

Arab Americans in King County and Washington State

‘Arab’ and ‘Arabic’ are terms that can be used in different ways. The modern Arab world includes 22 countries through North Africa to the Persian Gulf. Historically, Arabs were people of the Arabian peninsula, but beginning in the 7th century C.E., the Arab cultural sphere expanded into Asia, Africa and Europe. Within a couple of centuries, many peoples of North Africa and the Middle East took on Arab identity and the Arabic language. With this cultural shift, ‘Arab’ became less a term for ethnicity, and more a term to refer to a widespread culture and to Arabic-speaking peoples.

Census information and more numbers

In the U.S. Census information on ethnicity, Arab-Americans are included as Caucasian/ white (as are North African Americans and European Americans). However, the census also includes a separate question on ancestry, and the table below gives figures for those who identified themselves as having Arab ancestry in 1990, 2000 and 2005.

It is important to note that several experts believe the actual numbers of Arab Americans are at least two to three times higher than these official estimates. Although the Census Bureau keeps census information confidential, some people do not feel comfortable or safe in providing it. The Arab American Institute (AAI) states: “While the 2000 Census accounted for some 1.25 million persons who self-identify with an Arabic-speaking origin, our estimates (based on research done by the Zogby International polling and marketing firm) place the population at more than 3.5 million.” [<http://www.aaiusa.org/arab-americans/22/demographics>]

Currently, about one-third of the Arab American population lives in the metropolitan areas of New York, Los Angeles, and Detroit.

	US Census 1990: Arab ancestry	U.S. Census 2000: Arab ancestry	U.S. Community Survey 2005: Arab ancestry
Population in the U.S.A.	870,738	1,202,871	
Population in Washington State	8,908	15,141	17,703
Population in King County	3,586	2,680	7,093

‘Arab ancestry’ here is an inclusive term, representing a total of the people who identify any of the nations of the Arab world as their ancestry.

Table 2: National heritage of Arab Americans

	US Census 1990 National population	US Census 2000 National population
Arab/Arabic	127,364	205,822
Egyptian	78,574	142,832
Lebanese	394,180	440,279
Syrian	129,606	142,897
Other Arab*	141,014	271,041
Arab inclusive, TOTAL:	870,738	1,202,871

***'Other Arab' includes Palestinian Americans, people with ancestry in Iraq, Jordan, Yemen, and other Arab nations.**

History of Arab Americans

The first wave of Arab immigration to the U.S. took place from the late 1800s until World War I, and consisted primarily of single men looking for work, 90% of whom were Christian. The first Arab immigrants to Washington State were from Lebanon, and arrived in the late 1800s. Immigration was limited by the U.S. between the world wars, and the second wave took place after World War II, from 1950-1965. This wave included some Muslims in addition to Christians, professionals, students, refugees from the 1948 Palestine War, and others. A third wave of immigration began after the Immigration Act of 1965 gave equal access to immigrants who were not from Europe. A larger and more diverse group of Arab Americans immigrated as part of this third wave.

Within King County, as in the U.S. as a whole, the largest proportion of Arab Americans are Lebanese.

Earlier Arab Americans assimilated more easily in some ways to life in the U.S., relative to some other non-European immigrants. Some chose to live in ethnic neighborhoods in large cities. Others chose to spread out among different regions of the country and did not necessarily identify as Arab Americans. However, with political changes after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Arab Americans began facing suspicion and hostility from some Americans. Suspicion and unfounded harassment have increased in the forty years since.

Cultural Background

Many Americans assume that all Arab-Americans are Muslim. In fact, approximately 63% of Arab Americans are Christian, about 24% are Muslim, and others are unaffiliated.

[<http://www.aaiusa.org/arab-americans/22/demographics>] In the Middle East, almost half of Lebanese people are Christian, and there are sizable Christian populations in Iraq, Syria, Jordan as well as many Palestinian Christians. Arab American Christians belong to Roman Catholic, Eastern Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant churches along with other Americans. In

King County, there are over a dozen mosques and Islamic centers that serve the larger Muslim community, including Muslim Arab Americans. Most of these centers are in Seattle, with others in East and South King County.

The Arabic language is a major unifying factor of the Arab world, yet is spoken in different dialects in each country, and in local versions of these dialects within each country. Generally Arab speakers can communicate with one another, but it's easier if they are from neighboring countries, and harder if they are from far distant areas. Egyptian Arabic, however, is familiar across the Arab world, because so many movies and music recordings are made in Egypt. Also, this form of Arabic is familiar because Egypt has been a leader among the Arab nations for a long time.

Arab cooking includes the well-known cuisines of Morocco and Lebanon, and many more regional traditional foods. Arab Americans enjoy preparing dishes with ingredients including lamb, rice, flat breads, chick peas, sesame paste, olives, and dates. Muslims traditionally eat *halal* meats, ritually slaughtered, which have become more and more available at *halal* groceries in King County and elsewhere.

Arab Americans have introduced many cultural and artistic traditions to the U.S., and in Washington state the Arab Festival at Seattle Center is a major showcase. The art of henna, using a red paste of the henna plant to create intricate designs on women's hands and feet, is alive and well, and spreading to the larger community. Performers of traditional Arabic music and dance in King County include a children's percussion and dance group, the master oud player Maurice Rouman, and others.

Challenges Facing the Community

Discrimination and hostility towards Arab Americans in the past forty years have taken a turn for the worse when violence and conflict flare up in the Middle East. The hostility takes such forms as job discrimination and hate crimes by individuals, but has also appeared in organized forms, including in some of the media reporting on conflict in the Middle East. Hate crimes against Arab Americans hit record levels in the mid 1980s, and then soared after September 11, 2001. American popular culture contributes to the problem when movies and books are released depicting Arabs and Arab Americans as violent fanatics. This negative stereotyping is not just a problem of insensitivity, but fuels violence at home and abroad.

A severe challenge to Arab Americans since 2001 has been the many civil rights violations as part of the war on terrorism. Many Arab Americans have been targeted by federal and local law enforcement agencies, and deprived of their rights to privacy and due process. There have been many political and media discussions on this issue; a link here is given to a couple of National Public Radio specials on this topic.

“Civil Liberties and the War on Terrorism: Arab and Muslim Americans Fear Discrimination.”
Bradley, Barbara. August 28, 2002.

http://www.npr.org/news/specials/091102reflections/civil_liberties/

Sources

U.S. Census Bureau FactFinder

http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en&_ts=

Abraham, Nabeel. "Arab Americans" www.everyculture.com

Arab Center of Washington Website, (www.arabcenter.net)

King County Organizations:

Arab American Community Coalition of Washington State

<http://www.theaacc.org/index.php>

Arab Center of Washington sponsors cultural programs

<http://www.arabcenter.net>

Long, Priscilla. 2001 First Arab festival held at Seattle Center on October 16 and 17, 1999.

HistoryLink.org Essay 3558. http://www.historylink.org/essays/output.cfm?file_id=3558

Further Resources

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee offers education materials for download:

<http://www.adc.org/index.php?id=203>

Arab American Institute Education Packet available for download

<http://www.aaiusa.org/foundation/832/educational-packet>

"Arab Americans: Dispelling Myths," *The Seattle Times*, September 16, 2001
(<http://archives.seattletimes.nwsourc.com>).

Council on Islamic Education, thoughtful education materials based on solid scholarship available online, such as Teaching About Islam and Muslims in the Public School Classroom.

<http://www.cie.org>

Rounding Up of 'The Enemy:' Civil Liberties and National Security. On-line lesson plan, Independent Television, <http://www.itvs.org/facetoface/activities/lesson2.html>.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population: Social and Economic Characteristics, Washington Section 1* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1993), p. 196, 200, 402'

The following Arab American traditional artist in King County can be found on the searchable database, *Folk & Traditional Artists in Washington State*:

Maurice Rouman