they saw in American policy and culture. Organizations to edu-

cate and to advocate the Arab point of view laid the groundwork for the first publicly engaged movement to represent the needs and issues of Arab Americans and to create a national sense of community and common purpose. Organizations such as the National Association of Arab Americans, the Association of Arab-American University Graduates, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, the Arab American Institute were founded to respond to these political, civic, and cultural challenges.

Recent anti-terrorism policies of airline-passenger profiling and the use of secret evidence by immigration judges have disproportionately affected Arabs and Muslims and have raised the concern of selective prosecution. The secret-evidence provisions of the Illegal Immigration



Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, enacted by the U.S. Congress in 1996, have been challenged by constitutional-rights advocates and through bipartisan legislation slated to reverse this policy that was introduced in the 106th Congress in 2000.

When the relative invisibility of the broader Arab American community is contrasted with highly volatile political events, the most visible members and their institutions can be vulnerable to scapegoating. One prominent example was the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing tragedy in which initial suspicions of a Middle-Eastern link prompted incidents of anti-Arab backlash.

Population Highlights

Arab immigrants began arriving in sizable numbers during the 1880's. It is estimated that nearly three million Americans trace their roots to an Arab country. The 1990 U.S. census identified just under one million persons who indicated one or more lines of Arab "ancestry," but it is believed that this figure underestimates considerably the actual population. In 2000, Arab Americans were among the populations identified by the U.S. Census Bureau for a special outreach effort, using promotional materials in the Arabic-language to improve the response rate and thus the ethnicity count.

Arab Americans are found in every state, but more than two thirds of them live in just ten states. The three metropolitan areas of Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York are home to one-third of the population. Since the late 19th century, New York has been a port of entry for Arabic-speaking immigrants, and for decades that city remained the community's cultural and commercial center. While New York and neighboring New Jersey (particularly Paterson and Jersey City) remain a focus for new arrivals, southern California has become the preferred destination for new Arab immigrants.

By far the most concentrated areas Arab American settlement, however, are in southeastern Michigan, especially the distinctly Arabic neighborhoods in the city of Dearborn. Michigan's vibrant expanse of ethnic, civic, and religious institutions have made it the new cultural and political magnet for the community nationwide. Unlike anywhere else in the country, Arab Americans make up 20% of Dearborn's population and more than 40% of the students enrolled in public schools.

Arab Americans are employed in all major occupation groups, but 72% work in managerial, professional, technical, sales, or administrative jobs. As an ethnic group, they value education and have a higher-than-average percentage (36%) who hold bachelor's degrees. The propensity of Arab Americans to be business owners and professionals translates into a corresponding median income (\$39,580 in 1990) that also surpasses the national average. However, some new arrivals struggle economically, resulting in a poverty rate of some 10%.

Contrary to popular assumptions or stereotypes, the sizable majority of Arab Americans are native-born, and nearly 82% are citizens. While all Arab countries have sent emigrants to the United States, the majority of the U.S. Arab community traces their roots to five major national groups - the Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians, Egyptians, and Iraqis.

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