

MODULE V: ARAB AMERICAN CULTURE, CUSTOMS, AND TRADITIONS



Arab American Culture, Customs and Traditions

Module Goals

- Understand the different ways in which immigrant groups undergo cultural change
- Identify common Arab cultural traits
- Learn specific components of Arab American culture

Assimilation and Acculturation

All immigrant and ethnic groups undergo processes of *assimilation*, *acculturation*, and *hybridization*:

Assimilation refers to a process where an ethnic group gives up cultural traditions in order to better fit into a new cultural context.

Acculturation involves the adaptation to and adoption of certain cultural traits of the majority society in order to better engage in it. This is while still retaining elements of the traditional culture, which may only be used in the ethnic community.

Hybridization can be thought of as incorporating elements from a variety of cultural influences, thereby creating a new mixed form of culture.

Assimilation and Arab Americans

Throughout various points in American history, immigrant groups have tried to assimilate more into American society, going so far as to change names and remove all cultural remnants of their homeland traditions, including Arab Americans.

At other times, there has been greater acceptance of cultural diversity, allowing immigrant groups to keep some traditions, while adopting new ones.

For Arab Americans, the presence of multiple waves of immigration groups has allowed a constant cultural renewal, and created the opportunity for later-generation ethnics to become reacquainted with the culture of their ancestors.

Arabic Language

Later generations of Arab Americans generally do not speak the Arabic language. However, an emphasis on maintaining Arabic in the household is strong with first generation Arab Americans and new immigrants.

The Arabic language is comprised of 28 letters, and is written from right to left.

ا	ب	ت	ث	ج	ح	خ
alif	baa	taa	thaa	jiim	haa	kha
د	ذ	ر	ز	س	ش	ص
daal	thaal	raa	zaay	siin	shiin	saad
ض	ط	ظ	ع	غ	ف	ق
daad	taa	thaa	ayn	ghayn	faa	qaaf
ك	ل	م	ن	ه	و	ي
kaaf	laam	miim	nuun	ha	waaw	yaa

English	Transliteration	Translation
Welcome	Ahlan wa sahan	أهلاً وسهلاً
Hello	Marhaba	مرحباً
Goodbye	Ila eltiqaa	إلى اللقاء
Good morning	Sabah elkayr	صباح الخير
Good afternoon	Masa elkayr	مساء الخير
Thank you	Shokran	شكراً
Sorry	Aasif	أسوف
Please	Min fadlek	من فضلك
Yes	Naam	نعم
No	La	لا
Come here	Twala huna	تعالى هنا

Arab Americans and English Language

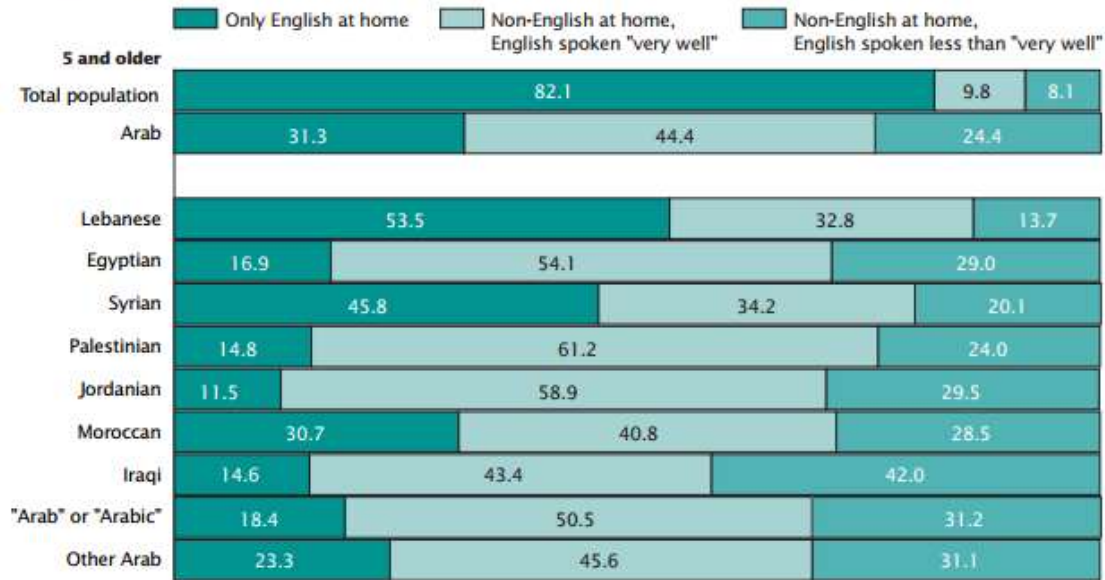
Arab Americans can see two general language patterns. For those who are descendants from the early immigration waves, English is the primary (and perhaps only) language spoken.

For more recent immigrants, they can live in a bi-lingual household. Census data indicates that almost 25% speak English less than “very well.” On the other hand, this means three-quarters do speak English very well.

Depending on the country of origin, other languages, such as French which could be spoken in addition to Arabic.

Language Spoken at Home and English-Speaking Ability: 2000

(Percent distribution of population 5 and older. Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/doc/sf4.pdf)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 special tabulation.

Arabic Calligraphy

Arabic Calligraphy is the art form in which phrases in Arabic, often taken from the Quran, are written in a beautiful script. This is why it is also known as Islamic Calligraphy.

In its modern form, Arabic calligraphy can be found in the logos of companies, and in representations of animals.



ALJAZEERA
AMERICA



Emirates



Hospitality in Arab Culture

Hospitality is very important in Arab culture and this holds true for Arab Americans, as well. Providing food and drink, such as tea or coffee, is typical when visiting a home, or even business.

It is important that this hospitality is accepted and appreciated, as rejecting such attempts is a breach with customs and norms.

أَهْلًا وَسَهْلًا

Ahlan wa Sahlan
“Welcome”



Greetings in Arabic and Arab Culture

Greetings in Arab culture can take on a variety of forms, depending on the context and familiarity between people. Often, a handshake in formal settings will be expected, although this can be withheld by persons who follow the religious tradition of not touching members of the opposite sex who are not related. In these settings, a slight nod, a right hand placed above the heart, or bow will be substituted.

For those who are close friends, a kiss on each cheek may occur. This can occur between men and between women. This is even the case between heads of state.



Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud and President George W. Bush exchanging greetings. Mandel Nan/AFP/Getty Images

Marhaba--Hello

Ahlan wa Sahlan--Welcome

Assalaam Alaykum—Peace be upon you (religious expression)

Arab American Holidays

Most celebrations for Arab Americans coincide with religious events and national holidays. These combine both Arab and American traditions, food, and family gatherings.

There are also events to celebrate their ancestral heritage and homeland. Such as *mahrajans/festivals* are opportunities for families to reunite, as well as persons of non-Arab ancestry to experience a taste of Arab culture.



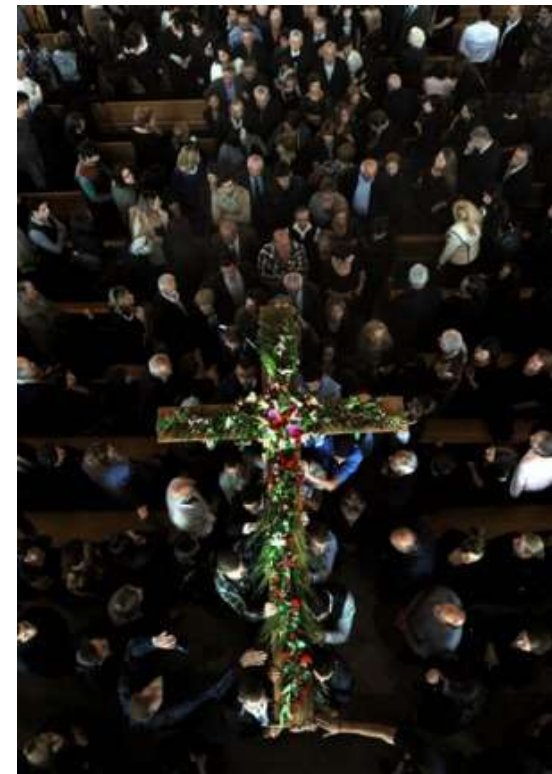
Our Lady of Lebanon Mahrajan, Wheeling, WV



Rihanna Harajli, 3, of Dearborn gets her face painted by Manal Alaktama, 19, also of Dearborn, during Sunday's Eid Festival.



Dearborn Arab International Festival, photo from the festival site



The cross is carried out of Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church in Friday's Easter service. *Photo: Mal Fairclough*

Food for Special Occasions



As with other cultures, certain foods are associated with certain special occasions. These traditions remain throughout the generations, eliciting fond memories of childhood and homeland.



Mlabbas (Jordan almonds) are almond candies that are served mainly during weddings.

Ma'amoul, pastries filled with dates and nuts, is typically enjoyed during holidays, especially during Easter and Ramadan.



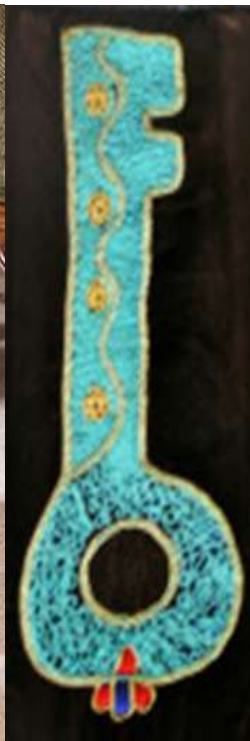
Deep-fried *zalabieh* and *awwamat*, served in syrup, is eaten for all occasions and is often made during Epiphany.



Many variations of baklava are enjoyed at all celebratory occasions.

In the Arab American Home

Within many Arab American homes, you can find elements of ethnic pride and ancestral heritage. This might be in the form of artifacts carried by immigrants, pictures of villages, and/or general symbols of Arab identity.



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Summary Points

- Assimilation, acculturation, and hybridization are parts of the processes through which immigrants go through when arriving to a new society.
- While Arab culture is diverse, there are certain traits that are central to it.
- Most Arab Americans speak English as native speakers.
- Food plays a central part of Arab (American) culture and holiday traditions.