

# MODULE III: ARAB AMERICANS AND RELIGION



# Arab Americans and Religion

## Module Goals

- Understand the religious diversity in the Arab American community
- Identify the dominant religions represented amongst Arab Americans
- Learn about specific religious traits and practices in these groups
- Recognize stereotypes associated with various groups

# Arab Americans and Religion

Given that the Arab World, and more specifically the Middle East, is home to three of the world's largest religions, it is not surprising to find religious diversity among Arab Americans. This goes beyond the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Within each of these there is more diversity to be found. While much might be shared on one level, subtle differences can result in the formation of different communities and different identity, despite sharing a common national origin.



Coptic Cross



Arabic Word for God



Druze Flag



Melkite Coat of Arms



Chaldean Seal



Star of David



Antiochian Orthodox



Syrian Orthodox Emblem

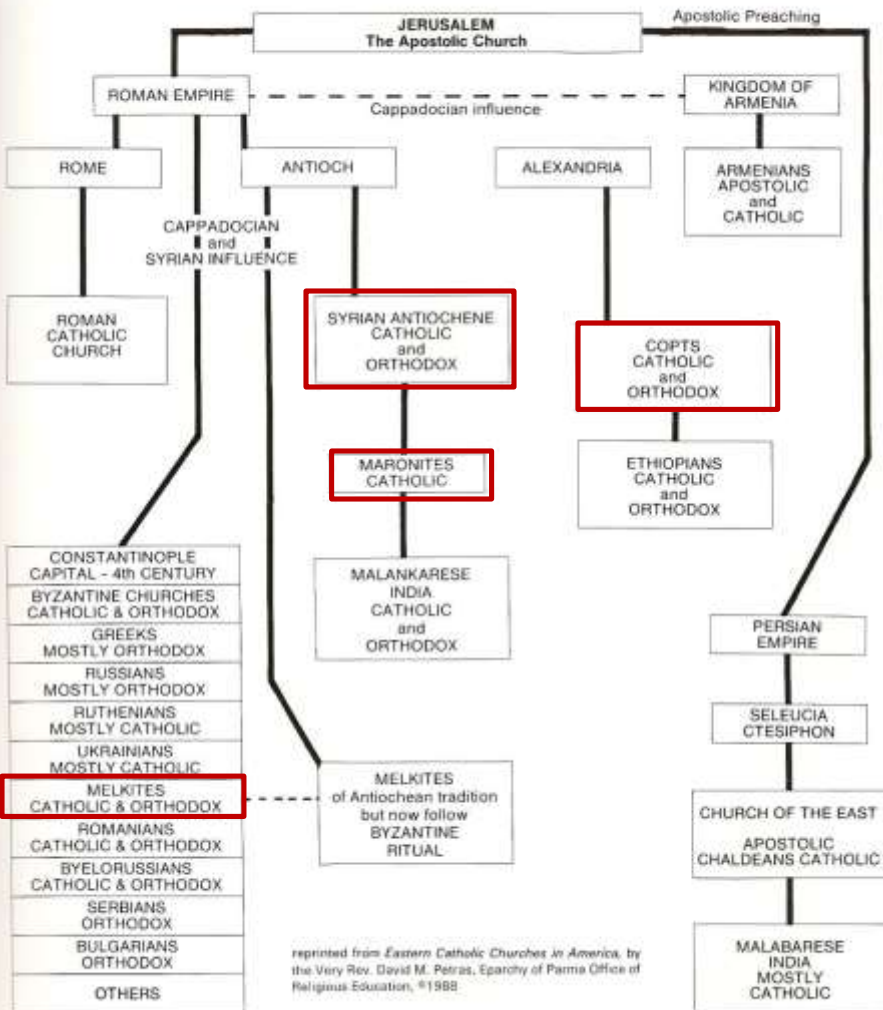


Maronite Patriarch Coat of Arms



# Christian Arab Americans

## THE PARTICULAR CHURCHES OF CHRISTENDOM



Based on various reports, 65-70% of Arab Americans are Christian. For those who follow the faith of their ancestors, they primarily fall into what is known as Eastern Rite churches.

Some of these churches, such as the Maronites, Melkites, and Chaldeans, fall under the Catholic Church in Rome. Others, such as the Syrian Orthodox and Egyptian Copts, fall under their own religious orders.

Other Arab Americans left their Eastern Rite churches for Roman Catholic churches as a matter of convenience.

# Christian Arab Americans



The Coptic church has its origins in Egypt and very early Christianity. The Copts constitute the largest number of Christians in the Arab World. Copts immigrated to the US primarily after the 1950s. Today, Coptic parishes can be found throughout the US to service its expanding population. It is the largest growing Christian Arab population in the US.



The Maronite church is found in Lebanon, and is an Eastern Rite tradition of the Catholic Church. Early Arab immigrants were Maronite, but left to attend Roman Catholic churches that were more convenient and allowed for assimilation. Today, however, the Maronite Church in the US is very prominent and has led to some returning based on their family origins. Maronites may consider themselves to be more Lebanese American than Arab American.



The Melkite church is also referred to as the Greek Melkite Church, owing to its origins in the ancient world. However, today it is a primarily Arab church in its culture and liturgical home. Primarily found in Syria, it is an Eastern Rite tradition of the Catholic Church. Melkites were part of the early Arab immigration wave, and churches can be found primarily in California, the Northeast, and Midwest.

# Christian and Jewish Arab Americans



Orthodox Christianity dates back to the very beginnings of Christianity. The Antiochian and Syrian Orthodox Churches in the US were established early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to service its members who began immigrated in the late 1800s. The Orthodox churches can be found throughout the Arab World. Likewise, parishes can be found throughout the US.



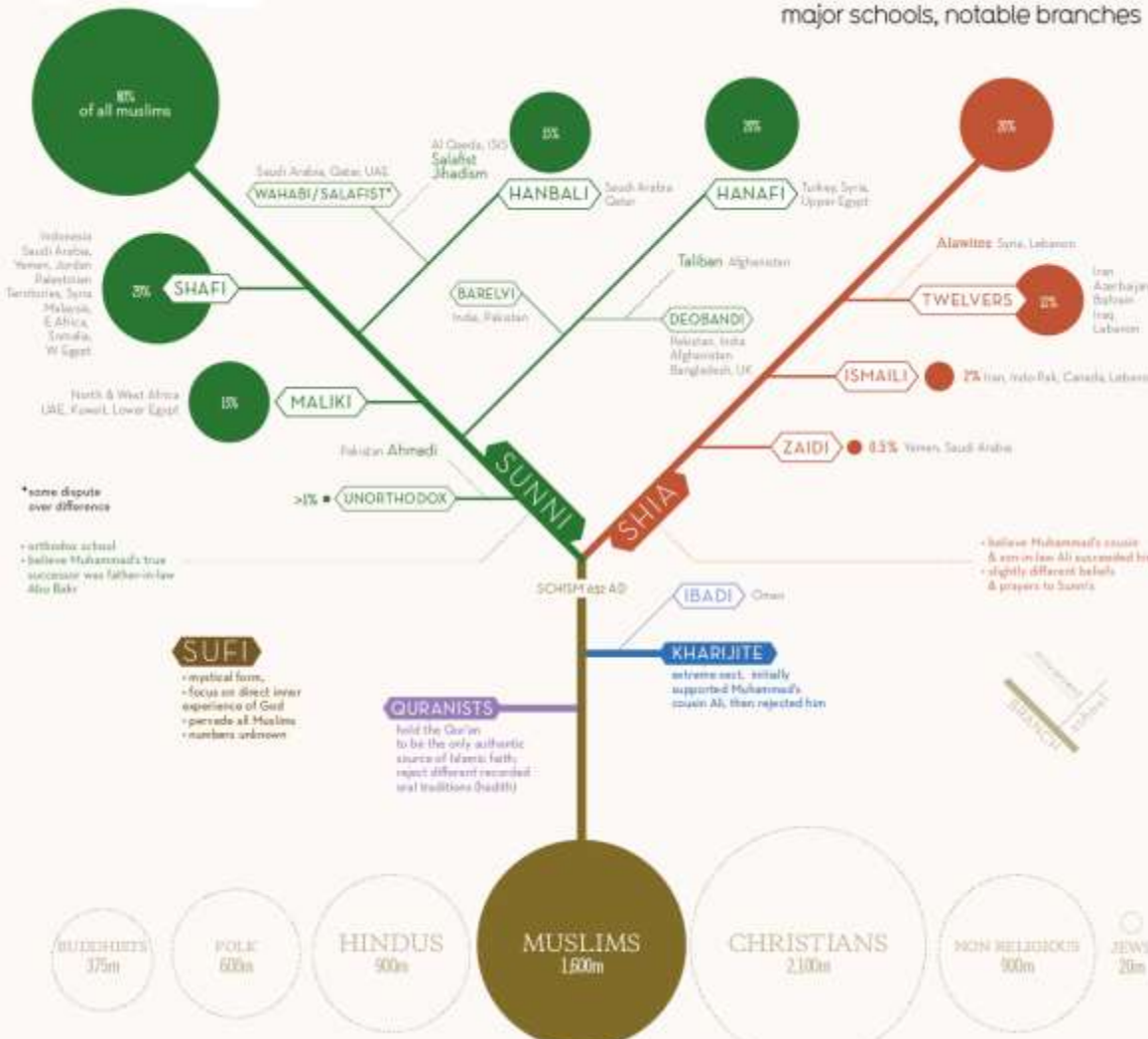
The Chaldean Church was found in Iraq, and is an Eastern Rite tradition of the Catholic Church. While early Chaldean immigrants established the first communities, it was not until the second wave after the 1960s that the community really grew. Today, Chaldeans are primarily found in the Detroit area, with five churches. Additionally, four churches can be found in California. There has been a resurgence of teaching the Chaldean language, and many Chaldean Americans may not consider themselves to be Arab Americans.



A minority of Arabs have been practicing Judaism since its founding. Arab American Jews make up an extremely small percentage of the population; they migrated to the US from Egypt, Iraq, and the Levant, mostly. They are often referred to as “Mizrahi” or “Sephardic” Jews. However, since the establishment of Israel, many have dropped the Arabic language and customs in order to be included in the national narrative of Israel.

# Muslim Arab Americans

Islamic Sects  
major schools, notable branches



A Muslim is a follower of Islam. Islam often is viewed as a singular religion. However, it is a diverse religion that has many important distinctions.

The major distinction is between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Like with all religions, the schisms occur as followers devote themselves to the messages of different leaders, which then become their own branches.

30-35% of Arab Americans are Muslims. This does not account for all Muslim Americans, as many come from non-Arab nations, or are not of immigrant origins (such as the Nation of Islam).

In the past 10 years, most Arab immigrants have been Muslim as compared to 15 to 30 years ago when they were mostly Christian.

# Muslim Arab Americans



The majority of Muslims in the world are Sunni Muslims. Similarly, the majority of Muslims in the United States are Sunni, as well. In fact, the majority of American Muslims are not Arab, but either South Asian or African American. The primary distinction between the two main branches of Islam is who was chosen to follow after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD.



In the Arab World, Shi'a Islam is primarily found in Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Bahrain. Outside of the Arab World, Iran has the largest Shi'a population. In the US, fairly sizable Shi'a communities can be found in places like Dearborn, Michigan. As the Shi'a community has grown, so have their own community institutions, making them a more notable part of the American Muslim setting.



Druze Muslims are primarily found in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel. While a very small part of Islam, their early immigration to the US makes them an important part of many Arab American communities. While Muslim, the Druze incorporate a variety of belief systems into their theology, which is described as a gnostic movement.



# Muslim Belief System

As an Abrahamic religion, Muslims share many of the same theological elements as Judaism and Christianity. It is monotheistic, believing in one God. It gives reverence to the prophets associated with Judaism and Christianity, including Moses and Jesus. Muhammad is seen as the last prophet to deliver God's word on earth. Unlike Christianity, Muhammad is not seen as God. Rather, "there is no God but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger" (a phrase which is known as the *shahadah*).

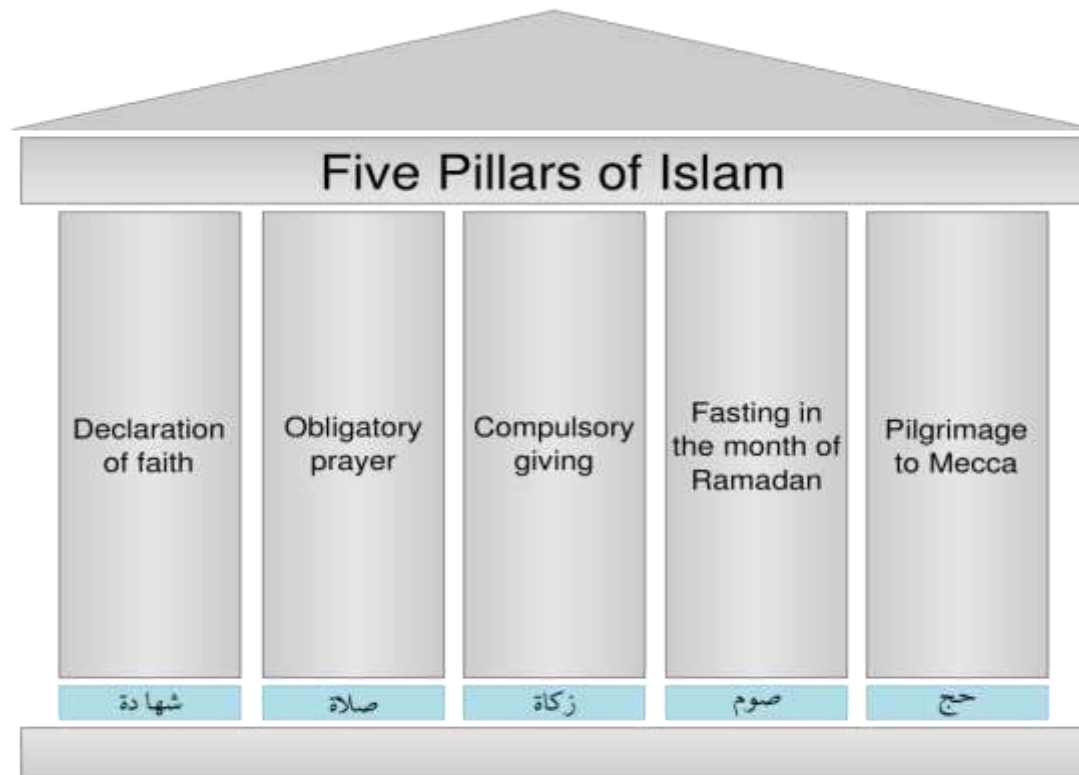
The word for "God" in Arabic is Allah. It would be the same word used when attending an Arabic religious service whether Muslim or Christian. Saying "Allahu Akbar" simply means "God is Great." It is similar to saying "Praise God," although the saying in Arabic has many cultural connotations, depending on the context. In other words, what it means depends on when and how it is used.

Depictions of the Prophet Muhammad are shunned from Islam in order to prevent worshippers from idolizing him like a God. Therefore, Islam is often represented by a picture of the word "Allah".



# 5 Pillars of Islam

There are five principle components to Islam that all Muslims are supposed to follow during their lives. In general, these tenets are very similar to the tenets of other major religions in that they cover: a belief in God, prayer obligations, charitable giving, ritualistic fasting, and visiting holy sites.



# 5 Pillars of Islam

**Shahada:** This is the declaration of faith that “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.”

Every religion has some kind of declaration of faith. This is the fundamental creed for all Muslims to recite. It can be found throughout the Islamic World, including on flags and other important national and religious symbols.



# 5 Pillars of Islam

**Salat:** This refers to the Islamic daily prayer cycle. Muslims are supposed to pray five times a day, as possible. This can be performed wherever the person is, and is done facing the city of Mecca (in Saudi Arabia) and more specifically the Kaabah (the Black Stone building in Mecca). Friday prayer is typically done in a congregation as a mosque.



iSalam: Smartphone compass app to find the direction for prayer



# 5 Pillars of Islam

***Zakat:*** This refers to charitable giving, which is based on a person's wealth. As a pillar, it is obligatory that a Muslim does so as she or he is able.



Muslims donate water to Flint, Michigan with Islamic Relief USA



A mosque in Missouri raise funds to help restore vandalized Jewish cemeteries

# 5 Pillars of Islam

## *Sawm:*

This refers to fasting that is performed in accordance with the Islamic calendar and traditions, such as during Ramadan. During this holy month, Muslims (as physically able and of a certain age) are to abstain from food and drink during the daylight hours.

Beyond fasting, Ramadan is meant to be a time of other observances, during which Muslims try to be better people (and thus better Muslims).



# Women and the Hijab

In Islam, the idea of wearing a *hijab*, or head covering, is rooted in modesty. Whether or not a woman wears a hijab, and the manner in which it is worn, is based more in local cultural customs. Some women will coordinate the hijab worn to match their outfit.

The wearing of the hijab has undergone ebbs and flows in Arab and Muslim society. In the period after September 11, 2001, many more American Muslim women adopted the hijab out of a sense of solidarity to combat the negative reactions aimed at Muslims.

Other women choose not to wear the hijab at all. This can have less to do with a sense of liberation than a personal choice. Also, some wear it in certain contexts only, like religious events or family gatherings.



Saudi Women's Rights Activist  
Manal al-Sharif



Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan

# Arab Americans and Religion

## Summary Points

- For those who practice a religion, Arab Americans are predominantly Christian.
- While Shi'a Muslims are a minority in the Islamic World, they constitute a large number of Arab Americans.
- Islam has five pillars to which all Muslims are supposed to adhere (as possible).
- The tradition of wearing the hijab is varied, and not followed by all Muslim women.