

The historical experience of arab americans history essay

[History](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Arab Americans have long historical ties with America. In her Article, " Who Are Arab Americans?"[1]Scholar and historian of the Arab community, Helen Hatab Samhan, an Arab Americanist and former Executive Director of the Arab American Institute, explains that Arab Americans constitute a pan-ethnicity made up of several waves of immigrants from the Arabic-speaking countries of southwestern Asia and North Africa that began arriving in the United States during the 19th century. Their original homeland includes 22 Arab countries, stretching from Morocco in the west to the Arabian Gulf in the east. Although they represent a highly diverse U. S. group, Arab Americans descend from a heritage that represents common linguistic, cultural, and political traditions. For immigrants, America unquestionably represented a new " promised land," a land of plenty and opportunity and freedom from oppression, more specifically for Arab Americans whose history of coming and settling is long and diverse. The story of Arab Americans in the United States is a very vivid one. Many came to the United States as scattered sojourners planning on going back to their homelands. [2]In the course of time, they assimilated and became an invisible population. For the last few decades, and especially after 9/11, the status of Arab Americans has changed. They have become a singled out and stigmatized group that is politically marginalized, yet economically successful, able to " blend in" the American mosaic. Aside from the flowing of these scattered Arabs, Arab immigrants came in three waves: the first wave was the period from 1878 to 1924; the second, from 1948 to 1966; and the third, from 1967 to the present.[3]

First Wave of Arab Immigrants

The first wave of Arab immigration to the United States started in the middle of the 19th century and ended around 1924. It consisted overwhelmingly of Christian farmers and villagers who came from the Greater Syria region (especially present day Lebanon),^[4] which was under the Ottoman rule.^[5] According to Yvonne Haddad, a professor of the History of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Georgetown University, " the first recorded Arabs came to America to partake of the Homestead Act around 1862."^[6] It is very challenging to establish reliable data on the numbers of immigrants from Arab countries before 1899, as immigration officials did not employ a standard term for identifying the immigrants. They were first called Turks, then Syrians. The names also included Ottomans, Armenians, Greeks or Arabs.^[7] It is estimated that 110, 000 immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries came to the United States by 1914, representing about 85 % of the total Arabic-speaking population up to 1940. Immediately after WWI, less than four thousand Arab immigrants arrived to the United States. They were motivated by two major economic push factors in their homelands. The first was the opening of the Suez Canal, which sidelined the world traffic from Syria to Egypt and made the trip to the Far East easier and fast. For instance, many Yemenis came after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.^[8] The second occurred when Lebanese vineyards were infected by the fungus phylloxera, devastating the wine industry there and leaving the farmers with no income.^[9] Apart from the economic reasons, the sectarian massacres of 1860 in Mount Lebanon and in Damascus were also the root of the first wave of immigration, amplified later by the conscription of the Arabs to fight in the

Ottoman Empire's wars, and culminating in the Levantine disasters and famine in the First World War. Additionally, the Christian immigrants were being persecuted by the Ottomans; they were not considered loyal subjects of the Ottoman Empire because they were westernized and Christian and protested against the Ottoman hegemony in the area. Especially until the turn of the century, the initial Arab community in America was made of single individuals or nuclear families that were mostly poor, uneducated and illiterate and could work only in factories and mines. Such jobs did not offer opportunities for the fast accumulation of wealth, which was their primary objective for those who had no intention to settle permanently in the New World. As unskilled laborers in a labor market already filled by other ethnic groups, many of the Lebanese and Syrians became back peddlers. Success in peddling did not require much training, capital or knowledge of English. It simply required thrift, hard work, very long and courage to endure, harsh travel conditions and sometimes insults from children or resentful customers. In fact, both women and men carried a stock of goods consisting mainly of items for personal use that were difficult for farming families to make themselves or to procure in nearby stores: They carried on their backs products such as dry goods, lotions, tin ware, combs, and handcrafted goods. A handful of families established a network of peddling, setting the routes and supply sources for next families to come. No other immigrant group, with the exception of German Jews, was so completely identified with peddling.[10]By 1920s, many of the peddling families were able to establish stores. Subsequently, they became wholesalers and retailers of groceries and produce.[11]Consequently, Naff says that peddling was a key factor in

the assimilation of this minority group and concluded " If political and economic events had not reactivated Arab immigration and an interest in Arab culture, Syrian-Americans might have assimilated themselves out of existence." [12] Alaxia Naff asserted that it was not until after World War II that Arab Americans began to develop an Arab identity to counter the ignorance about their history. Obviously, not all Arab immigrants were peddlers. Eric Hooglund, the editor of *Taking Root: Arab- American Community Studies 2*, views the " Syrian peddler" as a stereotype and image, observing that early Arab immigrants occupied various jobs and established separate ethnic neighborhoods (e. g. Little Syria in New York). Assimilation, in his view, occurred among the second generation of Syrians, born between 1900--1940, which moved out of these neighborhoods and were Americanized. [13] The majority of them settled in, and worked as unskilled laborers in factories. They established businesses in big cities such as Boston, New York, and Cleveland, and in medium size cities and towns, primarily in the East and Great Lake region. In Brooklyn, they opened up all clothing stores of manufacturing and lingerie. [14] In 1919, more than half of all Arab immigrants lived in four states, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio. A minority, perhaps fifteen percent, were involved in entrepreneurial activities such as barbering, bakery, grocery, carpentry, transportation, and manufacturing. The smallest percent in the first wave consisted of professionals such as dentists, doctors, clergymen, pharmacists, and teachers. Some Syrians revived the silk production that they had been doing in Greater Syria. [15] Before WWI most Arabic speaking immigrants thought of themselves as sojourners, thinking that they were temporary

residents and ultimately wanting to go back to their homeland.[16]While there was a communal solidarity built along the lines of several communities, they were often in tension with each other.[17]There were splits in the community between the Nationalists[18]and Americanists.[19]The former group was oriented mainly to their homelands, even though a process of socialization and assimilation resulted in increased participation in voting and party membership.[20]In fact, this integration was not on behalf of their national identity, but rather based on interests at the community level, while the latter advocated assimilation and participation in the wider American society. A lot of them did not maintain their Arab ethnicity, in many cases; Arab treats and culture were on the verge of extinction. The flow of immigration was interrupted by WWI and then restricted by the National Origin Act/Immigration Quota Act of 1924, which reduced quotas of immigrants from the Middle East to 100 per year.[21]The slow communication with the homeland, weakened the flow of immigration, and made the first Arab immigrants engage themselves in the pattern of assimilation that remolded them into American citizens. Consequently, they settled in America, raised their families, launched businesses and became established merchants. In the summer, children helped in the family business by performing various chores. Children were taught that thrift and hard work are the basis of success.[22]Most of the Arab families encouraged the education of their children. By the turn of the 19th century, many Arab American children finished school and some were able to continue to trade school and college.[23]They Anglicized their names; Muhammad became Mo and Ali was recognized as Al.[24]They started attending citizenship and

English classes while studying the American governmental system as a preparation to become well-informed citizens. In order to cease feeling like strangers in the new country, community leaders suggested that Arab Americans should follow the assimilation patterns. They established their own churches, clubs and newspapers, but they were not active in the political arena of the United States. They were anxious not to offend their hosts, not to break laws, and not to behave in a manner offensive to Americans, but they did not intermarry with Americans and did not participate in the political system except for voting.[25]

Second Wave of Arab Immigrants

A second wave of Arab immigration started in 1948 and ended in 1966 when Arab nationalism was nascent, as Arab states agitated for independence.

[26]The United States became involved in Middle East petroleum politics and recruited students from newly independent Arab states to study at American universities in hopes of creating a desirable influence on the region.

[27]Additionally, many newly formed Arab states initiated free and fully accessible education. For example Iraq had the best educational system in the region, then Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait. These education systems facilitated wider access to scholarships abroad. Many of the students married American women and stayed in the U. S. After WWII, Arab Americans who were subsequent generations of immigrants have mostly assimilated and a large number of them were Palestinians who were forced out of their country after the creation of the state of Israel: Egyptians who lost land to the Nasser regime and Syrians, Yemenis, and Iraqis fleeing political upheavals and aspiring revolutionaries.[28]The new immigrants came from all parts of the

<https://assignbuster.com/the-historical-experience-of-arab-americans-history-essay/>

world including a newly growing emigration movement from the Arab Gulf states, Sudan, and the countries of North Africa.[29]This second wave of Arab immigrants brought to the New World a much more diverse population, one that differed greatly from the early pioneering group. By 1940, U. S. officials reported that 350, 000 immigrants were Arabic-speaking. About 80% of them were from today's Lebanon, 15% from Syria and Palestinian territories, with the rest from Yemen and Iraq. The majority were Christian (45% Maronite, 45% Greek Orthodox) and only 4% were Muslim.

[30]Moreover, these immigrants were mostly men from middle and upper class urban backgrounds, often highly educated professionals like lawyers, professors, teachers, engineers, and doctors.[31]Many found good employment opportunities and stayed in the United States while many others were semi-educated Arabs who were primarily political refugees who became engaged in trade in the U. S. Having a different composition and higher education levels, immigrants of the second wave were more inclined toward political issues. However, because of lack of knowledge about the American political system and fear of authoritative regimes back home where giving political opinions is always undesirable, the majority of the second wave Arab immigrants were more outspoken when it came to Arab issues, but not so much about American politics.[32]Unlike early arrivals, who were predominantly Christian, the new immigrants were Christians and Muslims. However, there were several factors that revived and mobilized the Arab identity once again and increased the immigration to the United States. The dismemberment of Palestine, creation of the state of Israel, and mass immigration of Palestinian refugees to the United States after 1948 were

precipitous events. During the Nakba,[33]the turmoil resulting from independence struggles in the Arab region, professionals and young students became involved in Arab world politics and transplanted this outlook to American soil, but this was unrelated to American politics. Finally, the Six-Day War in 1967 had devastating effects on the Arab states and thus awakened a multitude of Arab American identities as they started to call themselves Arabs instead of a specific national origin.

Third Wave of Arab Immigrants

The sixties marked the beginning of the third wave of Arab immigration to America. This wave has been called the " brain drain." [34]Internal and external factors contributed to this inflow of Arabs. As a result of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act [35]which lifted the national origin quotas, allowed Arabs to move into the country more easily and increased overall immigration into the United States, huge numbers of Arab immigrants started to pour from around the Arab world basically from Arabic speaking countries such as Egypt and Iraq and emphasized diversity. This was a significant pull factor. The push factor for the majority of foreign-born Arab Americans was political turmoil in the Middle East, such as the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars. [36]These newcomers were more educated, often having college degrees, bilingual and more politically motivated. The vast majority of these Arabs were the ' educated elite' in their country and somewhat Westernized. Many had received education abroad and decided to seek higher education in America. [37]When they arrived in America, they established churches, mosques, newspapers and meeting centers and emphasized the value of education to their children. [38]Arab Americans

have traditionally been successful in the educational sector. According to the 2000 Census Report on Ancestry issued in March 2005, Arab Americans as an ethnic group are more educated than the average Americans. It states that the proportion of all Arabs with at least a bachelor's degree was higher than that of the total population (41.2% compared with 24%). About 73% of employed Arab Americans worked in management professional, in sales and office occupations. Most Arab Americans work in the private sector (88%), while 12% are government employees.[39] They live in all fifty states, but two thirds tend to reside in ten main states. One third of the total population lives in California, New York, and Michigan. About 94% live in the Metropolitan Areas, with the top five metro areas being Los Angeles, Detroit, New York/New Jersey, Chicago and Washington, D. C.[40] The largest segment of the third wave was Palestinians. Out of 757, 626 Arab immigrants who came during the period between 1967 and 2003, 121, 737 were Palestinians (even though they came through Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Persian Gulf countries). Many from the third wave were similar to the second wave in its composition of professionals including lawyers, professors, teachers, engineers, and doctors. The first main difference between previous waves and the third one is that the third wave was larger than the second one due to the end of nation-based quotas in U. S. Immigration laws.[41] Secondly, Arabs were fleeing not only Israeli aggression but also intra-Arab conflicts. Those Iraqis, Lebanese and Syrians, for instance, have left situations that had been shaken by change of rule, or new economic structures. The Lebanese Civil War and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 brought 119, 562 new Lebanese immigrants to the U. S.

[42]U. N sanctions on Iraq and the Gulf Wars drove 53, 388 Iraqis to the U. S. Economic hardship and authoritarian government in Syria brought 71, 033 Syrians to the United States. Additionally, increasing Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East drew many Christians (Copts, Chaldeans) away from the Arab countries, including 80, 000 Iraqi Chaldeans that arrived in Detroit between 1960 and 2003, as well as 129, 518 Egyptians (between 1967 and 2003) many of whom were Copts.[43]The third wave significantly changed the overall composition of immigrants, enhanced the diversity of ethnicities, religions, and nationalities of the Arab and Muslim world, including more women and immigrants from all social classes and religions. Christian Arabs continued to migrate in this newer wave, but most of the arrivals were educated Muslims, whose achievements encouraged integration into the American middle class.[44]As new comers, they maintained ties with their countries of origin. Unlike the first and second waves that followed the patterns of assimilation, the third wave remains in the process of making their way into the American society through keeping stronger political and social ties with their homelands.[45]Transnational ties are strong in the recent immigrants. Many Arabs came to the United States and stayed, yet there were communities like Saudi Arabians who came to the United States in order to get an education and experience and return back home. At an earlier time, many Arab communities were intent on assimilating, which resulted to the next generation being unable to speak its mother language. Until the 1960s, assimilated Arab Americans had little connection with recent Arab immigrants. Both waves lived as disconnected groups.[46]Yet, in the 1960s many of these Americanized Arabs started to adopt Arab nationalism

as their political outlook.[47]Yossi Shain, an American historian, in fact, states that the Palestinian cause provided " the very foundation for pan-Arab ethnic identity in the United States."[48]He adds that, " before that war, Arab-American identity was amorphous and dormant."[49]In the later decades of the 20th century, Arab Americans felt the urgent need to engage in action in order to drive away myths regarding their cultures and to correct prevailing injustices among Arabs in the United States and back home.[50]In other words, it was a reaction to anti-Arab bias which grew during the war. Consequently, ethnic awareness had tremendously developed and had helped to revive immigrants' interest Arab in their cultural heritage. This revival was seen as more and more mosques were being built on American soil. Interest in the Arabic language became considerably important as the next generation became willingly interested to learn about their cultural heritage. Many college-degree holders started taking extra courses to learn Arabic and enhance their knowledge of Arab history as a necessary means to combat ethnic stereotypes.[51]TABLE 1: The following table provides a portrait of the Arab population in the United. It specifies the ethnic identities of immigrants and shows that the Arab Americans community is not a monolithic group. Their national origins, religious affiliations vary considerably.

Distribution of Arab- Americans by Major Ancestry Group: 1980, 1990 and 2000[52]

Year

1980

1990

2000

NumberPercentNumberPercentNumberPercent

Total Population

100246. 709. 873100281. 421. 906100

Total Arab Population

711. 7600. 27860, 3540. 351. 89. 7310. 42

Lebanese

301. 84042. 4394, 18045. 82440. 27937. 01

Syrian

112. 52015. 8129, 60615. 06142. 89712. 01

Egyptian

52. 3807. 478, 5749. 13142. 83212. 01

All other Arab Reports

140. 32019. 7268, 37831. 19476. 86340. 08

Palestinian

20. 6202. 948, 0195. 5872. 1126. 06

Moroccan

22. 1403. 119, 0892. 2238. 9233. 27

Iraqi

48. 8606. 923, 2122. 7037. 7143. 17

Tunisian

-

-

2, 3760. 284. 7350. 40The table gives evidence that the Arab American population grew rapidly in the last two decades. From 711, 760 in 1980 (when data on ancestry were first collected in the decennial census) to 860, 354 in 1990 while in 2000, 1. 89 million people reported an Arab ancestry in the United States. More than one-third of those reporting their Arab ethnic origin were Lebanese (37%), including both people who indicated that they were only Lebanese and those who reported being both Lebanese and another ancestry, which might or might not also be Arab. The next largest groups were Syrian and Egyptian (12% each). Among the nearly half-million people who reported other specific Arab ancestries, the largest proportion was Palestinian (6. 1% of the total Arab population). The Jordanian, Moroccan, and Iraqi populations were also sizable (3. 3%, 3. 3%, and 3. 2%, respectively). In comparing the 1980, 1990, and 2000 censuses, Rifaat Dika, census information specialist working with the Arab American community in the 1990 and 2000 censuses notes: All of them do not reflect the number of the community because of structural problems in the ways the questions are asked in the long [census] forms, where the answers are ' write-in'

responses. This is different, for example, for racial groups who have specific boxes to choose from in the short form, such as Hispanic, African American, and so on. However, comparing the three censuses in terms of the worst or the best, there is no objective database to come to a solid conclusion. But, I would say that census 2000 is the best of them in terms of reaching out to the community nationwide for the first time in the history of the Census Bureau, and the involvement of more Arab organizations in the process in addition to the media local and national. In the 1980 census there was no single Arab American working for the census. In the 1990 census it was the first time an attempt was made by the census to reach out to the community and to get community grassroots organizations as census partners, but it was a limited project in terms of number of Arab Americans who were hired including me and few other people." [53] What is challenging here is that it is impossible to determine the exact number of Arab immigrants to North America. Counting members of the Arab ethnic community in the United States has always been problematic. Not only because Arabs came in waves from differing parts of the region, but also because of self-identifications (regional, linguistic, religious) that may have emphasized aspects of identity other than the greater ethnic one (i. e., Arab). Thus one finds a variety of labels depending on the time of arrival of these groups, such as: Syrian, Lebanese, Maronite, Chaldean, Orthodox, Muslim, etc. [54] Apart from that, because U. S immigration officials have at different times used different classification schemes. As a result, we might understand the contrasted estimates used to summarize statistics for one population group may be contrasted with estimates published by various governmental and

nongovernmental institutions. For instance, the 2000 U. S. Census special report on ancestry entitled " Ancestry: 2000" indicates that there were 1. 395. 553 million persons of Arab Ancestry in the United States, which is 0. 5% of U. S population in 2000, but experts believe that the official Arab American population could swell to more than 4 million people if Arab Americans cohesively checked the " other" box and write in " Arab". While the Arab American Institute[55]conducted its own count and produced a better picture of the Arab American scene through its reports of estimates established by Zogby International, an American private research and polling group, whose research projects Arab American population figures to be three times more than the Census Bureau.[56]Though there is debate about the exact numbers, the Arab-American population is clearly on the rise. In the 2011 American Community Survey, the U. S. Census Bureau reported there were close to 1. 8 million Arab Americans trace their heritage to the Arab world, an approximately 47% increase in population size from 2000.

[57]According to the Arab American, for instance, the number of Arab-Americans is increasing at an even greater rate, with a total population closer to 3. 7 million.[58]Some believe, moreover, that this drastically undercounts the Arab American population as the Census Bureau numbers suggest a total number two-thirds less than the numbers produced through the Zogby poll. The official government categorization of Arab Americans as White or Caucasian denies Arab Americans full citizenship. Arab Americans' legal classification as white essentially ignores the present extreme discrimination and racist attitudes toward Arab Americans in the U. S. Given the contexts of Racism, bias, and bigotry, the population at large regards

Arab Americans as part of the "other" rather than as part of the white majority.[59] Achieving census recognition of Arab Americans classification as distinct from white is an important step in securing minority protections for Arab Americans as a group. The point is that the Census is one of the main ways that certain race-based group protections and entitlements are distributed, and it is an essential means of conferring identity. Therefore, it is especially important that Arab Americans secure recognition. The Census plays a dual role of recognizing identity and also conferring it. Even if it presents a positive outlook on Arab American communities and emphasizes its diversity, the way in which data is collected perpetuate the divided relationships between groups, between "us" and "them," thus reinforcing the "othering." [60] Thus, while the Census classifies individuals according to race, it simultaneously creates racism. It should be noted that some Arab Americans argue that it is time to seek official Census recognition. It is the first step in combating fears, protecting Arab Americans, and educating America about Arab Americans as a minority group, rather than allowing them to disappear into the wide definition of white without white privilege. [61] Official Census classification should reflect how Arab Americans are recognized and understood, both politically and legally, in a racially diverse society. It should also confer identity on a group who feels excluded from society at large. Official Census classification should allocate funds and protections to Arab Americans and create a sense of group membership among a community that needs to be brought together to face the everyday challenges ahead.