

Who Are the Arabs?

- *Arabs define themselves as “those who speak Arabic as their native tongue and who identify themselves as Arabs.” This currently consists of about 300 million people living mostly in 17 independent countries plus the Palestinian Territories that make up “The Arab World.” They are:*

Morocco
Tunisia
Algeria
Libya
Egypt
Sudan

Lebanon
Syria
Iraq
***Palestinian Territories**
Jordan
Kuwait

Saudi Arabia
Yemen
Oman
United Arab Emirates
Qatar
Bahrain

**Palestinians are Arab, although they are a nation without a recognized country.*

- *Arabs are not a monolithic group. There are many ethnic and religious groups as well as diverse histories, geographies, governments, and social norms. Many current borders of the region were drawn up by colonial powers less than a century ago.*
- *The Arab World does not correspond to the Muslim World. Arabs make up less than 20% of Muslims worldwide. Also, not all Arabs are Muslim; there are Arab Jews, Arab Christians, Arab Bahai's ... and several other religious Arab identities.*
- *Though Arabs have existed since ancient times, most did not identify themselves with a collective “Arab consciousness” until about 100 years ago. Some Arab families/tribes claim descent from one of the twelve tribes of Abraham's first son, Ishmael. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) claims decent from one of these sons.*
- *Arabs are “collectivists” as a unit of society, with strong emphasis on the family and/or tribal identity. Whatever one person does is seen as directly impacting others in the group.*
- *Along with Hebrews, Assyrians, Chaldeans and others, Arabs are a Semitic people. The Arabic language is likewise related to other Semitic languages.*
- *Although fewer than one in five Muslims worldwide speak Arabic as their native language, all Muslims consider Arabic as a sacred language since Muhammad received God's messages in Arabic, as recorded in the Qur'an.*

Arab Culture and Values

- *Arabs have a rich cultural heritage and are proud of their historical contributions to religion, philosophy, literature, mathematics, medicine, art, architecture, and the natural sciences.*
- *Almost everyone believes in God, acknowledges His power over this life, and has a strong religious identity. Humans cannot control all things; some are in the hands of Al-lah ("Ensha-allah" --- "if God wills!")*
- *The basis of Arab society is the family, which often includes a tribal identity. Individuals are not generally seen as independent from their "collectivist" group; therefore, the behavior of each group member affects the whole group.*
- *A person's dignity, honor, and reputation are of paramount importance; no effort should be spared to protect them! Piety is one of the most admirable personal attributes. One must behave at all times in ways that create a good impression on others.*
- *Loyalty to one's family takes precedence over personal preferences. Also, loyalty to the "honor of the family" may take precedence over the "truth" in communication.*
- *One's personal status is generally determined at birth according to family background, reputation, and social class. One who is born into an honorable family is said to "come from a good tent."*
- *There are often very strong "in-group – out-group" distinctions. One's deepest values are generally reserved for members of one's own family or group.*
- *Arabs think of themselves as exceptionally generous, hospitable, polite, loyal, and humanitarian; they see these traits as distinguishing them from other groups.*
- *Issues of "pride" and "shame" are critical to the Arab personality. One should always uphold the reputation and dignity of one's self as well as one's family or group. Perceived "shame" by an Arab may be masked or reframed.*
- *Arabs generally believe that they have been misunderstood by others and exploited by the Western World; the experience of the Palestinian people represents the most painful and present example.*

Some ideas taken from Nydell, Margaret: **Understanding Arabs – A Guide for Westerners.**

Arab Language and Communication

Verbal

- *Oral communication assumes great importance, particularly in areas where there are higher levels of illiteracy. Generally, the spoken word takes priority over the written word.*
- *Great value is placed on one's ability to memorize and quote long pieces of literature. Many Arabs pride themselves on being able to recite the entire Qur'an.*
- *Something may not be considered important unless stated two or three times.*
- *Loudness of speech, as well as excessive gesturing, may be normal and should not be viewed as threatening.*
- *Belief in "the evil eye" (or jinn) is common; one should avoid talking about topics of death, illness, and matters which might draw the attention of "the eye."*
- *In verbal communication, the tendency is to be "indirect;" that is, emphasis is often placed on detail rather than the key issue. Arabs love words and pride themselves in being able to "fill in the blanks" of a conversation. One should not always expect to "get to the point" right away.*
- *Many statements may be accompanied by "Ensha-allah" ("if God wills") or other indication of one's religious beliefs. Also, the protection of one's dignity and honor may have priority over absolute truthfulness.*

Non-verbal communication

- *Body-language is extremely important; one should always appear alert and engaged in a conversation (not the laid back casualness of some Westerners).*
- *Always use the right hand when eating, gesturing, touching, or handing over something to someone. After shaking hands, the right hand is often placed over the heart to show respect or sincerity. The left hand is used for cleanliness and almost never used for eating or touching someone.*
- *Exposing the soles of one's shoe is the worst insult to an Arab. Removing shoes when entering a home is common. Be careful when crossing the legs.*
- *Arabs generally like to stand or sit closer to someone than is usually preferred in Western cultures. No "thumbs up" when talking ... it has a vulgar meaning!*
- *Since saving face is so important, an Arab may seldom say "no" to something; however, the "yes" may be considered to mean "yes," "no," or "maybe!"*

Famous Arab-Americans

Science and medicine

Dr. Michael DeBakey – famous heart surgeon, currently at Baylor University
Dr. Elias Corey – 1990 Nobel Prize winner for chemistry
Farouk El-Baz – space program specialist who helped plan Apollo moon landings
Christa McAuliffe – teacher/astronaut who died on the Challenger space shuttle

Political figures

Ralph Nadar – Consumer advocate and outspoken political speaker
George Mitchell – former U.S. Senate Majority Leader from Maine; now official negotiator for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process
John Sununu – former White House Chief of Staff; Governor of New Hampshire
Donna Shalala – former Secretary of Health and Human Services
Dr. Philip Habib – special Presidential envoy and Ambassador
Helen Thomas – 50-year veteran with UPI; dean of the White House press corps
Ray LaHood – United States Secretary of Transportation

Humanitarians

Candy Lightner – founder of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)
Danny Thomas – founder of St. Jude's Children's Hospital (late comedian and entertainer) also: Marlo Thomas, his daughter
Ralph Johns – key participant in the 1960's Civil Rights Movement

Business and Entrepreneur

Dr. Joseph Jacobs – founder of the international Jacobs Engineering Group
Dr. Ray Irani – President and CEO of Occidental Petroleum
Najeeb Halaby – former head of Federal Aeronautics Authority; former CEO of Pan-American Airlines (His daughter is the former Queen Noor of Jordan)
J.M. Haggard – designer and owner of Haggard Slacks for men
Tony Ismail – founder of Alamo Flag Company, largest retailer of flags in the U.S

Entertainment

Radio: Casey Kasem and Dan Bustany - founders of Casey's Countdown and American Top 40 radio shows
Singers: Paul Anka; Paula Abdul; Frank Zappa; "Tiffany"; "Tiny Tim;" "Shikara"
Actors/Actresses: Jamie Farr ("MASH."); F. Murray Abraham (Oscar for Best Actor in "Amadeus"); Marlo Thomas (television series); Michael Ansara (star of "Cochise"); Kristy McNichol ("Empty Nest"); Kathy Najimy (Sister Act); Michael Nouri ("Flashdance").
Directors/Producers: Assad Kelada ("Family Ties," "Who's the Boss?" etc.); Moustapha Akkad (epic film producer: "Halloween"); Tony Thomas ("Golden Girls"; "Driving Miss Daisy").

Sports

Bill George – NFL Hall of Fame Linebacker
Doug Flutie – Heisman Trophy winner and NFL quarterback

Arab Proverbs and Wisdom

"The hand of God is with the group."

"The world changes – one day honey, next day onion."

"A concealed sin is 2/3d's forgiven."

"A foolish man may be known by six things: anger without cause; speech without profit; change without progress; inquiry without object; putting trust in a stranger; and mistaking foes for friends."

"Every sun has to set ... patience is beautiful."

"Only the tent pitched by your own hands will stand."

"Support your brother, whether he is the tyrant or the tyrannized."

"The monkey in the eyes of his mother is a gazelle."

"Older than you by a day, wiser than you by a year."

"Seek counsel of him who makes you weep, not of him who makes you laugh."

"Believe what you see and lay aside what you hear."

"A known mistake is better than an unknown truth."

"A horse of good breed is not dishonored by his saddle."

"Every ambitious man is a captive and every covetous one a pauper."

"Measure your guilt ... then stretch your legs!"

"He who plants thorns must never expect to gather roses."

"Bring up your children other than the way you were brought up yourselves, for they were born for times other than yours."

"The knife of the family does not cut."

(Collected from different sources by Johnnie Hicks)

Arab World Bibliography

Al-Amily, Hussain Mohammed (2005): The Book of Arabic Wisdom. Interlink Publishing Group, Inc.; Northampton, MA.

Anderson, Scott (2013): Lawrence in Arabia – War, Deceit, Imperial Folly, and the Making of the Modern Middle East. Doubleday; NY.

Barakat, Halim (1993): The Arab World – Society, Culture, and State. University of CA Press; Berkeley.

Diamant, Anita (1992): The Red Tent. Pacador USA; NY.

Fernia, Elizabeth W. (1965): Guests of the Sheik. Anchor Books – Doubleday; NY. Also (1985): The Arab World – Personal Encounters. Anchor Books Doubleday; NY.

Friedman, Thomas L. (1995): From Beirut to Jerusalem. Anchor Books; NY.

Gibran, Kahlil (1975): The Treasured Writings of Kahlil Gibran. Castle Books; Edison, NJ. (Also: “The Prophet” and “Spirits Rebellious”)

Hitti, Philip K. (1970): The Arabs – A Short History. Henry Regency Co.; Gateway; Chicago.

Hourani, Albert (1991): A History of the Arab Peoples. Warner Books; NY.

Lamb, David (2002): The Arabs – Journeys Beyond the Mirage. Vintage Books; NY.

Leverett, Flynt (2005): Inheriting Syria – Bashar’s Trial by Fire. Brookings Institution Press; Wash., D.C.

Lewis, Bernard (1995): The Middle East- A Brief History of the Last 2000 Years. Simon & Schuster; Touchtone; NY. Also (1998): The Multiple Identities of the Middle East.

Mackey, Sandra (2002): The Saudis – Inside the Desert Kingdom. W.W. Norton; NY.

Mahfouz, Naguib (1975): Midaq Alley. Anchor Books; NY. (Other fictional books, too.)

Nydell, Margaret K (2006): Understanding Arabs – A Guide for Westerners. Intercultural Press; Yarmouth, ME.

Queen Noor (2003): Leap of Faith – Memoirs of an Unexpected Life. Miramax Books; NY.

Rogan, Eugene (2009): The Arabs – A History. Perseus Books Group; NY.

Shadid, Anthony (2005): Night Draws Near – Iraq’s People in the Shadow of America’s War. Henry Hold & Co.; NY. Also (2012): House of Stone – A Memoir of Home, Family, and a Lost Middle East.

Compiled by Johnnie Hicks – 03/24/14