

Who Are the Arab Americans?

SHORT ANSWER

1. When you hear the term "Arab," what words or images come to mind?

2. List three countries from which Arab Americans have immigrated.

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3. Name a prominent person of Arab descent for each of the following fields:

POLITICS

ENTERTAINMENT

SCIENCE

SPORTS

TRUE OR FALSE

1. _____ Most Muslims in the U.S. are Arab American.

2. _____ Arab Americans live mostly in urban areas.

3. _____ Most Arab Americans speak a language other than English in their homes.

Answers to “Who Are the Arab Americans?”

SHORT ANSWER

1. WHEN YOU HEAR THE TERM “ARAB,” WHAT WORDS OR IMAGES COME TO MIND?

ANSWER Students may possess a multitude of stereotypes about Arabs and Arab Americans. One of the most damaging misperceptions is that people of Arab descent are “terrorists” who systematically use violence to oppose U.S. policy in the Middle East. This stereotype often manifests in adjectives like ruthless, violent, treacherous, barbaric, swarthy, dirty, greedy, fanatical, fundamentalist, uneducated, dishonest or manipulative. Other stereotypes include beliefs that Arabs live in the desert and use camels as a primary mode of transportation and that oil is the sole resource or industry in the Arab world. Also, many Westerners believe that all Arabs are Muslim. Commonly used epithets include “camel jockeys,” “towel heads” and “sand n—.”

ACTIVITY

Where did students get these ideas? Many stereotypes of Arabs and Arab Americans are reinforced by representations in popular culture. For example, the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) – the nation’s largest Arab American advocacy organization – currently is protesting Paramount Pictures’ box-office smash, “Rules of Engagement,” for what it calls a stereotypical depiction of Arabs as “terrorists.” See www.adc.org/action/2000/11aprilb2000.htm. The ADC has targeted numerous feature films in the past, including the animated blockbuster “Aladdin,” “Father of the Bride Part II,” “G.I. Jane,” “True Lies” and “The Siege.” View one of these films – or segments of a film – as a class. How does the film portray people of Arab descent? Ask students to use a critical eye to discern stereotypes of Arabs and Arab Americans. Compare “stereotype films” with those that cast Arabs and Arab Americans in a positive light – “13th Warrior” and “Three Kings” for example.

2. LIST THREE COUNTRIES FROM WHICH ARAB AMERICANS HAVE IMMIGRATED.

ANSWER Arab Americans claim ancestry in a region that spans from North Africa to Southwest Asia and includes more than 20 different countries. (Persian nations like Iran are not part of the “Arab world.”) Most Arab Americans have roots in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan or Yemen.

ACTIVITY

Locate Arab nations on a map. See www.al-bab.com/arab/maps/maps.htm. Use the on-line almanac at www.infoplease.com to locate information about each country. How many people live in each country? What types of industry are represented? With which countries do Arab nations trade? What are the primary exports? What religions are practiced in Arab nations? Does this information contradict any of the stereotypes uncovered in Question #1?

3. NAME A PROMINENT PERSON OF ARAB DESCENT FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING FIELDS:

POLITICS Currently, there are seven members of Congress who are Arab American:
Republican Senator Spencer Abraham of Michigan www.senate.gov/~abraham
Democratic Congressman John Baldacci of Maine www.house.gov/baldacci
Democratic Congresswoman Pat Danner of Missouri www.house.gov/danner
Democratic Congressman Chris John of Louisiana www.house.gov/john
Republican Congressman Ray LaHood of Illinois www.house.gov/lahood
Democratic Congressman Nick Rahall of West Virginia www.house.gov/rahall
Republican Congressman John Sununu of New Hampshire www.house.gov/sununu

The first Arab American ever appointed to the U.S. Cabinet is the current Secretary of Health and Human Services, Donna Shalala. www.hhs.gov/about/bios/dhhssec.html

Former U.S. Senator George Mitchell recently served as a U.S. delegate in the Ireland peace talks. See www.irishnews.com/mitchell.html.

Helen Thomas, dean of the “White House Press Corps,” has covered 8 presidencies – from Kennedy to Clinton. Her new book, *Front Row at the White House: My Life and Times*, is now available in paperback at www.amazon.com.

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ENTERTAINMENT Big screen actress Salma Hayek has starred in films like “Wild Wild West” and “Fools Rush In.” See <http://features.yahoo.com/webceleb/salma>. Among the stars of the NBC sitcom “Stark Raving Mad” is Tony Shalhoub, who was also featured in “Men in Black” and “The Siege.” See www.nbc.com/starkravingmad. Viewers can also look to NBC for Kathy Najimy of “Veronica’s Closet.” Nijimy starred previously in the “Sister Act” films. See www.nbc.com/veronicascloset. Recording artist Paula Abdul also claims Arab heritage. See www.virginrecords.com/artists/VR.cgi?ARTIST_NAME=Paula_Abdul.

SCIENCE On January 28, 1986, the Challenger space shuttle exploded just 73 seconds after it lifted off. The accident killed all of the crewmembers, including teacher Christa McAuliffe, who was of Arab descent. See www.starhop.com/cm_bio.htm. Two Arab Americans have received the Nobel Prize for Chemistry. Dr. Ahmed H. Zewail received the award in 1999. See www.its.caltech.edu/~femto/zewail.html, while Dr. Elias Corey won it in 1990. See <http://nobel.sdsc.edu/laureates/chemistry-1990-1-autobio.html>.

SPORTS Think football! At the Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, visitors can learn about linebacker Bill George. See www.profootballhof.com/famers/george.html. Jeff George (www.nfl.com/players/stats/logs/1781.html) and Doug Flutie (www.nfl.com/players/profile/3533.html) are two of the NFL’s top quarterbacks.

ACTIVITY

Students can research the lives of these famous Arab Americans and prepare written or oral reports. Students might also identify Arab Americans and their contributions in other fields – the U.S. military, business, media, education and medicine for example. See www.arab-aaai.org. Now that they know a little bit more about the contributions of Arab Americans, how do students feel about the stereotypes identified in Question #1?

TRUE OR FALSE

1. MOST MUSLIMS IN THE U.S. ARE ARAB AMERICAN.

FALSE Although many people think that “Muslim” equals “Arab” (and vice versa), the majority of U.S. Muslims are not people of Arab descent. Arab Americans constitute only 12% of this country’s Muslim population. The bulk of U.S. Muslims are African American (42%), while immigrants of South Asian descent comprise almost 24% of American Muslims. There are also 80,000 people of Western European heritage who practice Islam.

Further, a large number of Arab Americans are Christian. Between the latter part of the 19th century and World War II, a multitude of Christians left Syria and Lebanon and came to America. These immigrants (and their descendants) represent roughly 50% of Arab Americans today.

ACTIVITY

Students can test their knowledge of Islam by taking Channel One’s on-line quiz at <http://channelone.com/cgi/fq.pl?quiz=news/199812/15/islam.fq>. Visit a local mosque or invite a representative to the class to discuss the major tenets of Islam. Alternatively, an on-line summary of Islam is available at the Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance’s Web site. See www.religioustolerance.org/islam.htm.

2. ARAB AMERICANS LIVE MOSTLY IN URBAN AREAS.

TRUE Ninety percent of Arab Americans live in cities. Detroit, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and the Washington, DC, metropolitan area (which includes

portions of northern Virginia and southern Maryland) have the highest proportion of Arab American citizenry. See www.aaiusa.org/arabamericans/whereweare.htm for a listing by county.

ACTIVITY

Conduct a local history project. Find out when Arabs first immigrated to your city and why. Were Arab Americans among your city’s founders? Invite speakers from Arab organizations to visit the class or school. If you live in a community with few Arab Americans, look outside of your town or city. Students can explore the history of Arab Americans in Chicago at www.hanania.com/aaintra.htm. Alternatively, let students explore the immigration histories of their own families. See “Family Ties and Fabric Tales” in the Classroom Activities section of www.teachingtolerance.org.

3. MOST ARAB AMERICANS SPEAK A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH IN THEIR HOMES.

TRUE Barely! Fifty-one percent of Arab Americans speak a language other than English in their homes. The vast majority, however, are bilingual. Only 8% of Arab American school-age children, for example, speak little or no English.

ACTIVITY

Arabic is the most commonly spoken home language among Arab immigrants. Introduce students to the language by logging onto <http://i-cias.com/babel/arabic/01.htm>. The site offers free on-line instruction.