

# Arab Americans

HISTORY, CULTURE & CONTRIBUTIONS



ARAB AMERICAN NATIONAL MUSEUM  
WITH RANDA KAYALI, PHD

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ON COVER

Artwork: Hanah Diab, *Return*, 2003. Mixed media and acrylic on canvas.  
AANM Collection 2010.45.01. Gift of Hanah Diab.

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## INTRODUCTION

### A Demographic Portrait

The Arab American community is vibrant and diverse and continues to impact American society. Arab Americans have served in all levels of government; written highly celebrated books; produced compelling movies and other media; invented life-saving medical tools and procedures; served in high-ranking military roles; founded global businesses; won major sports championships; and have served their local communities as teachers, lawyers, factory workers, restaurateurs and medical professionals. This book offers a glimpse into the nationwide community while simultaneously combatting the misinformation and stereotypes about Arabs and Arab Americans that exist in media and political rhetoric.

The term “Arab American” refers to anyone living in the United States with ancestry in any of the 22 Arab countries, which stretch from northern Africa to western Asia. Arabs have been immigrating to the United States in large numbers since the 1890s, when Arabic-speaking immigrants from the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire (present-day Lebanon, Syria and Palestine) left their homeland for mainly economic reasons. Lebanese Americans, who have the longest history of immigration, remain the largest ancestry group within the Arab American community. The total population of Arab Americans is between 2 million and 3.6 million.<sup>1</sup>

While economic situations remain a significant factor in Arab immigration, political upheaval and war have played a greater role in the growing numbers of immigrants from Arab countries since the 1990s.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the myriad ways that Arab Americans self-identify and the problems with obtaining accurate national samples from smaller ethnic groups, it is difficult to find an exact number. According to the weighted population figures from the American Community Survey, there are around 1.9 million people with Arab ancestry in the U.S. The Arab American Institute estimates that the total number of Arab Americans is closer to 3.6 million.

The community has been undergoing significant demographic changes since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, which pushed the numbers of Iraqi immigrants and refugees to the highest in history. Conflict and war in Sudan and Somalia in the early 2000s forced people to flee their homes. Subsequent events in Arab countries, like the uprisings and revolutions that began in late 2010 in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and other places, have pushed hundreds of thousands more Arabs to leave their home countries and immigrate to the United States, in addition to other countries. While not all Arab immigrants to the U.S. fleeing and political strife, it remains a major factor, as does family reunification and economic and educational opportunities in the U.S.

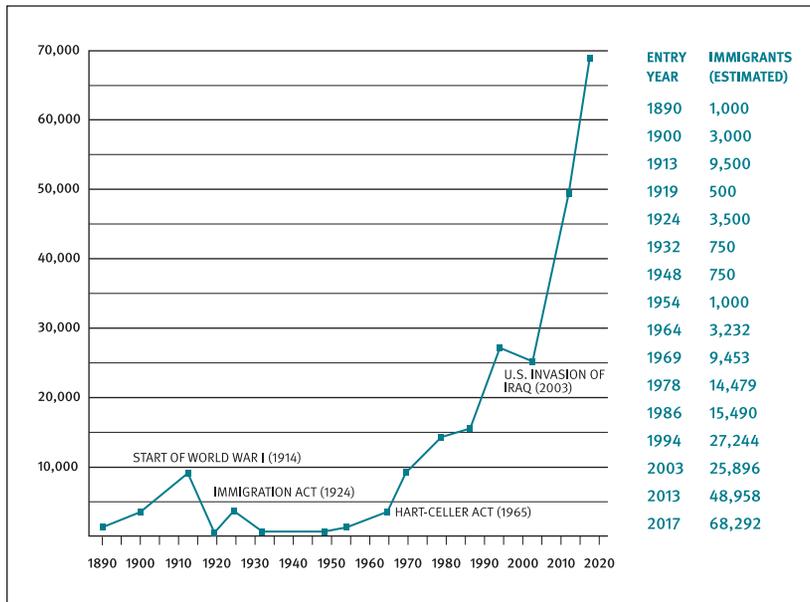
### Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Since 2000, due to factors such as civil conflict, revolutions and U.S.-led wars in the region, some Arab countries have experienced mass migration internally and to other countries. Immigrants from the Arab world, like all immigrants, may enter the U.S. on student visas, family or work-related visas, as refugees or as asylum seekers. Refugees and those seeking asylum must prove that they are unable or unwilling to return to their home country because they have been persecuted there in the past or have a well-founded fear that they will be persecuted if they return. The claim of persecution must be based on the applicant's race, religion, national identity, membership in a particular social group or political opinion. To secure refugee status, the applicant must approach the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) and be vetted by a U.S. consulate abroad. In contrast, asylum seekers apply for their status at the U.S. border or from the interior. Within a year, both refugees and asylum seekers must apply for a "green card" or lawful permanent residency status, which is a path to U.S. citizenship. If not admitted with refugee status, aspiring immigrants must apply for a family reunification visa (if they have family living in the U.S.), or choose a different destination country.



The Mohammad Family moved from Sudan to Flint, Mich., on July 4, 1993. AANM Collection 2016.11.20.

The U.S. Department of State is in charge of the resettlement program that has admitted refugees since 1980. For many years in the 1990s, the U.S. accepted more than 100,000 refugees annually. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the ceiling for refugee admissions fluctuated between 40,000 and 80,000. Under President Barack Obama's administration, in 2016, the ceiling was raised to 110,000 with particular focus on Arab countries. In 2017, President Donald Trump imposed a travel ban and a massive reduction in the number of refugees, to 22,000. The impact was immediate — only 3,339 Iraqi refugees and 3,024 Syrians came in through the refugee resettlement program in 2017, compared to 12,587 Syrians and 9,880 Iraqis in 2016. In 2018 the number of refugees from Arab countries admitted to the U.S. was only in the hundreds, according to data from the Department of Homeland Security. Obviously, curbing the number of refugees and immigrants admitted into the U.S. negatively impacts the Arab American community.



Trends in immigration from Arab countries from the 1890s until 2017. Compiled by the Arab American National Museum.



Hand-painted family tree of the Haddad family. AANM Collection 2001.29.01.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Three Essential Questions, Answered

#### 1. What is the Arab world?

The Arab world is often defined by membership in the League of Arab States (also known as The Arab League), which consists of 22 countries: Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Sudan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Tunisia, Somalia, United Arab Emirates, Libya, Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority, Mauritania, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Djibouti and Comoros Islands (listed in order of size of population). Most of these countries consider Arabic their national language, although they may have substantial non-Arabic speaking populations. Even if they speak English fluently, attachment to the Arabic language as their native tongue is one of the cultural aspects that Arab Americans, particularly more recent immigrants, share.

#### 2. How is the Arab world different from the Middle East?

While many in the U.S. tend to use the terms “Middle East” and “Middle Eastern” casually, it is not fully interchangeable with the more specific term Arab. Although both geographic-cultural terms are debatable, the Middle East includes countries that are not considered Arab, including Iran, Turkey and Cyprus. Rather than identifying their main national language as Arabic, people in these countries speak Farsi, Turkish, Cypriot Turkish and Cypriot Greek, respectively. The State of Israel is included in the Middle East, where Modern Hebrew and Arabic are the two official languages. In addition, African Arab countries are often not placed in the Middle East and are categorized either as separate countries or by their location within the African continent.

The reasons behind the unclear terminology lie in history and changes in Western colonial perceptions of the region. Early European geographers divided the East — broadly meaning the Asian continent — into the Near

East (the area extending from the Mediterranean to the Arabian Gulf), the Middle East (from the Arabian Gulf to Southeast Asia) and the Far East (the region facing the Pacific Ocean). In the 20th century, these traditional delineations changed when the Ottoman Empire broke up and the British military command in World Wars I and II began to claim that areas in both the Near East and the Middle East were part of their “Middle East command.” The term Middle East slowly began to refer to the whole region in general, but which exact areas were included is subject to interpretation and context.

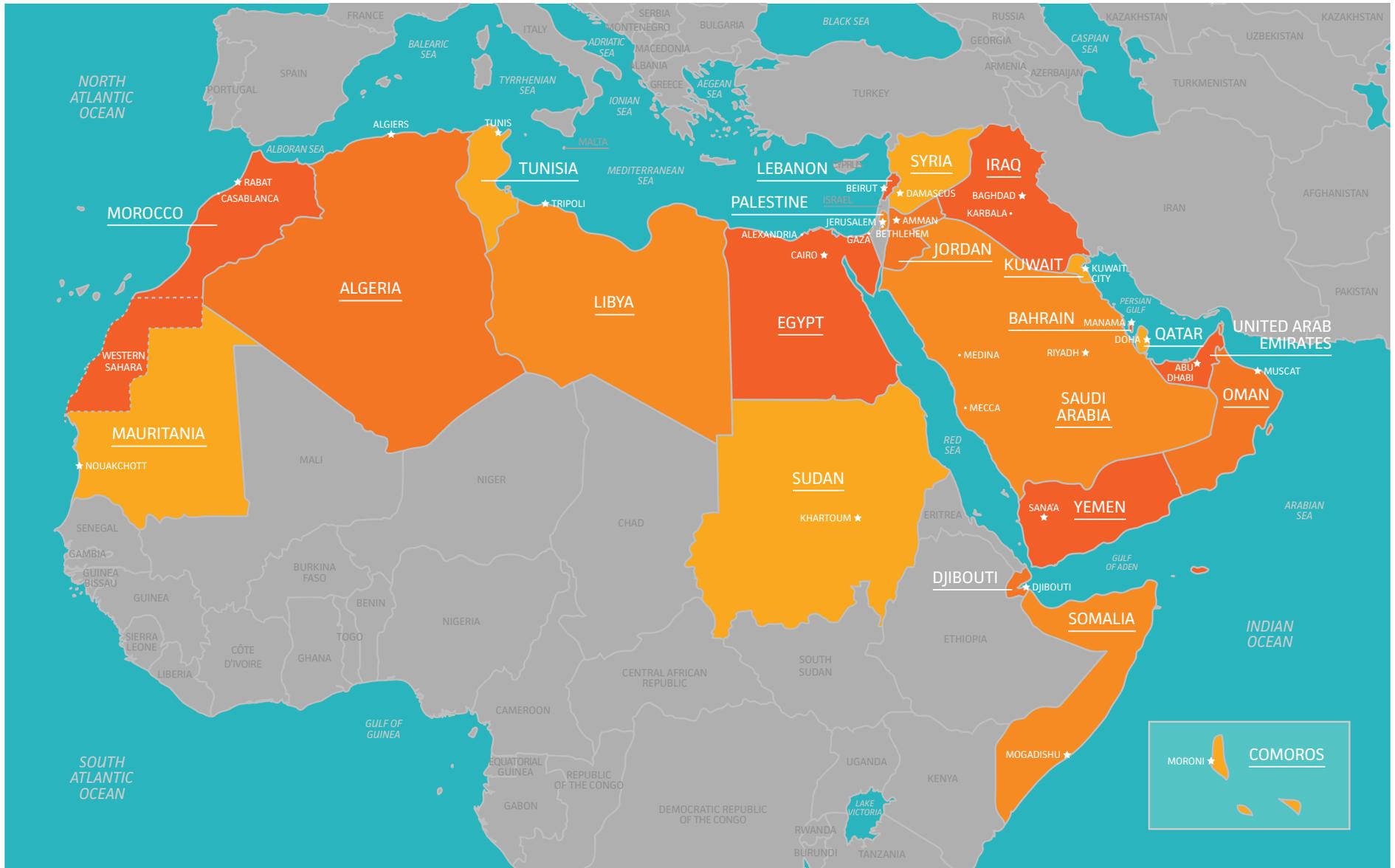
### 3. Are all Arabs Muslim?

Although American popular culture and media tend to present all Arabs as Muslim and all Muslims as Arab, Arabs represent only one-fifth of the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims. Arabs are a minority of Muslim Americans as well. A 2011 Pew Research Center survey found that 26% of Muslim Americans and 41% of foreign-born Muslims were from the Middle East and North Africa. This highlights that Muslims are not always Arab, but in addition Arabs are not always Muslim. There are large Christian communities in many Arab countries, particularly Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Jordan. Historically, Arab countries have also had Jewish communities, such as Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Tunisia.

The majority of immigrants to the U.S. from the Arab world before 1965 were Christian, and Christian Arab immigration continues alongside Muslim Arab immigration today. Although the religious breakdown is difficult to ascertain, scholars estimate that the Arab American population is about half Christian and half Muslim. There are also smaller numbers of Arabs in the U.S. that practice other faith traditions, like Druze and Judaism, or practice no religion at all. Shared ethnicity, rather than religion, defines Arab Americans.



The Ashker family band from Jackson, Miss., 1959. Joseph Ashker (on vocals) is a descendant of Lebanese Christian immigrants. AANM Collection 2015.13.01. Courtesy of Tommy Ashker.



Arab world map

## CHAPTER TWO

### Stereotypes

Whether through news coverage of real events or through the portrayal of Arabs and Arab Americans in fictionalized accounts, the media perpetuate stereotypes that impact Arab American lives daily. Commercial media — films, TV shows, music videos, comic strips and video games to name a few — use exaggerated, distorted images of people of differing racial and ethnic backgrounds for financial gain. The portrayals of Arabs and Arab Americans in commercial media rely heavily on contemporary news headlines and events to create characters and plotlines. Stereotypes of Arabs and Arab Americans tend to fluctuate with global events, diverse U.S. interests and policies, as well as with the representations of other ethnic groups.

#### **How have stereotypes changed over the years?**

American media stereotypes of Arabs have shifted drastically in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The image of Arabs in Hollywood films began as romantic “sheiks in the desert” in the 1920s, while the “rich oil sheik” who was anti-woman and anti-American emerged in the 1970s. The theme of Arab-as-terrorist also developed in the 1970s — an image that intensified and was applied to Arab Americans after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Rather than one dominant stereotype replacing an older one, past stereotypes remain in popular culture and merge with new images, so it is worthwhile to understand the evolution of these stereotypes. (For more information visit AANM’s online exhibition *Reclaiming Identity* at [www.arabstereotypes.org](http://www.arabstereotypes.org).)

Before the 1920s, the portrayal of Arab countries and the Middle East was generally as the Holy Land. Americans began to visit Palestine in the 1830s for religious reasons — to visit the places mentioned in the Bible and to encounter the physical locations of the life and ministry of Jesus. In letters home, lectures, paintings and photographs, the inhabitants of the Holy Land

were depicted as shepherds and people untouched by time, as if living in an ancient historical bubble. However, sometimes the local population did not live up to the biblically inspired hopes of the American visitors and so were depicted as dirty, degenerate and regressive.

In the early 1900s the “Orient,” or the East, began to be associated with luxury and sexuality, and with indulgence and irresponsibility — a link that was commodified in goods such as Camel cigarettes. The image of Arabs in Hollywood films began with Rudolph Valentino starring in *The Sheik* (1921) and *Son of the Sheik* (1926) in which Valentino plays a handsome “Arab” sheik who lives in the desert but who turns out to be an Englishman in disguise. This character echoed the real-life Lawrence of Arabia, the British military officer who fought with Arabs against the Ottomans in World War I. In the Orientalist imagery of films made before World War II, Arab women became visual subjects alongside their male counterparts and were depicted as mysterious, daring, scantily clad belly dancers, who seduced European men. In addition to the romantic desert sheik, the men could be wicked sultans, viziers or genies who traveled by magic carpet. The legacy of these Orientalist images can be seen in Disney’s *Aladdin* (1992), which has elements of the mythical “Arabland” created by Hollywood, replete with young heroic men from the desert, older greedy sultans and seductive young women dressed in sheer belly-dancing clothing.

The common stereotypes of Arabs that cropped up in films and TV slowly shifted from romantic and seductive to violent and dangerous. This was due to fiction imitating news events in Arab and Middle Eastern countries, as well as the development of U.S. policies toward the region that were cemented by President Ronald Reagan declaring a “war on terrorism” in his inaugural presidential speech in January 1981. This declaration was made after the 14-month embassy siege and taking of American hostages in Iran, a non-Arab country. The association of the word terrorist with Arabs and the broader Middle East was solidified, and Islam was labeled as the core cause of cultural tensions between the U.S. and the Middle East. Since Arabs and Muslims were conflated into one blurred category, the Arab/Muslim terrorist became a well-worn theme in news shows and in U.S. commercial media.

For example, in films such as *The Kingdom* (2007), all Arab Muslims (here Saudis) were portrayed as evil and radical Islamic terrorists intent on killing Americans.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in the 1980s, Arab/Muslim men tended to be stereotyped as malevolent and anti-American, and Arab/Muslim women portrayed as oppressed and the victims of a barbaric culture and patriarchy. In these narratives, women’s submission was often symbolized through clothing — wearing an Islamic “veil” that was a black body covering. Differences between the East and West, and more specifically between Islam and the U.S., were highlighted by contrasting a Western woman with a Muslim woman. In fictional plots, pity is evoked in the reader or viewer for the Muslim woman, who could only be freed by escaping the Middle East, often to the West. In films such as *Not Without My Daughter* (1991), the liberation of an American woman from her Iranian husband, his family and the Iranian government is pitted as a battle of good vs. evil, based on moral grounds.

#### COMMON STEREOTYPES OF ARABS AND ARAB AMERICANS IN THE U.S. MEDIA TODAY

**Men:** Dangerous, anti-American, anti-women, terrorist, dark and swarthy, bearded

**Women:** Always veiled, dangerous or submissive to men, olive-skinned and wearing heavy black eyeliner and black cloaks

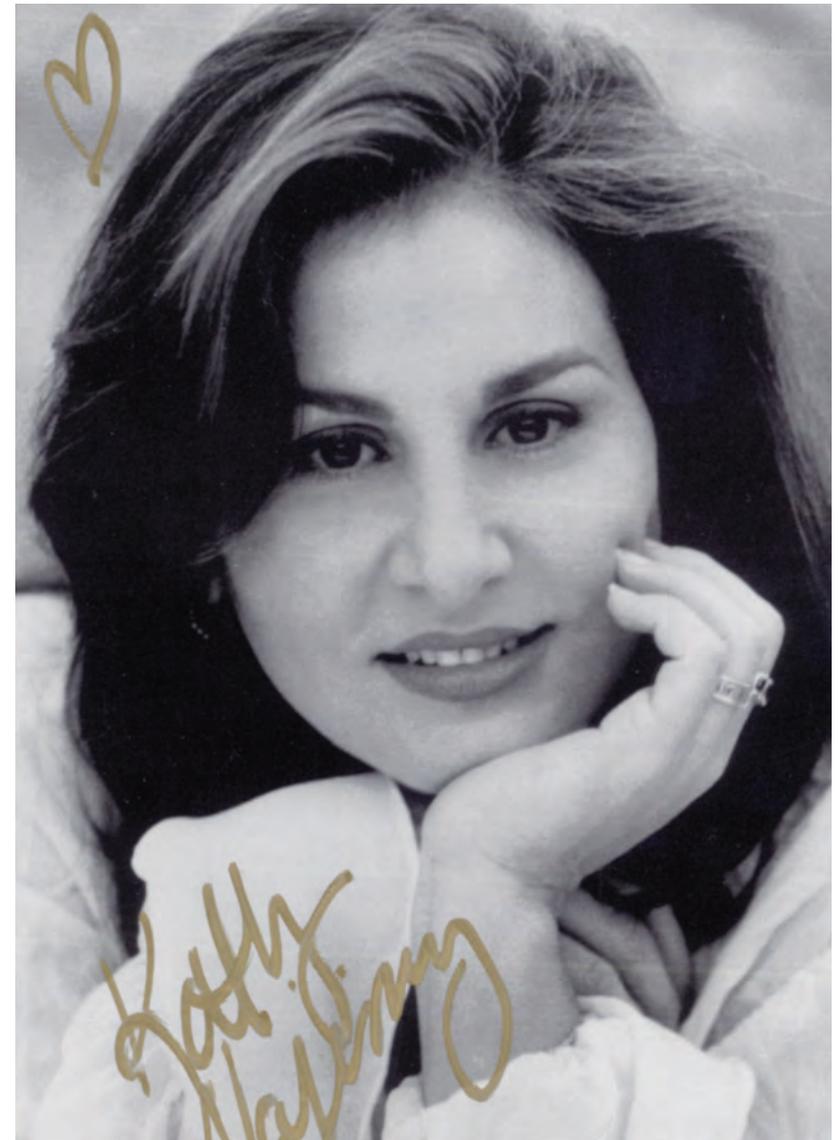
**Community:** Islamic only, highly religious, anti-American, suspicious, closed off from “outsiders” and living in ethnic enclaves, gender binary, homophobic

<sup>2</sup> For hundreds more examples of Hollywood films that stereotype Arabs, see Jack Shaheen's book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies A People* (2001).

In the years following Sept. 11, 2001, Arab American and Muslim American characters appeared more often in TV shows and films. Cultural studies scholar Evelyn Alsultany has found that after 2001 strategies were employed by television producers, writers and directors to give the impression of a new era of racial representation. Although producers and writers appeared to challenge or complicate former stereotypes with more complex representations, they actually reinforced stereotypes that existed before 2001. For example, despite inserting a patriotic Arab or Muslim American into a plotline or presenting diverse Muslim identities in TV shows, Arabs and Muslims were still portrayed within the context of terrorism. The portrayal of Arab men as anti-American and anti-women, Arab women as veiled and submissive to men, and all as dangerous, extremist Muslims continues today. It is of vital importance to recognize that these stereotypes are simplistic portrayals, made to sell films and other commercial media, and that they do not reflect the realities of the diverse and vibrant Arab American community.

Although stereotypes continue to impact the community, Arab Americans are becoming more adept at responding to negative media depictions. In 2014 for example, a group of Arab American activists and organizations convinced the ABC network to drop the proposed television pilot *Alice in Arabia*, in which an Arab American teenager is abducted by her Saudi uncle and forced to live in a palace in Saudi Arabia. The show, written by a non-Arab woman, was widely criticized as perpetuating negative stereotypes of Arabs and Arab Americans.

Arab Americans also use television, movies, literature and other mass media to create their own representations. Authors such as Laila Lalami and Rabih Alameddine have earned international success for their books. Television writer and producer Sam Esmail won a Golden Globe for his ground-breaking show *Mr. Robot*, which also featured an Egyptian American Oscar-winning lead, Rami Malek. Actors like Kathy Najimy and Tony Shalhoub continue to earn awards and accolades for their portrayals on screen and stage. Models Gigi and Bella Hadid use their fame and talent to influence global media. In popular music, people across the world listened to Casey Kasem's voice on the weekly *American Top 40* radio show, and DJ Khaled is one of the most recognizable figures in hip-hop.



Actress Kathy Najimy has appeared in numerous films such as *Hocus Pocus* and *Sister Act* and voiced Peggy Hill on the show *King of the Hill*. AANM Collection 2003.41.05f, gift of Kathy Najimy.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Holidays, Cultural Practices and Food

Arab Americans celebrate major life events, American holidays and religious holidays. Holidays are often an opportunity to get together as a family and to reinforce shared cultural and religious values with food, dance, music and conversation. Many holidays and feasts are celebrated according to religion and sect. As previously mentioned, Arab Americans come from a diversity of faiths, including Islam and Christianity, but also Judaism, Druze, Mandaism and others. There are Shi'a, Sunni and Sufi Muslims as well as Orthodox, Coptic, Greek Catholic (Melkite), Chaldean, Roman Catholic, Maronite Catholic, Protestant and other Christians.

The most important holy day to Muslims is Eid al-Adha, commemorating Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his son, whom Muslims believe was Ishmael rather than Isaac. This eid (or feast) falls at the end of the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, and is often celebrated with a meal of halal lamb with family and friends. Practicing Muslims will donate money to a mosque or an Islamic charity, which then must assist the poor and needy with their eid donations.

Shi'a Muslims observe the beginning of the month of Muharram as a mourning period for the Prophet Mohammed's grandson, Hussein, who was martyred in Karbala, Iraq. The feeling is somber in these 10 days when practicing Shi'a Muslims pray at the mosques, chant religious songs and read verses from the Qur'an at home. In some cases, dancing, music, television and parties of any sort, including weddings, are prohibited and women may refrain from wearing makeup at this time.

Eid al-Fitr is the most publicized event in the Islamic calendar in the U.S. because it takes place at the end of Ramadan, an approximately 30-day period of fasting in which practicing Shi'a and Sunni Muslims refrain from eating, drinking and sexual relations from dawn to dusk. Children who

have not reached puberty, women who are menstruating, and those who are traveling or ill are exempt from fasting. Ramadan is considered the holiest month for Muslims, with more time spent reading the Qur'an, praying at the mosque and eating iftar (the sunset meal) with fellow Muslim friends and families. On university campuses, Muslim students may cook in the dorms, or arrange to meet and eat together in the cafeteria. Members of the local mosque or Muslim community may meet at homes to share iftar together, and families often wake up early to have some food before the sun rises. Muslims in non-Muslim communities may feel isolated during Ramadan and recent immigrants report that it is much harder to fast in the U.S. than in the Arab world, where schedules and timetables are rearranged to account for fasting. While Ramadan is not a holiday, Eid al-Fitr is a three-day celebration, in which children are given new clothes and money from friends and relatives. Both Ramadan and this eid are symbolized by lantern decorations and are calculated using the lunar calendar; therefore the dates shift 11 days or so earlier every year.

Arab Christians celebrate three major religious holidays with their families: Christmas, Palm Sunday and Easter. While most Christians celebrate Christmas on December 25, some Eastern Christians, such as Copts, consider January 7 the day that Jesus was born. Palm Sunday launches the Holy Week that leads into Easter Sunday. Parents who can afford to do so buy their children new clothes and all enter church with candles decorated with ribbons, palm branches and flowers. For some Eastern Christians, Easter services begin on the Saturday night before with a procession. Easter Sunday is celebrated with elaborate meals that mark the transition from the simple meals of Lent. Since most Eastern Christians follow the Julian calendar, Palm Sunday and Easter celebrations usually occur later than in the Gregorian calendar, which is more widely recognized in the U.S. and followed by Roman Catholics and Protestants.



Children make lanterns, a traditional symbol of Ramadan, at AANM's annual Eid Family Party, 2016. Photo by Houssam Mchaimch.

Many Christians consider the holiest time of the year to be the six weeks before Easter. In this Lenten period, Eastern Orthodox churches hold special services or masses and many practicing Christians abstain from certain foods. Although the rules of fasting for Christians are too complex to detail here, during Lent and sometimes on Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year, observant Orthodox Christians (including Copts, Armenians, Antiochians), Chaldeans and Melkites abstain from eating meat, eggs, dairy, olive oil and wine. Chaldeans and Assyrians fast for three days and abstain from meat and dairy products in the period known as the Rogations of Nineve. Cookbooks produced by church members reflect the various local, sectarian food traditions, and include recipes with permissible Lenten foods. To see some of these cookbooks, visit AANM's library catalog: [www.dalnet.org/aanm](http://www.dalnet.org/aanm).

#### FOOD SERVED DURING HOLIDAYS

Each Arab country and community has varying culinary traditions, spice blends and traditional foods, but there are some common dishes served during religious holidays.

For Muslims, Ramadan iftars often start with eating dates and/or hot soups of lentils or vegetables to ease the throat and body into eating. Eid al-Adha meals often include lamb dishes commemorating Abraham's sacrifice to God.

Orthodox Christians often abstain from certain foods during Lent and may prepare special vegan meals. Like other Americans, Arab American Christians may color eggs and serve baked ham at the big Easter meal alongside traditional maamoul (date and nut cookies).

Arab Americans tend to merge their cuisines with American foods served on Thanksgiving and Christmas Day, preparing turkey as well as lamb, rice, tagines, stuffed grape leaves or other dishes.



A young Maronite Catholic girl poses with an ornate candle as part of Palm Sunday services, ca. 1920s. AANM Collection 2009.02.57, gift of Warren David.

While Muslims and Christians have adjusted some traditions from Arab countries to life in the U.S., they continue to celebrate holidays and fast during Ramadan and Lent. Different American institutions have found ways in which to accommodate ethnic minorities and religions while maintaining harmonious work and school environments. For instance, school officials have set aside special study halls during lunchtime for fasting Muslim students so that they do not have to go to the cafeteria during Ramadan. While employees can take vacation time, universities and schools debate if they should recognize the two eids, as well as the later Easter and Christmas dates, as official days off for their employees and students. In 2017, New York City Public Schools began recognizing Muslim holidays, and some other school districts with large Muslim students population, like Dearborn, Mich., also close for Muslim holidays.

### **Births, marriages and deaths**

As in many communities, births, marriages and deaths are considered significant markers of life for Arab Americans and are celebrated with certain religious and cultural traditions. In more traditional families, after the birth of a child, relatives and close friends are expected to visit the hospital or home of the parents with gifts such as gold coins or jewelry for the baby. Christians and Muslims alike usually circumcise boys shortly after birth. Babies may be adorned with a blue bead to ward off the evil, a cross or a small metallic Qur'anic pendant, depending on the family's religion.

Arab American marriages and funerals are usually officiated by religious figures. For weddings, practicing Muslims often invite the local imam into a home with a small number of family guests to witness the signing of the marriage contract. Practicing Christians hold longer ceremonies in churches with priests officiating. Both Christians and Muslims often celebrate marriages with family and friends in large, catered parties or haflas. Some Muslim families may not serve alcohol at these parties, but dancing is commonplace. Deaths, too, are officiated by priests or imams in funerary services at churches and mosques. Funerals are attended by family and friends in all-black clothing.



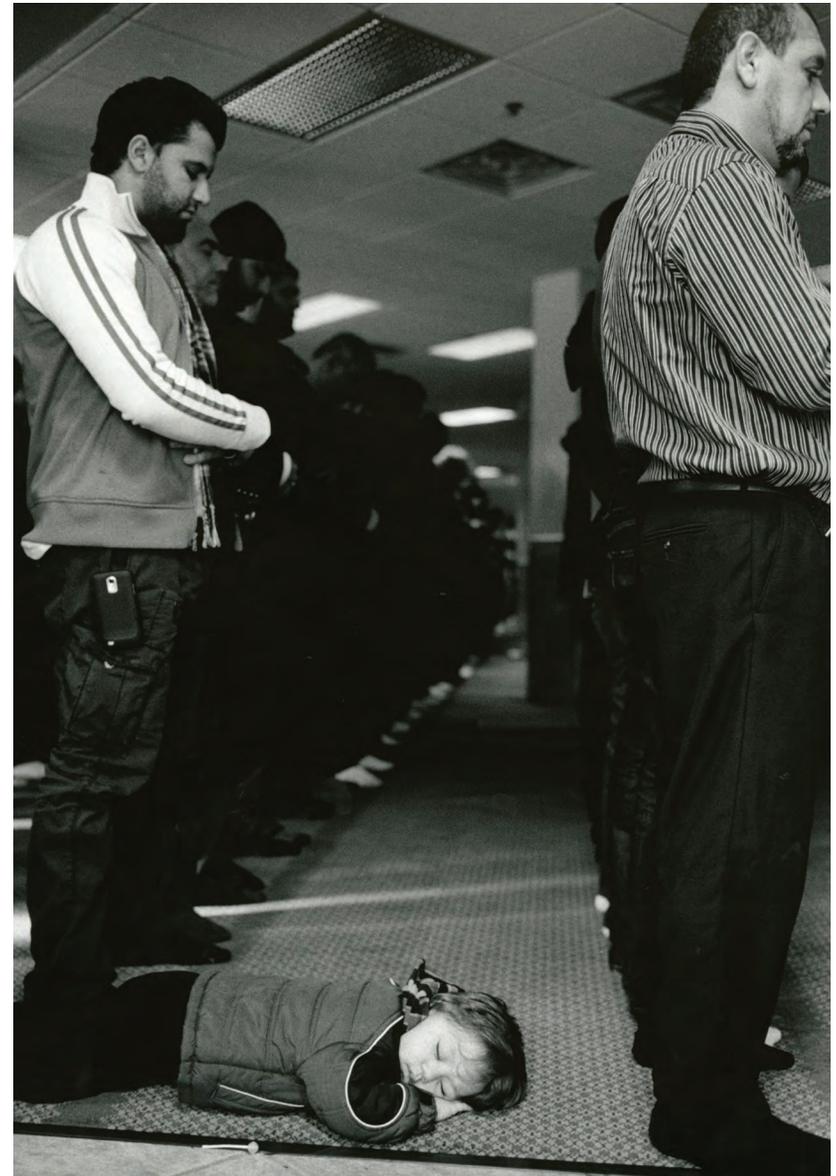
Women attending the Muslim Convention at the Chicago Hilton, ca. 1963. AANM Collection 2009.08.02.

Traditionally, both Christians and Muslims hold an ‘azza, which is a three-day mourning reception held after a funeral, usually at the family home of the deceased.

A tradition that is practiced in some Arab American communities (particularly Yemeni, Egyptian/North African, Sudanese and Palestinian) before the wedding is the henna night. Henna is made from the leaves of the henna tree and is a natural dye that is painted onto the body, especially the hands and feet, of the bride and her female friends and cousins. The henna designs look like a tattoo, but they fade completely after three weeks or less. While the application of henna is supposed to make the bride more attractive to her groom on their wedding night, the purpose of the henna night is to bring together women to kick off the wedding celebrations.

When Arab Americans first immigrate, they are likely to stick with the holidays that they celebrated back home, such as celebrating Mother’s Day on March 21 rather than the U.S. Mother’s Day, the second Sunday in May. Other holidays that are new to them may take some adjustment. Many Arab Americans consider Independence Day (4th of July) a time for patriotism and family celebrations. Some Arab Americans have large annual family reunions on that weekend. For example, Arab Americans who trace their ancestry to Ramallah, Palestine, gather thousands of people to attend their family reunion/convention.

For some Arab Americans, other holidays can prove to be more difficult. Some Muslims believe that Valentine’s Day promotes cheap, commercialized romanticism in boys and girls, but they may allow their children to exchange cards with their friends. Halloween is another holiday that is opposed by some Muslim families as it is seen as a celebration of witchcraft. Other Muslims see the holiday as harmless and allow their children to dress up and trick-or-treat with adult supervision. As is often the case in a diverse community, the choice to celebrate a holiday or event changes over time, even within families.



A child sleeps during prayers at The Mosque Foundation in Bridgeview, IL (2012) where there is a large Palestinian population. AANM Collection 2018.01.03. Photo by Robert Gerhardt.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Histories of Arab American Immigration

The first recorded Arab and African to arrive in North America was a slave, Zammouri, also known by his slave name, Estebanico, who was brought to the continent in 1528. Although about 15% of African slaves brought to the Americas would have been Arabic-speaking Muslims, maintaining their language and religious traditions was forbidden under slavery. There is very little record of these early Arabs in what is now known as the United States.

Although some Arabs traveled to the U.S. as merchants and adventurers in the mid-to-late 1800s, an Arab American community did not begin to develop until the 1890s when there was a significant influx of Arabic-speaking immigrants. Changing immigration laws in the U.S. and conditions in Arab countries created four periods of Arab American immigration.

#### **The First Period (1880s–1924)**

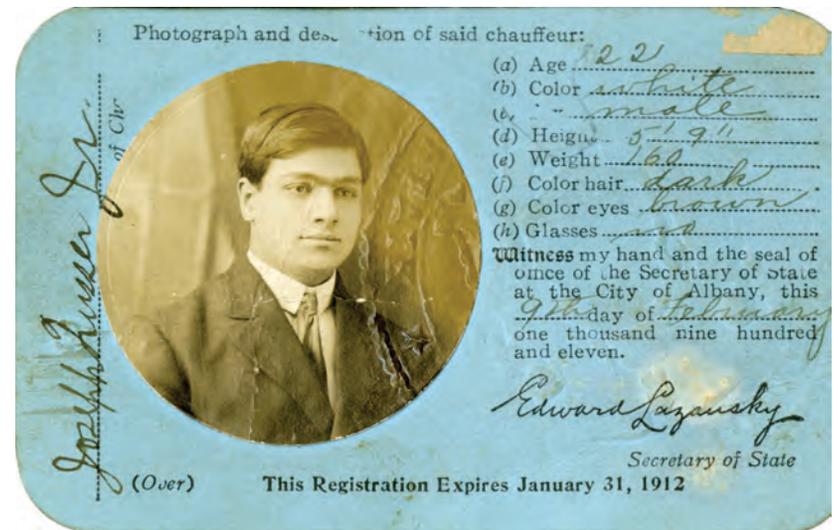
During the period from 1880–1924, known as the first era of mass migration to the U.S., an estimated 20 million immigrants from around the globe came to America. As part of that period, an estimated 95,000 Arabs came from what was known as Greater Syria, which included the present-day countries of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Israel. Smaller numbers of Arab immigrants also came from Yemen, Iraq, Morocco and Egypt. By 1924, approximately 200,000 Arabs were living in the United States.

The number of Arab immigrants was large enough to prompt the U.S. government to hire Najeeb Arbeely as a facilitator and interpreter at Ellis

Island. The Arbeelys of Damascus, Syria, were the first recorded Arab family to come to the U.S. with the intention of becoming citizens. Dr. Joseph Arbeely, his wife, six sons and niece arrived in New York on August 20, 1878. 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 the U.S. (*Kawkwab America*), in 1892. The majority of Arabs who came during this early period of immigration 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 and the declining Ottoman Empire, which heavily taxed its subjects and conscripted men into 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 and Oklahoma. As time passed, families brought their relatives over and communities were established to help new arrivals. Arab immigrants, like others who came at the time, provided much-needed labor that helped transform the U.S. 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 first period, it is almost impossible to know the exact number. This is partially due to the various ways Arab immigrants were classified. Since Arab countries are located in both Asia and Africa, and because Arabs do not have common physical characteristics, Arabs were classified as either Greek, Armenian, Turk, Ottoman, African, Asian, White or European. In addition, before Ellis Island in New York Harbor became the major port of entry, many 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, the only known stories are those passed down



City of Albany, N.Y., driver's license for Lebanese immigrant Joseph Nusser, 1911. AANM Collection 2017.01.02.



Aliya Hassen's (also spelled Hassan) membership card in the Egyptian Arab American Seaman's Society in Brooklyn, N.Y., ca. 1950. AANM Collection 1999.04.11g.

through families, newspapers or other public records. While the majority of immigrants during this early period came through New York, some arrived through Boston Harbor, New Orleans and other ports. In the early 1900s, many Arabs came to Texas via Mexico. Some also reached the U.S. from South America after being turned away at Ellis Island, living in Brazil, Chile or Venezuela and then immigrating to the U.S.

### LITTLE SYRIA, NEW YORK

By the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Arab American community in New York City (both Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn) was a thriving ethnic enclave. Little Syria, also known as “the mother colony,” was the first major Arab American community and boasted dozens of restaurants and grocery stores, newspapers in both Arabic and English, houses of worship, as well as numerous manufacturers, importers and purveyors of women’s clothing (particularly silk undergarments and robes). Famed writers Kahlil Gibran and Ameen Rihani published their first works in Little Syria; warehouses supplied Arab immigrant peddlers that traversed the nation; and Arab American Christians founded some of their first churches in the country in the Lower Manhattan enclave.

The number of residents in Little Syria began to decline in the 1930s. By 1946, the construction of the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel displaced the remaining residents. The tunnel — with its entrance in the middle of what had been Little Syria — was completed in 1950. Later the northern border of Little Syria became a construction site for the World Trade Center. Most residents moved to Brooklyn and other cities, including emerging Arab American communities around the country.



Sam Jabara in his Mancelona, Mich., general store, ca. 1930. He and his wife, Mymonie, owned and operated the store. AANM Collection 2003.32.05c.

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 and, in reaction, the U.S. Congress passed several laws including the 1921 Quota Act and the Immigration Act of 1924.

### The Second Period (1925–1965)

Those two major pieces of immigration legislation ushered in a new period of Arab immigration to the United States. These laws established an immigration quota system that placed restrictions on immigrants from all countries except northern and western Europe. After 1924, some of the immigration records were lost and those that remain indicate that there was a drastic decrease in the arrivals of new Arabic-speaking immigrants. However, there are stories of Yemenis, Palestinians and others immigrating to the U.S. that are not clearly reflected in the official records.

At the end of World War II, the U.S. 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. Although strict immigration laws were still in effect, the U.S. made exceptions for some Arab immigrants. In the post-colonial Arab world, many educated, elite and middle-class urbanites from Iraq, Egypt, Palestine and Jordan, in addition to Syria and Lebanon, decided to leave the region and come to the U.S. 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 and Palestinians. Yemenis, who were mostly low-skilled, single men, came to work in American shipyards, in the mining and car industries, or worked as migrant farmers in the valleys of California. Palestinians also came to the U.S. in this period. Following the creation of the State of Israel and the



Ali Mohammed Abdorahman Alkabish immigrated from Yemen around 1924. Photo ca. 1940s taken in Dearborn, Mich., where he worked in automotive factories. AANM Collection 2018.07.01.

resulting tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees, U.S. Congress's passage of the 1953 Refugee Relief Act allowed 2,000 Palestinian families to immigrate by 1956. Another 985 families were allowed to immigrate between 1958 and 1963.

### The Third Period (1966–1990s)

In late 1965 the U.S. government changed its immigration laws with the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act. This act marked a significant change in U.S. immigration policy from one that favored immigration from Europe to a more equal approach that accepted people from non-European areas, including the Arab world. The third period of immigration ramped up in 1970, when this immigration legislation ushered in a new stream of immigrants — approximately 400,000 Arabs throughout the period joined many others from around the world in coming to the U.S. to start new lives. In this third phase, many Lebanese fled civil war, Palestinians left refugee camps and others arrived in the U.S. from all over the Arab world. Unlike earlier groups of Arab immigrants who identified specifically with their country of origin, village, church or mosque, this period of immigration brought people who were much more secular and had a strong sense of a broader Arab identity. In the 1950s and 1960s, Arab American identity became more popular and national organizations such as the Organization of Arab Students and the Association of Arab-American University Graduates were established.

Demographically, Arab immigrants in the 1970s and '80s included a large number of highly educated professionals as well as students, who were offered jobs and ended up staying in the country permanently after graduation. Three major Arab organizations were also founded in this period. The Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (now known as ACCESS) was founded in 1971 by a group of volunteers in Dearborn, Mich., who were concerned for the well-being of local immigrants. ACCESS has grown into the largest Arab American community non-profit in the U.S. Important national political Arab American organizations — the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) and the Arab American Institute (AAI) — were both founded in the 1980s. All three of these organizations continue to operate today.



Donated items from boxer Sadam Ali, U.S. Olympian and 2017 WBO Junior Middleweight champ; and hockey player Brandon Saad, two-time Stanley Cup winner. AANM *Making An Impact* exhibit.

### The Fourth Period (1990s-present)

In the fourth period, political push factors as well as diversity in the Arab American populations increased. Beginning in the 1990s, the number of Iraqis, Somalis and Sudanese in the U.S. grew exponentially from relatively small numbers to thousands annually as people escaped wars and starvation. In the first decade of the 21st century, Iraqis fled their homes due to U.S. military involvement. Later the rise of Daesh, also known as the Islamic State (IS), and other violence and war caused more Iraqis and also Syrians to flee their homes. Economic difficulties, unemployment and population pressures acted as significant reasons for Egyptians, Moroccans and Jordanians to immigrate in the 1990s and 2000s, specifically following the Arab Spring revolutions that began in 2010.

In the 1990s, a significant number of Somali and Sudanese immigrants moved to Midwestern cities, such as Columbus, Ohio, and the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul in Minnesota. Some also settled in large cities like Washington, D.C., New York and Boston. The Egyptian community tended to settle on the East Coast, in the New York/New Jersey area, as well as metro Washington, D.C. Iraqi refugees were placed in the states of Texas, California, Washington, Virginia, Michigan and Massachusetts.

U.S. official policy and tone towards Arab immigrants in the U.S. changed following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Security officials looked at how the perpetrators had entered the country and found that the hijackers were all young male Arab nationals who had entered the United States with visas in their real names. As a direct result, U.S. immigration authorities focused on the age, gender and nationality of applicants. In 2003, the Department of Homeland Security implemented a special registration program, formally known as the National Security Entry/Exit Registration System (NSEERS). Under this program, males over the age of 16 who had recently entered the United States from certain countries were required to report to immigration offices to be photographed and fingerprinted annually. Through the list of countries, it was obvious that the immigration enforcement was focused on Arabs and Muslims — a reality that had a chilling effect on Arab Americans.



Adam Hashem from Hashems Roastery in Dearborn, Mich., offers visitors a sample of cardamom, a spice mixed with coffee beans to brew Arabic or Turkish coffee. AANM Yalla Eat tour, 2017.

Following the inauguration of President Trump in January 2017, the selective enforcement of immigration laws transformed into travel bans and massive reductions in the ceiling of the number of accepted refugees. Again, the Arab American community was disproportionately impacted. In January 2017, Trump issued an executive order to ban immigration from seven countries (Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen) and the admission of all refugees to the U.S. for four months, as well as an indefinite ban on Syrian refugees. In the course of a year, different versions of this order took effect, including dropping Sudan and Iraq from the list to make it seem less like a “Muslim ban,” which was deemed unconstitutional. Regardless, these policies pointed to a future of restricted immigration from the Middle East and North Africa.

In 2000, nationals from the Arab world accounted for just under five percent of the total number of immigrants who became Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), many of whom are presumably now U.S. citizens. From 2007 to 2016, 5.66 percent of total LPRs were from Arab countries — a slight uptick from the percentage in 2000. In terms of national breakdowns, over 50,000 people from Egypt, Iraq and Somalia and over 20,000 immigrants from Yemen, Sudan, Syria, Morocco, Lebanon and Jordan became LPRs of the United States from 2007 to 2016. Thousands of Syrians and Iraqis arrived as part of the refugee resettlement program between 2010 and 2016, as well as asylum seekers and Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) recipients. While these groups of immigrants have been scaled down due to the changing political climate, Arab American immigration and communities continue to grow and evolve in the fourth period.



Zeinab Ahmad at the Women's March in Washington, D.C., in 2017, with a group organized by Arab American non-profit ACCESS and its Campaign to TAKE ON HATE. Courtesy of ACCESS.

## CONCLUSION

Arab Americans are a small percentage of the total U.S. population but have long been an integral part of American society. In the four periods of immigration, stretching from 1880s to the present day, Arab Americans have come from different countries and socio-economic positions. Motivated by economic opportunity, thousands of sojourners and settlers, mostly from present-day Lebanon and Syria, first came to the U.S. between 1880 and 1924 and established trade networks and residency across the country. The years between 1925 and 1965 mark the second phase of Arab American history, when more Egyptians, Palestinians, Jordanians and Iraqis joined Lebanese and Syrians in the U.S. The third period of immigration began after 1965 when new legislation opened the way for many more non-European immigrants. In this third phase, more Lebanese, Palestinians and other Arabs arrived in the U.S., including many students and professionals. The most recent layer of immigration began in the 1990s as a result of numerous push factors, including war and political strife in Arab countries. These push factors initiated increases in immigrants from Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, Somalia and Syria in particular.

While it is clear that developments in Arab countries have profoundly affected the evolution of Arab American communities, the impact of U.S. immigration legislation and policies cannot be understated. In 2017, cuts to the number of admissible refugees and selective immigration enforcement drastically reduced the number of migrants arriving from Arab countries through the refugee resettlement program. Despite this decrease, new immigrants continued to obtain Lawful Permanent Resident status and the Arab American community continues to grow as more people pass through the processes leading to U.S. citizenship. In addition, new generations of Arab Americans are born into the population every year.

Adding diversity to the ethnic landscape of the U.S., Arab Americans are found in every profession imaginable, practice a vast array of religions, and have a range of educational backgrounds and political affiliations. With continual immigration from across the 22 countries of the Arab region, and an immigration history that stretches back to the 1880s, the Arab American community is multi-faceted.

Despite their differences, Arab Americans feel connected through shared histories, cultural heritage and common values such as entrepreneurship, education, generosity and hospitality. To stay connected, and to serve their fellow community members, Arab Americans have built up political, cultural and social service organizations. The missions of these organizations range from social, community-focused groups to those that help new immigrants adjust after arrival, fight against discrimination, and promote the involvement of Arab Americans in the political process. The shared challenges to the community come from the stereotypes perpetuated by commercial media as well as the increasing political rhetoric and discrimination in national immigration and refugee policies.

The **Arab American National Museum (AANM)** is the first and only museum in the United States devoted to Arab American history and culture. Located in Dearborn, Mich., AANM is an Affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution and is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. It is a national institution of ACCESS, the Dearborn-based community nonprofit founded in 1971 by Arab American activists.

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*If you have any questions or require more information on Arab Americans, please visit [www.arabamericanmuseum.org](http://www.arabamericanmuseum.org) or call 313.582.2266.*

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To search AANM's Ebeid Library & Resource Center, please visit [www.arabamericanmuseum.org](http://www.arabamericanmuseum.org).