

Who Are the Arab Americans?

Since the September 11th terrorist attacks, Arab Americans have been the targets of profound bias, harassment and hate crimes. Ongoing conflicts in the Middle East only exacerbate stereotypes about people of Arab descent. This newly updated activity, originally published in 2000, can help students overcome misperceptions of this ethnic group.

This activity is designed to increase student knowledge about Arab Americans and to challenge misperceptions students might hold about Arabs and people of Arab descent. It also promotes critical thinking of media, government, culture and history.

TIME AND MATERIALS

- 1 to 5 class periods
- Copies of the “Who Are the Arab Americans?” quiz for students

SUGGESTED PROCEDURES

Distribute the “Who Are the Arab Americans?” quiz, assuring students it will not be graded. Allow students adequate time to complete the quiz.

Use the following answers to guide classroom conversation and select activities addressing student responses.

To evaluate the success of this unit, educators can re-administer the “Who Are the Arab Americans?” quiz as a post-test.

Answers and Activities

SHORT ANSWER

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

Students may reveal a multitude of stereotypes about Arabs and Arab Americans. In the wake of 9.11 and the ongoing crises in the Middle East, one of the most popular -- and most damaging -- misperceptions is that people of Arab descent are “terrorists” who systematically use violence to oppose the policies of the United States and other nations. This stereotype often manifests in adjectives like ruthless, devious, violent, treacherous, barbaric, swarthy, dirty, greedy, fanatical, fundamentalist, uneducated, dishonest or manipulative. Jihadists, militants, extremists, fanatic and evil are other negative words associated with the Arab community.

Other stereotypes that may arise are representations about women and stereotypes about “third world” nations. For decades, Hollywood films have portrayed Arab women as belly dancers or members of harems. Many students are familiar with the repressive policies of some Arab nations, which place severe restrictions on women’s roles in public life; some students may list head coverings as an image that comes to mind. Other students might describe how “Arabs live in the desert” or use camels as a primary mode of transportation, or talk about oil as the sole resource or industry of the Arab world.

ACTIVITIES TO DEBUNK THE “TERRORIST” STEREOTYPE

Film Reviews. Popular culture reinforces many stereotypes of Arabs and Arab Americans. The American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) -- the nation’s largest Arab American advocacy organization -- has long critiqued films and television programming for their stereotypical portrayals of the Arab world or people of Arab descent living in the United States, including the animated film “Aladdin,” blockbusters like “The Rules of Engagement” (<http://www.adc.org/action/2000/11aprilb2000.htm>) and “The Siege,” and TV programs like “Alias” and “24.” Recently, however, the ADC celebrates films portraying Arabs fairly and accurately, films such as “Syriana,” “Paradise Now” and “Kingdom of Heaven.”

Show two of these films -- or segments of the films -- as a class. How do the films portray people of Arab descent? Ask students to write film reviews comparing and contrasting a “stereotype film” with one casting Arabs and Arab Americans in a more realistic light.

Another Take on Terrorism. To help students reframe the notion “Arab means terrorist,” learn about domestic extremists in the U.S. -- mostly white people plotted or carried out nearly 60 terrorist attacks (<http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?aid=628>) since the deadly bombing in Oklahoma City in 1995. Just one of these plots, if not thwarted by law enforcement, could have killed 30,000 people. Would it be fair to stigmatize all white/European Americans as terrorists based on the actions of a few?

The Victims of Terror: Media Literacy Activity

The U.S. media tends to focus on American soldiers and contractors killed in Iraq by terrorist bombs and explosive devices, yet civilians are the most common victims. Divide students into six small groups, and ask them to find information about people killed by terrorist bombs in Iraq using magazines, newspapers and the Internet. Students should find five American soldiers or contractors and five Iraqi civilians who were killed and locate pictures, personal information and family reaction about victims and their deaths. As a whole class, ask the groups to share what they find. What emotions do victims’ families tend to express? What do these victims have in common? What differences do they have? Was it harder to find information about American or Iraqi victims? If so, why might this be?

The Victims of Terror: Journaling Exercise

When most people think “Arab” in the context of 9.11, they often think “perpetrator.” Yet, Arab Americans certainly were victimized by 9.11. Read ([/news/article_tol.jsp?id=609](#))>”The Secondary Victims of 9.11.” Then ask students to imagine they are Arab American on the fifth anniversary of 9.11 and write imaginary journal entries for September 10, September 11 and September 12. Or, divide class into diverse small groups, assign each group an entry date and let the group discuss and write a journal entry.

RESOURCES FOR DEBUNKING OTHER STEREOTYPES

- Veiled In Controversy (<http://www.tolerance.org/teach/current/event.jsp?&ar=271>) -- issues related to religious garb
- Proud to Wear My Hijab (<http://www.tolerance.org/teens/stories/article.jsp?&ar=122>) -- one student’s experience when she began wearing a head covering at school
- An Arab American Voice Against Terror (http://www.tolerance.org/news/article_tol.jsp?id=297) -- written by an Arab American woman living in New York
- I Don’t Ride a Camel (<http://www.tolerance.org/teach/current/event.jsp?cid=593>) -- stereotypes and assumptions about people in the Middle East

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

Arab Americans claim ancestry in a region spanning from North Africa to Southwest Asia and including more than 20 countries. Most Arab Americans have roots in Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan or Yemen. Persian nations like Iran are not part of the “Arab world.”

ACTIVITY

Locate Arab nations on a map (<http://www.al-bab.com/arab/maps/maps.htm>). Use an online almanac (<http://www.infoplease.com>) to find information about each country. Note the topography of the country and notice there are fertile river valleys and coastal regions, not just desert.

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?

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

POLITICS

Several Arab Americans have risen to prominence in the U.S. government:

- Republican Senator John Sununu of New Hampshire (<http://www.house.gov/sununu>)
- Governor of Maine John Baldacci (<http://www.maine.gov/governor/baldacci/index.shtml>)
- Governor of Indiana Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr. (<http://www.in.gov/gov/bio/>)
- Republican Congressman Ray LaHood of Illinois (<http://www.house.gov/lahood>)
- Democratic Congressman Nick Rahall of West Virginia (<http://www.house.gov/rahall>)
- The first Arab American ever appointed to the U.S. Cabinet was the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Donna Shalala. She is now the president of the University of Miami (http://www6.miami.edu/UMH/CDA/UMH_Main/0,1770,8548-1;8823-3,00.html).
- Former U.S. Senator George Mitchell served as a U.S. delegate in the Ireland peace talks. He is also founder of a scholarship program, the Mitchell Institute (<http://www.mitchellinstitute.org>).
- Former Green Party presidential candidate and consumer advocate Ralph Nader is of Arab descent.

ENTERTAINMENT/MEDIA

- Helen Thomas, former dean of the “White House Press Corps,” has covered eight presidencies -- from Kennedy to Clinton. She is author of the newly-released *Watchdogs of Democracy? The Waning Washington Press Corps and How It Has Failed the Public*.
- Singer and choreographer Paula Abdul (<http://www.paulaabdul.com>) is of Syrian descent. As a judge on the record-breaking television talent show “American Idol,” Abdul has helped catapult others to stardom.
- Lebanese-Mexican actress Salma Hayek (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000161/bio>) starred in films like “Wild Wild West,” “Frida” and “Once Upon A Time In Mexico.”
- Best known as the star of the hit television program “Monk,” Tony Shalhoub (<http://www.usanetwork.com/series/monk/theshow/characterprofiles/tony/bio.html>) was also featured in “Men in Black” and “Spy Kids.”
- Star of the “American Pie” and “Scary Movie” films, actress Shannon Elizabeth (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0002436>) has a Syrian/Lebanese father.
- Kathy Najimy (<http://www.kathynajimy.com>) is the voice of Peggy Hill on the animated sitcom, “King of the Hill” and starred in “The Wedding Planner” and the “Sister Act” series.

SCIENCE

- On January 28, 1986, the Challenger space shuttle exploded just 73 seconds after lift off. The accident killed all the crewmembers, including teacher Christa McAuliffe (http://www.starhop.com/cm_bio.htm), who was of Arab descent.
- Dr. Michael DeBakey (http://www.debakeydepartmentofsurgery.org/home/content.cfm?menu_id=40&pageview=splash), chancellor of Baylor University’s College of Medicine, invented the heart pump.
- Two Arab Americans received the Nobel Prize for Chemistry, Dr. Ahmed H. Zewail (http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/chemistry/laureates/1999/zewail-autobio.html) received the award in 1999, and Dr. Elias Corey (http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/chemistry/laureates/1990/corey-autobio.html) won in 1990.

SPORTS

- At the Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, visitors can learn about linebacker Bill George (http://www.profootballhof.com/hof/member.jsp?player_id=73).
- Jeff George (<http://www.nfl.com/players/playerpage/1049>) is an NFL quarterback.
- Bobby Rahal won the Indy 500 in 1986 and later became an all-time earnings champ among Indy car racers. Khalid Khannouchi is the world record holder for the track and field marathon.

ACTIVITY

Students, working in small, diverse groups, 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. Challenge each group to see how many names their group can add to each category. When they know a little bit more about the contributions of Arab Americans, how do students feel about the stereotypes identified in question 1?

4. LIST THREE WORDS WITH ARABIC ORIGINS.

Although many students assume English is American or British, it's actually a multicultural language that draws from across the globe. Many English words have their roots in the Arab world:

- Alcove = al-qobbah (vault, arch, dome)
- Algebra = al-jabr (the reunion of broken parts, from "jabara," to reunite, bind together)
- Almanac = almanakh (calendar)
- Candy = qandi (made of sugar, from Sanskrit "khanda," sugar in pieces; "khand," to break)
- Coffee = qahwa (coffee)
- Cotton = qutun (cotton)
- Magazine = makhzan (a storehouse)
- Sash = shash (turban)
- Sherbet = sherbet (from "sharaba," to drink)
- Syrup = sharab (from "shariba," to drink)
- Tariff = tar'if (explanation, information, a list of things, especially of fees to be paid; from "arafa," to inform)
- Zenith = semt-ar-ras (zenith, "way of the head")
- Zero = sifr (a cipher)

ACTIVITY

U.S. English is reflective of the nation's diversity. Use "World Without Words" (<http://www.tolerance.org/pt/index.html>) to discover the origin of everyday words. Download and use the Word Origins (<http://www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?ar=657>) activity . Find out how language lessons (<http://www.tolerance.org/teach/magazine/features.jsp?&is=13&ar=100>) created common ground at a Detroit elementary school.

TRUE OR FALSE

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

Although many people think "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 descendents) represent roughly 70-75% of Arab Americans today.

ACTIVITY

Visit a local mosque or invite a representative to the class to discuss the major tenets of Islam. Students can test their knowledge of Islam by taking this quiz (http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid_4190000/newsid_4191500/4191599.stm).

Learn how one Asheville, N.C., middle school teacher used compassion and mutual respect as a foundation to teach about world religions. See Belief In Action (<http://www.tolerance.org/teach/magazine/features.jsp?&is=21&ar=237&pa=1#>) for more guidelines for addressing religion in public school.

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 (<http://www.aaiusa.org/arab-americans/22/demographics>) of Arab American citizenry.

ACTIVITY

Conduct a local history project. Find out when Arabs first immigrated to your city or town 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 your town or city. Students can explore the history of Arab Americans in Chicago (<http://www.aaiusa.org/arab-americans/22/demographics>). Alternatively, let students explore the immigration histories of their own families. See Teaching Tolerance's lesson Family Ties and Fabric Tales (<http://www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?&ar=331>).

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

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 speak little or no English.

Arabic is the most commonly spoken language in Arab immigrant homes. Introduce students to the language (<http://www.lexicorient.com/babel/arabic/index.htm>).

Quiz: 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.

1.

2.

3.

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

POLITICS

ENTERTAINMENT

SCIENCE

SPORTS

4. List 3 words with Arabic origins.

1.

2.

3.

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.