

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT ARAB AMERICANS

Q. Who are Arab-Americans?

A. Arab-Americans trace their ancestry to or who immigrated from Arabic speaking places in southwestern Asia and northern Africa, a region known as the Middle East. Not all people in this region are Arabs.

Q. How many Arab-Americans are there?

A. This is a subject of some debate. Some estimates of Arab-Americans living in the United States are about 3 million.

Q. Where do Arab-Americans live?

A. Arab-Americans live in all fifty states, but about a third are concentrated in California, Michigan and New York. Another third are in these seven states: Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Ohio, Texas and Virginia.

Q. Do Arabs have a shared language?

A. The Arabic language is one of the great unifying and distinguishing characteristics of Arab people. Even so, colloquial Arabic differs from place to place. There are several categories: Levantine dialect (Jordan, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon), Egyptian and North African dialect, and Chaldean or Gulf dialect. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is a pan-Arabic language used in formal letters, books and newspapers.

Q. Do Arabs have a shared religion?

A. No. Arabs belong to many religions, including Islam, Christianity, Druze, Judaism and others. There are further distinctions within each of these, and some religious groups have evolved new identities and faith practices in the United States. Although Arabs are connected by culture, they have different faiths. Common misperceptions are to think that Arab traditions are Islamic, or that Islam unifies all Arabs. Most Arab-Americans are Catholic or Orthodox Christians, but this is not true in all parts of the United States. In some areas most Arab-Americans are Muslim.

Q. What is the Middle East conflict all about?

A. The largest conflict in the Middle East is the Arab-Israeli conflict and the struggle of Palestine. In addition to conflicts between Arab countries and Israel, there is disagreement between and within Arab countries. The roots of these conflicts are in some of the world's oldest religions, ethnic differences and boundaries drawn during 20th Century colonialism.

Q. Is Palestine a country?

A. Not today. Historically, Palestine was a country east of the Mediterranean Sea that includes Israel and parts of Jordan. As a distinct region, Palestine was under Ottoman control and then British control until 1948, when the nation of Israel was created. Areas of Palestine became Israel and part of Jordan. Today, Palestinians share a collective national identity and are moving toward independence and self-rule as a country.

Q. How is Arabic written?

A. Arabic is one of several languages written from right to left.

Q. When did Arab people come to the United States ?

A. The first significant wave of immigration began around 1875. It lasted until about 1920. After a period in which the United States restricted immigration, a second wave began in the 1940s.

Q. Why did Arabs first come to the United States ?

A. Like many peoples who came to the United States, Arabs were seeking opportunity. Most early Arab immigrants were from Lebanon and Syria, and most were Christian.

Q. What prompted the second wave?

A. After 1940, immigration to the United States was not for economic reasons as much as because of the Arab-Israeli conflict and civil war. This meant that people came from many more places. The second immigration also had many more people who practiced Islam, a religion that was not as familiar in the United States. Immigrants in this group tended to be more financially secure when they arrived than people who had come earlier for economic opportunity. Many people in the second wave were students.

Q. Who are some of the well-known Arab-Americans?

A. There are two Arab-Americans in President George W. Bush's Cabinet: U.S. Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham and Director of the Office of Management and Budget Mitchell Daniels. Donna Shalala, was the nation's longest serving Secretary of Health and Human Services. Former Governor of New Hampshire John H. Sununu became the White House Chief of Staff under President George Bush, Sr. Selwa Roosevelt, Thomas A. Nassif, Edward Gabriel, Theodore Kattouf, and Marcelle Wahba served as U.S. Ambassador. Philip C. Habib served as Special Presidential Envoy to the Middle East . Former Senator George Mitchell, who brokered a peace deal in Northern Ireland and led a peace commission to the Middle East . Several Arab-Americans have served in the US Senate and House of Representatives: James Abourezk and James Abdnor, both of South Dakota; Pat Danner of Missouri, Mary Rose Oakar of Ohio, the late George Kasem of California; Abraham Kazen, Jr. of Texas, and Toby Moffett of Connecticut. Victor Atiyeh was the popular governor of Oregon. Consumer advocate Ralph Nader is a Arab-

American. In business, Najeeb Halaby, former head of the Federal Aviation Administration, was CEO of Pan-American Airlines. His daughter, Lisa, married King Hussein of Jordan and became the only Arab-American to be queen of a foreign country, Queen Noor. Jacques Nasser was formerly the president and CEO of Ford Motor Company. Danny Thomas was a popular entertainer, and founder of St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital. J.M. Hagggar started Hagggar Clothing Co. in 1926. It became one of the world's best-known brands in men's apparel. Dr. Michael DeBakey invented the heart pump. Jibran Khalil, philosopher, known by his book, *The Prophet*. Geologist George A. Doumani's explorations helped prove the theory of continental drift. Another American geologist, Dr. Farouk el-Baz, helped plan all the Apollo moon landings. Christa McAuliffe, a teacher was among the astronauts who lost their lives aboard the space shuttle Challenger. Col. James Jabara was America's and the world's first jet ace and Korean War hero.

Q. What occupations do Arab-Americans pursue?

A. Arab-Americans work in all occupations. Collectively, they are more likely to be self-employed or to be entrepreneurs or to work in sales.

Q. What is the role of the family in Arab culture?

A. The variety of family types among the Arab-Americans is vast. Generally, family is more important than the individual and more influential than nationality. People draw much of their identity from their role in the family. Historically, this has fostered immigration in which members of an extended family or clan help one another immigrate.

Q. Do generations of Arab-Americans live together?

A. Sometimes, especially with people who have more recently arrived in the United States, but this can be true of non-Arabs as well and is not a distinguishing characteristic of Arab-Americans.

Q. Are there any Arab conventions for naming children?

A. Muslims often name their children after prophets in the Quran. Shia Muslims sometimes use Ali as a middle name. Arab tradition may call for the father's name to be the middle name of sons and daughters.

Q. Why do some Arab women wear garments that cover their faces or heads?

A. This is a religious practice, not a cultural practice. It is rooted in Islamic teachings about hijab, or modesty. While some say that veiling denigrates women, some women say that it liberates them. Covering is not universally observed by Muslim women and varies by region and class. Some Arab governments have, at times, banned or required

veiling. In American families, a mother or daughter may cover her head while the other does not.

Q. What is an appropriate way to greet an Arab-American?

A. Be yourself, and let them be themselves. If they are practicing Muslims or recent immigrants, watch for cues. A smile, a nod and a word of greeting are appropriate in most situations. Some Muslims feel it is inappropriate for unrelated men and women to shake hands. Wait until the other person extends his or her hand before you extend your own.

Q. What is Middle-Eastern food like?

A. Tasty! It is varied, but has some staples. Wheat is used in bread, pastries, salads and main dishes. Rice is often cooked with vegetables, lamb, chicken or beef. Lamb and mutton are more common than other meats. Arab recipes use many beans and vegetables, including eggplant, zucchini, cauliflower, spinach, onions parsley and chickpeas.

Q. What is that pipe I sometimes see Arab people smoking?

A. It is a water pipe that filters and cools tobacco smoke, which often is flavored with apple, honey, strawberry, mint, mango or apricot. Such pipes are used in several parts of the world and are not an exclusively Arab apparatus. They are known by several names, including sheesha, hookah and argilah, or argeelah.

Q. Is Islam mostly an Arab religion, then?

A. No. Only about 12 percent of Muslims worldwide are Arabs. There are more Muslims in Indonesia for example, than in all Arab countries combined. Large populations of Muslims also live in India, Iran, other parts of East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa . Islam has a strong Arab flavor, though, as the religion's holiest places are in the Middle East, and the Quran was originally written in Arabic.

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