
THE ARAB AMERICANS

“I believe that you are contributors to this new civilization. I believe that you have inherited from your fore-fathers an ancient dream, a song, a prophecy, which you can proudly lay as a gift of gratitude upon the lap of America.”

Kahlil Gibran - July, 1926

Arab Americans are diverse people who trace their ancestry to one of 22 nations in Southwest Asia and North Africa collectively called the Arab World.

Arabs began coming to America in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The great majority of these early immigrants came from Mount Lebanon and Greater Syria, a province of the Ottoman Empire, which included today's Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, and Jordan. They were almost all Christians. They knew America to be a predominantly Christian country, and probably had less hesitation about venturing into the new and unknown land than did Muslim Arabs.

The early Arab immigrants often began as peddlers, a pursuit they managed to trade in, rather quickly, for their own business establishments. Besides peddling dry goods and operating small stores, Arab immigrants worked in the textile and steel mills, and on automobile assembly lines.

By 1930, a second generation of Arab-American immigrants was growing up, eager to be assimilated and Americanized. Many were high school graduates and some had been to college. Some gave up speaking Arabic, married outside the community and entered local and national politics.

With the formation of the State of Israel in 1948, a new wave of Arab immigrants arrived in the United States. They brought with them a fresh stimulus that awakened a new ethnic consciousness among Arab-Americans.

In some ways today's Arab immigrants are the same as those who came to America fifty, to a hundred years ago. Many come primarily for economic reasons. Some plan to stay only a few years, working or seeking higher education, but end up making the United States their home.

But, unlike their predecessors, thousands of today's immigrants are leaving their countries because of the violence and political unrest there. Ironically, those same reasons would often make them subject to prejudice in their adopted country.

The Arab-American population in the United States has increased tremendously in the past three decades. While the 2000 Census accounted for some 1.25 million persons who self-identify with an Arabic-speaking origin, the estimates (based on research done by the Zogby International polling and marketing firm) place the population at more than 3.5 million. Most reside in these five metropolitan cities Los Angeles, Detroit, New York / New Jersey, Chicago and Washington, D.C.

In Georgia, there are approximately 35,000 Americans of Arab descent, of whom, approximately 20,000 live here in Atlanta.

Famous Arab Americans

F. Murray Abraham, Oscar winner for Amadeus
Elias Corey, winner of the 1990 Nobel Prize for Chemistry
Doug Flutie, Heisman trophy winner in 1984, football star
Casey Kasem, radio personality host of Casey's Top 40

Paul Anka, singer and entertainer
Micheal DeBakey, pioneer heart surgeon
Kahlil Gibran, philosopher & poet, author of The Prophet
Kathy Najimy, actress

*The information in this flier was compiled by Rima Houssami for educational use only
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