



# Arabs in America: *Understanding the Arab American Community*





***The Arab World  
An Overview***



# The Arab World: An Overview

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



- 1. The Arab World: An Overview***
- 2. History and Immigration***
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# The Arab World



The Arab World can be divided into three major geographical regions:

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

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

# Who are the Arabs?

- Anyone who is a citizen of an Arab country or identifies as an Arab
- Culturally speaking, not everyone who lives in the Arab World sees themselves as Arab
- Not all Arabs are Muslim. Not all Muslims are Arab.
- The Middle East includes the Arab World in addition to other countries
- The majority of Arabs are united by a common language (with different dialects), and a shared identity in Arab history and similar customs

# The Middle East Verses the Arab World



The category “**Middle East**” refers to a region of the world that is linked by a shared location, but ***not*** a common language. Therefore, Arab Americans ***should not*** be referred to as Middle Eastern Americans.



# The Islamic World Versus the Arab World



Muslims and Arabs are two different classifications of people. In fact, of the top ten countries with the largest Muslim populations, only three are Arab. While Muslims can be found all over the world, they are predominantly found in parts of Africa and Asia.



# Central Arab Cultural Elements

Three dominant themes can be found across the Arab World



## FAITH

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



## FAMILY

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



## COMMUNITY

An extension of faith and family is community. It is a connection to culture for enjoyable and organizational purposes.



Comoros



Kuwait



Oman



Jordan

# Diversity of the Arab World

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



Tunisi



Mauritania



Algeria



Egypt



*History of  
Arab American  
Immigration*



# History of the Arab American Community

- The U.S., since its first formation, has had a long history of engagement with the Arab World.
- Changes in immigration law continue to have significant impacts on the Arab American community.
- Arab immigration to the U.S. has existed over 100 years.
- Each immigration wave has its own unique characteristics.



# 1<sup>ST</sup> Wave of Arab Immigration to the U.S.

## Late 1800s – 1940s

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



The majority of these immigrants were from “Greater Syria”, which is present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine.

# 1<sup>st</sup> Wave Arab Immigration to the U.S.



**The early Arab immigrants shared a number of common features, which included:**

- Primarily Christians
- From rural areas
- With little to no education
- Mainly men, who were then followed by increasing numbers of women



# 2<sup>nd</sup> Wave of Arab Immigration to the U.S.

## Late 1940s – 1960s



**The 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of Arab immigrants encompassed more diverse characteristics, which included:**

- More Muslims as well as more Christians
- From both urban and rural location
- More educated which resulted in a **brain drain** to the homeland

# 3<sup>rd</sup> Wave Arab Immigration to the U.S. 1970's



**These immigrants came for political reasons as opposed to economic and educational purposes.**

- This wave of immigration was the result of the U.S. war in Iraq, civil war in Syria, and continued conflicts in Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine.



# 4<sup>th</sup> Wave Arab Immigration to the U.S. 2000s - Present



**Today, Arab (and Muslim) immigration is part of the larger debate on immigration reform in the U.S.**

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

***Arab Americans  
and Religion***





# Christian Arab Americans



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

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

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

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

Other Arab Americans left their Eastern Rite churches for Roman Catholic churches as a matter of convenience.

# Muslim Arab Americans



A Muslim is a follower of Islam which often is viewed as a singular religion. However, it is a diverse religion that has many important distinctions.

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

30-35% of Arab Americans are Muslims. This does not account for all Muslim Americans, as many come from non-Arab nations, or are not of immigrant origins (such as the Nation of Islam).



# Women and the Hijab

In Islam, the idea of wearing a *hijab*, or head covering, is rooted in modesty. Whether or not a woman wears a hijab, and the manner in which it is worn, is based more in local cultural customs. Some women will coordinate the hijab worn to match their outfit.



Saudi Women's Rights Activist  
Manal al-Sharif

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



Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan

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

# *Arab American Demographics*





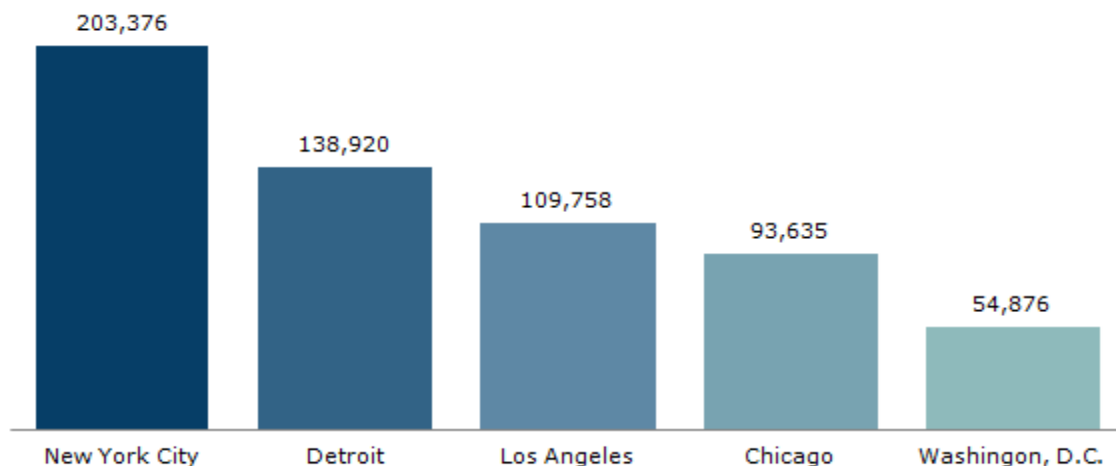
# Who are the Arab Americans?

- Arab Americans are in many ways distinct from American society, and in other ways very similar.
- Not everyone with Arab ancestry identifies as Arab American
- There are close to 4 million Arab Americans in the United States
- According to the U.S. Census, Arab Americans are classified as “White” although they come from Asia and Africa

# Where do Arab Americans live?

Arab Americans can be found throughout the United States, and literally in every state. However, there are certain areas that are known to have large Arab American communities. Not surprisingly, these are around major metropolitan areas, such as New York, Detroit, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington, DC. The largest concentration of Arab Americans can be found in Michigan, where some estimate that upwards of 500,000 Arab Americans.

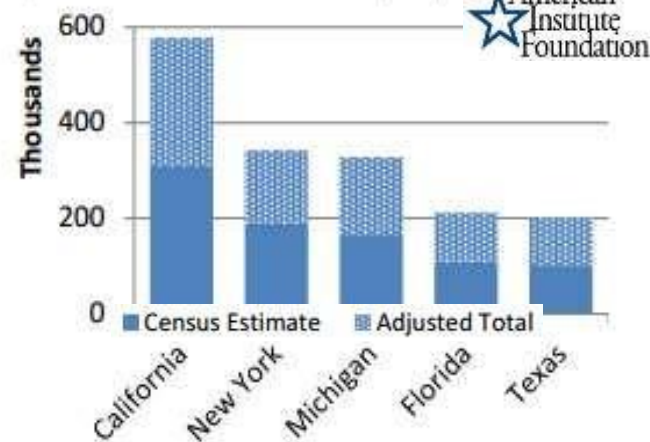
**Population of Top Five Arab American News Markets**



**Source:** Arab America: Demographics, U.S. Census 2010 and 2011 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Estimates  
**Note:** Washington D.C. population from 2010 ACS 1-Year Estimates; all other populations from the 2011 ACS 1-Year Estimates

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*Top Arab American States by Popu*



Arab  
American  
Institute  
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***Arab American  
Culture, Customs, and Traditions***



# Arab American Culture, Customs and Traditions

- Assimilation and acculturation are parts of the processes through which immigrants go through when arriving to a new society.
- While Arab culture is diverse, there are certain traits that are central to it.
- Most Arab Americans speak English as native speakers.
- Food plays a central part of Arab (American) culture and holiday traditions.



# Arabic Language

Children and grandchildren of immigrant Arab Americans generally do not speak the Arabic language. However, an emphasis on maintaining Arabic in the household is strong with first generation Arab Americans and new immigrants.

The Arabic language is comprised of 28 letters, and is written from right to left.

ا	ب	ت	ث	ج	ح	خ
alif	baa	taa	thaa	jiim	haa	kha
د	ذ	ر	ز	س	ش	ص
daal	thaal	raa	zaay	siin	shiin	saad
ض	ط	ظ	ع	غ	ف	ق
daad	taa	thaa	ayn	ghayn	faa	qaaf
ك	ل	م	ن	ه	و	ي
kaaf	laam	miim	nuun	ha	waaw	yaa

English	Transliteration	Translation
Welcome	Ahlan wa sahlan	أهلاً وسهلاً
Hello	Marhaba	مرحباً
Goodbye	Ilā ʿalīqaa	إلى اللقاء
Good morning	Sabah elkayr	صباح الخير
Good afternoon	Masa elkayr	مساء الخير
Thank you	Shokran	شكراً
Sorry	Aasif	آسوف
Please	Min fadlek	من فضلك
Yes	Naam	نعم
No	Laa	لا
Come here	Taala huna	تعالى هنا

# Arab Americans and English Language

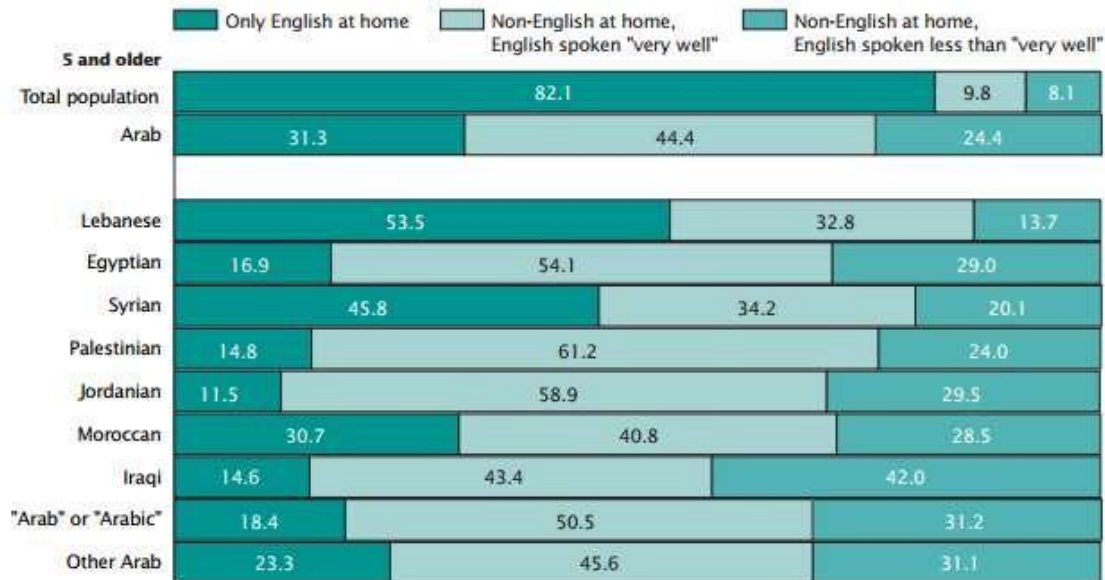
Arab Americans can see two general language patterns. For those who are descendants from the early immigration waves, English is the primary (and perhaps only) language spoken.

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

Depending on the country of origin, other languages, such as French could be spoken in addition to Arabic.

## Language Spoken at Home and English-Speaking Ability: 2000

(Percent distribution of population 5 and older. Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see [www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/doc/sf4.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/doc/sf4.pdf))



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 special tabulation.



# Arabic Calligraphy

Arabic Calligraphy is the art form in which phrases in Arabic, often taken from the Quran, are written in a beautiful script. This is why it is also known as Islamic Calligraphy.

In its modern form, Arabic calligraphy can be found in the logos of companies, and in representations of animals.



# Hospitality in Arab Culture

Hospitality is very important in Arab culture and this holds true for Arab Americans, as well. Providing food and drink, such as tea or coffee, is typical when visiting a home, or even business.

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

أَهْلًا وَسَهْلًا

**Ahlan wa Sahlan**  
**“Welcome”**





# Greetings in Arabic and Arab Culture

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

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



Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud and President George W. Bush exchanging greetings. Mandel Nan/AFP/Getty Images

**Marhaba--Hello**

**Ahlan wa Sahlan--Welcome**

**Assalaam Alaykum—Peace be upon you (religious expression)**

# Arab American Holidays

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

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



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



Our Lady of Lebanon Mahrajan, Wheeling, WV



Dearborn Arab International Festival, photo from the festival site



The cross is carried out of Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church in Friday's Easter service. Photo: Mal Fairclough



# Food for Special Occasions



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



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

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



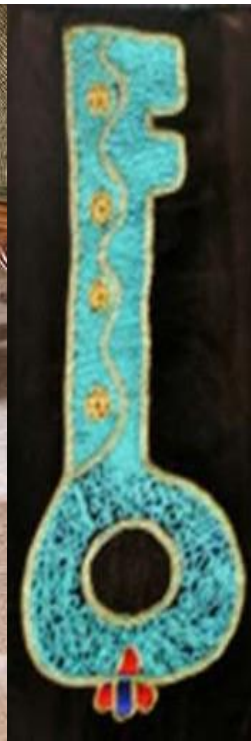
Deep-fried *zalabieh* and *awwamat*, served in syrup, is eaten for all occasions and is often made during Epiphany.



Many variations of baklava are enjoyed at all celebratory occasions.

# In the Arab American Home

Within many Arab American homes, you can find elements of ethnic pride and ancestral heritage. This might be in the form of artifacts carried by immigrants, pictures of villages, and/or general symbols of Arab identity.





*Issues Facing  
Arab Americans*



# Stereotypes and the Media

Stereotypes of Arabs (and Muslims) pervade media in America. In many ways, Arabs are perhaps the most stereotyped group in the media. This is by no means a recent phenomenon, but one that has a long history and legacy.

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

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



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



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



# Hate Crimes Against Arab Americans

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

The Southern Poverty Law Center has also reported a sharp increase in anti-immigrant hate crimes against Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Americans (who are often confused as Arab or Muslim) since the 2016 presidential elections.



# Bullying of Arab American Students

Despite the increased attention on bullying since a spate of teen suicides highlighted the problem a year ago, news reports and academic studies document dozens of examples in which school officials have dismissed Muslim bullying complaints. In some instances, teachers themselves are the bullies.

Among other examples, a substitute teacher at a school in Hillsborough County, Fla., was disciplined in 2007 for harassing a sixth-grader because his name was Islam. In 2006, a substitute teacher in Gaithersburg, Md., had to be escorted from a school after berating a group of students for speaking Arabic.

THE HUFFINGTON POST  
BREAKING NEWS AND OPINION

Terrorist

Sand N\*gger

Camel jockey

A-rab

Towel head

Osama

For Arab American and Muslim American students, bullying can be an everyday feature of life. This is further complicated by adults who can share in the biases possessed by those doing the bullying. Global events, such as wars, economic crises, inflammatory political rhetoric, coupled with cultural differences create a climate that is ripe for victimization of children.

In the end, group-based bullying is rooted in the larger social and cultural climate. Images experienced in movies, on television, video games, and music, as well as through the words of educators, create a kind of tacit approval targeting Arab and Muslim-American students is permissible, even admirable, when those actions are seen as patriotic.



*Arab American  
Professions, Education,  
and Achievements*



# Arab American Professions

While many early Arab immigrants sought opportunity in traditional immigrant routes of industrial work and homesteading, *pack peddling* (or peddling) became a hallmark. Peddlers would travel through the country side door to door, selling general products and 'novelties from the Holy Land' to customers. All what they needed was the determination to succeed, and a few goods to sell.



This eventually led to the opening of grocery stores, as peddlers looked for more stationary opportunities. Marriage and families also helped, providing the staff needed to run a store, creating a true family business and the achievement of their American Dream.

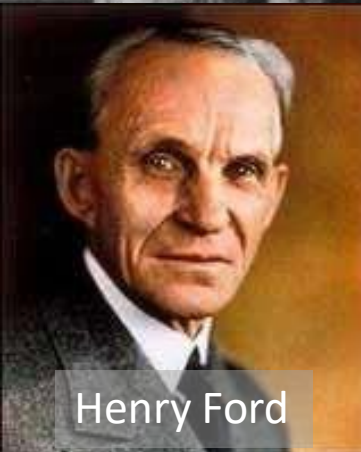




# Arab American Professions



As with other immigrants, many Arab immigrants worked in manufacturing. After Henry Ford offered “\$5 a day” for work, immigrants flocked to Detroit, Michigan to answer the call of higher wages. This led Detroit, and subsequently Dearborn (Michigan), to establishing a very large and diverse Arab-American community



Henry Ford



1913 Ford Assembly Line



# Arab American Professions

Immigrant parents wanted a better and easier life for their children. They *strongly* encouraged them into more professional vocations. Primarily, Arab immigrants looked for their children to become doctors, lawyers, or engineers - jobs that were seen to provide a healthy income, reliable stability, and social status that were part of their American dream.

Doctors, lawyers, and engineers became the calling for many Arab American youth, helping to fulfill the hopes of their parents, and integrating them into American economic life.



**NAAAEA**  
National Arab American  
Association of Engineers  
and Architects



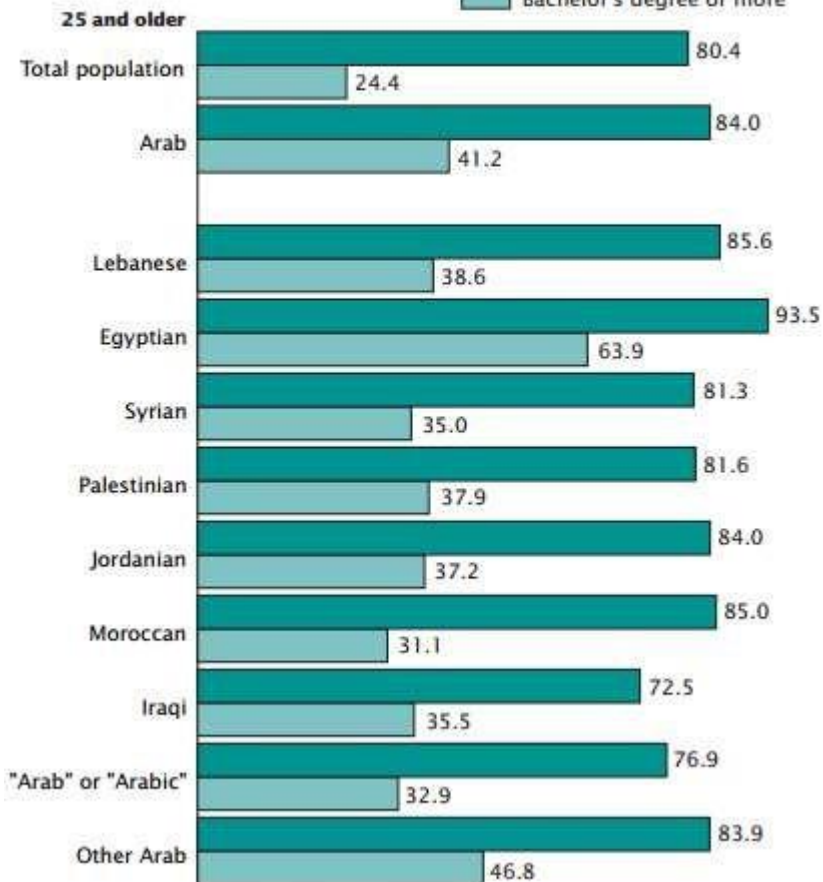


# Arab Americans and Education

## Educational Attainment: 2000

(Percent of population 25 and older. Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see [www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/doc/sf4.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/doc/sf4.pdf))

High school graduate or more  
Bachelor's degree or more



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 special tabulation.

Arab Americans have historically placed a very high value on educational attainment. This has resulted in Arab Americans having education rates that exceed that of the general US population.

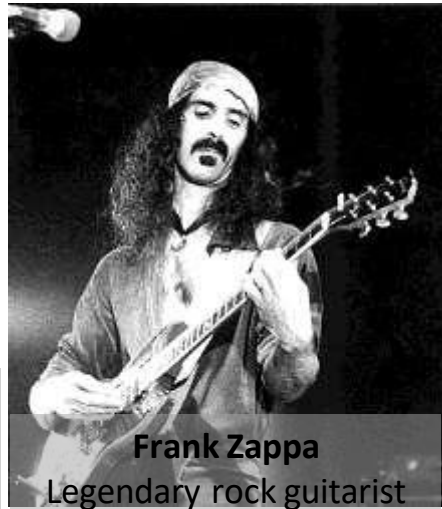
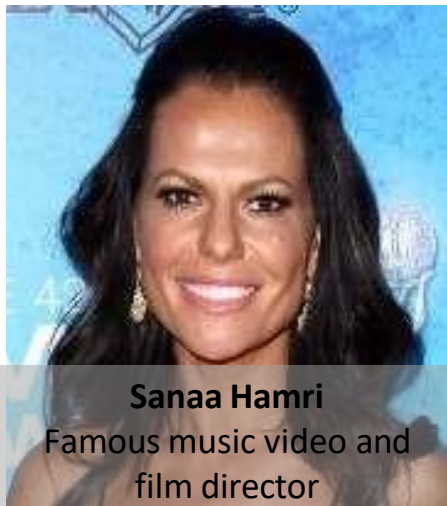
Census reports indicate that over 40% of Arab Americans have at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 24% of the general US population.



# Notable Arab Americans

Throughout their time in the United States, Arab Americans have contributed in significant ways to American society. Whether it be through their everyday work, extended family, broader community networks, and integration into civic life, their presence (along with that of other immigrant groups), has helped to form the nation.

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





# Notable Arab Americans in Entertainment



## **Rami Malek**

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



## **Shakira**

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



## **Gigi Hadid**

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



## **Salma Hayek**

Lebanese American Actress Salma Hayek's father, Sami, is Lebanese-Mexican, hailing from the city of Baabdat, Lebanon.

# Notable Arab Americans in Politics and Activism



**Donna Shalala**

US Secretary of Health & human Services  
President of the University of Miami



**Ray LaHood**

US Congressman  
US Secretary of Transportation



**Rashida Tlaib**

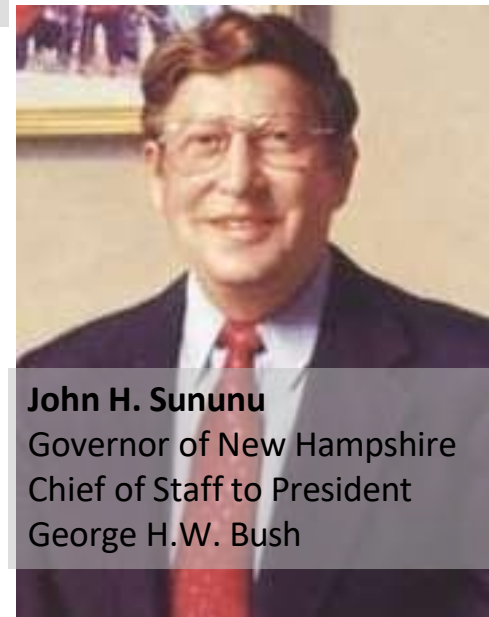
US Congresswoman



**Ralph Nader**

Consumer Advocate  
Candidate for President

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

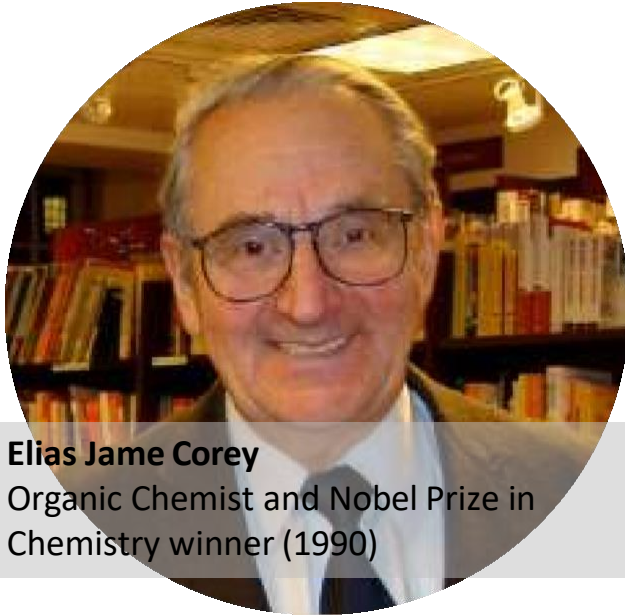


**John H. Sununu**

Governor of New Hampshire  
Chief of Staff to President  
George H.W. Bush



# Notable Arab Americans in Education & Science



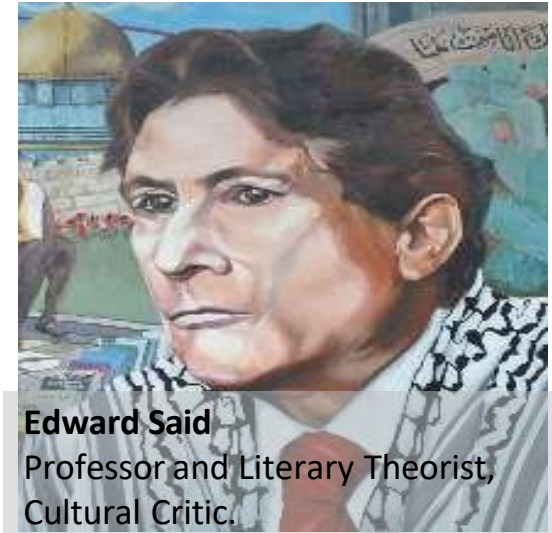
**Elias Jame Corey**

Organic Chemist and Nobel Prize in Chemistry winner (1990)



**Christa McAuliffe**

Teacher and Astronaut, killed in the Challenger tragedy.



**Edward Said**

Professor and Literary Theorist, Cultural Critic.



**George Doumani**

Geologist, author and explorer in Antarctica



**Jack Shaheen**

Professor and Media Analyst, focusing on Arab Stereotypes

Arab Americans have continued the legacy of advancement in science and advancement known in the historical Arab World. In a variety of fields, Arab Americans build on the culture's emphasis on education through leading research and discovery.

# Notable Arab Americans in Media and Literature

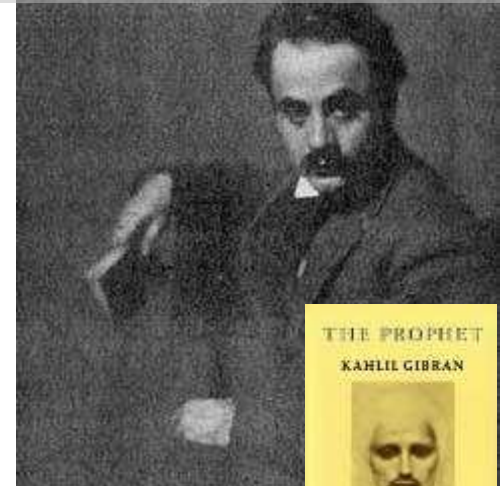


**Suzy Kassem**  
Writer, director, and poet

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

**Kahlil Gibran**

Poet, philosopher, literary author.



**Helen Thomas**  
White House correspondent, journalist



**Naomi Shihab Nye**  
Poet, songwriter, novelist



**Anthony Shadid**  
Journalist, correspondent, author,  
Pulitzer Prize winner



# Notable Arab Americans in Medicine



## **Danny Thomas**

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



## **Michael DeBakey**

Renowned cardiac surgeon whose work was instrumental in changing heart surgeries, including pioneering the artificial heart.



# Notable Arab Americans in Business

Business and entrepreneurship are viewed by Arabs as part of their cultural legacy. Arab American, descendants of immigrants in search of opportunity, still look for opportunities in business. Some of the most notable innovators in their areas of business are of Arab ancestry, fulfilling the American dream that their ancestors hoped.



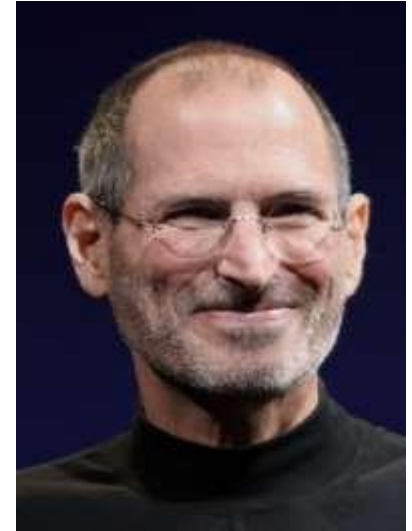
**Paul Orfalea**  
Founder of the Kinko's  
copy-center chain.



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



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

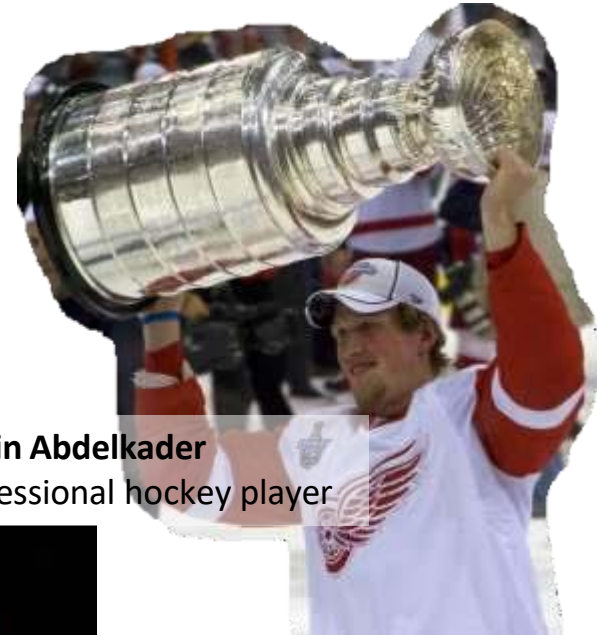


**Steve Jobs**  
Co-founder, chairman, and  
CEO of Apple, Inc.



# Notable Arab Americans in Sports

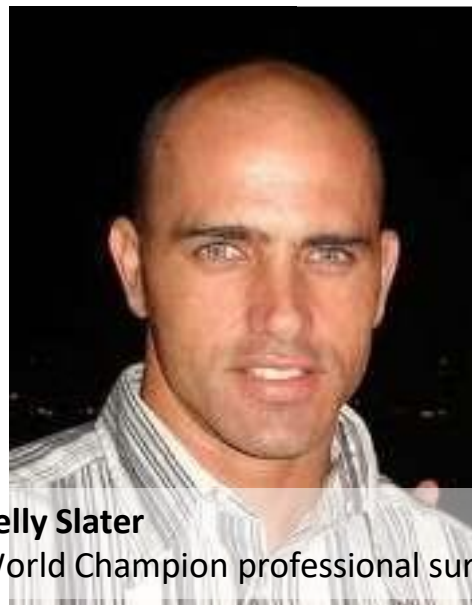
Arab Americans have excelled in a variety of athletic pursuits, achieving championship status in their respective sports.



**Justin Abdelkader**  
Professional hockey player



**Bobby Rahal**  
Champion race car driver



**Kelly Slater**  
World Champion professional surfer



**Omar Hassan**  
Professional skateboarder



**Doug Flutie**  
Professional football player in the NFL and CFL



# Arabs in America Educational Presentation



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