

An Introduction to Arab American Studies

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Theme	2
Disciplinary Area	2
Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment	2
Relevant Curriculum Standards	3
Background Information for Educators	4
Learning Objectives	6
Guiding Questions	6
Key Concepts and Terminology	7
In-Class Activities	7
Discussion Questions	9
Homework	10
Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection	11
KWL Worksheet	12
<i>Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People</i> Cornell Notesheet	13
True or False: Facts about Arab Americans (Student Version)	14
True or False: Facts about Arab Americans (Teacher Version)	15
“What is Orientalism?” Worksheet	17

Introduction

From entrepreneurs and innovators to politicians and entertainers, Arab Americans have formed an integral part of American society for centuries. Despite this, American media, government, and education often put forth biased and inaccurate stereotypes of Arab Americans. This lesson asks students to critically interrogate these biased stereotypes and to listen to the authentic voices of Arab Americans.

With an estimated 3.5 million people who trace their ancestry to 22 different Arab countries, Arab Americans are one of the most diverse ethnic groups in the United States with many different lived experiences, customs, and beliefs.¹ This lesson introduces

¹ Pierre Tristam, “Arab Americans Are a Growing Electoral Force in Swing States,” ThoughtCo, April 14, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/arab-americans-in-the-united-states-2353696>.

students to the diversity of experiences of Arab Americans, with a focus on humanizing members of this population to combat the monolithic stereotypes that students often encounter elsewhere.

Part One of this lesson features an overview of the Arab region, the history of Arab immigration to the United States, and current Arab American demographics. Part Two introduces students to the origins of dominant narratives about Arab Americans and the impact of these stereotypes. Finally, Part Three highlights the voices and contributions of Arab Americans and invites students to explore strategies for combating bias.

Because this lesson covers a large amount of content, educators should consider spreading the lesson across several class periods to allow sufficient time for class discussion and reflection.

Theme

Identity

Disciplinary Area

Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment

1: “Cultivate empathy, community actualization, cultural perpetuity, self-worth, self-determination, and the holistic well-being of all participants, especially Native People/s and Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC).”

2: “Celebrate and honor Native People/s of the land and communities of Black Indigenous People of Color by providing a space to share their stories of success, community collaboration, and solidarity, along with their intellectual and cultural wealth.”

5: “Challenge racist, bigoted, discriminatory, imperialist/colonial beliefs and practices on multiple levels.”

6: “Connect ourselves to past and contemporary social movements that struggle for social justice and an equitable and democratic society; and conceptualize, imagine, and build new

possibilities for a post-racist, post-systemic racism society that promotes collective narratives of transformative resistance, critical hope, and radical healing.”

Relevant Curriculum Standards

California’s [Literacy in History/Social Studies Standards](#):

- **Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies: RH.11.12.1; RH 11.12.2; RH.11.12.7; RH.11.12.9; RST.11.2.2**
 - Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
 - Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
 - Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.
 - Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.
 - Determine the central ideas or conclusions of a text; summarize complex concepts, processes, or information presented in a text by paraphrasing them in simpler but still accurate terms.
- **Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: WHST.11.12.2.b; WHST.11.12.4; WHST.11.12.7; WHST.11.12.9**
 - Develop the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience’s knowledge of the topic.
 - Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
 - Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
 - Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Background Information for Educators

While the term “Arab” used to only refer to those whose native language is Arabic, the definition of Arab has broadened as more Arab Americans consider English as their first language. Today, Arabs are primarily defined as individuals who trace their ancestry to one or more of the 22 Arab countries (see map below). While these 22 countries have majority Arab populations, they are also incredibly diverse and include other ethnic groups, such as Kurds, Imazighen, and Persians.



The first wave of Arab immigration to the United States began in 1880 as significant Christian populations from modern-day Syria and Lebanon came to the United States to pursue new economic opportunities and to flee war in their homelands.² From 1880-1920, more than 95,000 Arabs moved to the United States and began lives as merchants or small business owners. The second wave of Arab immigration occurred after World War II and included mostly urban, highly educated Christians and Muslims. The third wave of Arab immigration began in the 1970s when the United States lifted many of its restrictive immigration laws.³ Since 2000, many Arab immigrants and refugees, particularly from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Egypt and Somalia, have come to the United States to escape political instability and/or to seek new economic and educational opportunities.⁴

² Mattea Cumoletti and Jeanne Batalova, “Middle Eastern and North African Immigrants in the United States” (Migration Policy Institute, January 10, 2018), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/middle-eastern-and-north-african-immigrants-united-states-2016>.

³ “Arab American Immigration,” *Reclaiming Identity: Dismantling Arab Stereotypes* (Arab American National Museum, 2011), <http://arabstereotypes.org/who-are-arab-americans/arab-american-immigration>.

⁴ Randa Kayyali, *Arab Americans: History, Culture & Contributions* (Dearborn, MI: Arab American National Museum, 2019), 6.

Today's Arab American population is one of the most diverse and fastest growing diasporic groups in the United States. Although the majority of Arabs worldwide are Muslim, the majority of Arab Americans are Christian.⁵ Almost 95% of Arab Americans live in urban areas, with California, Michigan, and New York having the highest Arab American populations.⁶ The average income of Arab Americans is 22% higher than the national average, and over 40% percent of Arab Americans have obtained at least a college degree compared to the national average of 34%.⁷

Despite the diversity and long history of Arab Americans in the United States, American media, governmental institutions, and educational sources often put forth harmful and inaccurate stereotypes of Arab men as violent and un-American, and Arab women as oppressed and submissive.⁸ For example, researcher Jack Shaheen studied over 900 American films and found that 95% of the films presented Arabs as "heartless, brutal, [or] uncivilized."⁹

These negative and inaccurate stereotypes stem from the colonial era and are referred to by scholars as "Orientalist ideas." Professor Edward Said, a pioneer in the field of Middle Eastern and Arab American studies, coined the term "Orientalism" to describe the pervasive Western (European and American) tradition of prejudiced interpretations of the East (particularly the Middle East), shaped by the attitudes of European imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries.¹⁰ Said argued that colonial figures defined the Arab world in opposition to the West and characterized its people as barbaric and uncivilized to justify the colonization and subjugation of Arab populations.¹¹ Said and others argue that this legacy has persisted through the present day because it allows Western countries to assert themselves as superior to the Arab countries over whom they seek to exert power.¹²

⁵ "Arab Americans," Bias Busters: Cultural Competence Guides (Michigan State University, March 18, 2020), <https://news.jrn.msu.edu/culturalcompetence/race/arab-americans/#who>.

⁶ "AMEMSA Fact Sheet" (Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, November 2011), <https://aapip.org/sites/default/files/incubation/files/amemsa20fact20sheet.pdf>.

⁷ "Demographics," Arab American Stories (Arab American National Museum), accessed February 3, 2021, <http://www.arabamericanstories.org/arab-americans/demographics/>.

⁸ Randa Kayyali, *Arab Americans: History, Culture & Contributions* (Dearborn, MI: Arab American National Museum, 2019), 18-19.

⁹ Jack G Shaheen, "Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588, no. 1 (2003): 171-93.

¹⁰ Susan Douglass, "Orientalism," Slideshow retrieved from <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Q11ZRpqYyUt1U5-I0CMHcR8TdGqatalv/view?usp%3Dsharing&sa=D&source=editors&ust=1612366714453000&usg=AOvVaw1xnV-azwGad2qO5f01CIBI>

¹¹ "What is Orientalism?," Reclaiming Identity: Dismantling Arab Stereotypes (Arab American National Museum), accessed February 3, 2021, <http://arabstereotypes.org/why-stereotypes/what-orientalism>.

¹² Tayyab Mahmud, "Colonialism and Modern Constructions of Race: A Preliminary Inquiry," no. 53 (1999), <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/faculty/501>

These negative stereotypes have a tangible impact on Arab Americans every day.¹³ Hate crimes against Arab Americans and those perceived to be Arab or Muslim rose by 1700% in 2001.¹⁴ Arab American youth in particular have reported feeling “afraid, unsafe, and insecure” at school because of prejudiced rhetoric and actions by their peers and school officials.¹⁵ It is also important to note that not only Arabs are impacted by anti-Arab bias. Often members of other ethnic minority groups from the Middle East and other Asian regions, including Kurds, Imazighen, Persians, Sikhs, and South Asians, are targeted because they are mistakenly perceived to be Arab.

Despite these challenges, Arab Americans have continued to persist and succeed in their careers, education, and daily lives. Arab Americans are central figures in fields as diverse as science, technology, politics, and entertainment. Many organizations have dedicated their attention to improving the lives of Arab Americans through educational efforts and social justice campaigns. By elevating the voices and lived experiences of Arab Americans, educators can combat the widespread stereotypes and contribute to the humanization and appreciation of our fellow Americans.

Learning Objectives

- Students will be able to explain the long history and diversity Arab Americans communities across the United States.
- Students will be able to develop their media literacy skills by recognizing and critiquing stereotypes of Arab Americans in popular culture.
- Students will be able to explain Arab American contributions and accomplishments in the face of adversity.

Guiding Questions

1. Who are Arab Americans and what factors shape their lived experiences?

¹³ For more information on the lived experiences of Arab Americans after September 11, 2001, consider the book *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America* by Moustafa Bayoumi.

¹⁴ “‘We Are Not the Enemy’: Hate Crimes Against Arabs, Muslims, and Those Perceived to Be Arab or Muslim after September 11,” Human Rights Watch, November 14, 2002, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2002/11/14/we-are-not-enemy/hate-crimes-against-arabs-muslimsand-those-perceived-be-arab-or>.

¹⁵ Zeina Azzam Seikaly, “At Risk of Prejudice: The Arab American Community,” At Risk of Prejudice: The Arab American Community (National Council for the Social Studies), accessed February 3, 2021, <http://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/publications/se/6506/650604.html>.

2. Where do dominant stereotypes about Arab Americans come from and what can we do to improve them?
3. How have Arab Americans demonstrated resilience and success in the face of adversity?

Key Concepts and Terminology

Arab - a person whose ancestry is from an Arab country and who identify themselves as Arab.

Arab American - anyone living in the United States with ancestry from one of the 22 Arab countries.

Arabic - the dominant language of Arab countries with over 313 million native speakers.

Diaspora - a scattered population whose origin lies in a separate geographic location.

Orientalism - the representation of Asia, especially the Arab region, in a stereotyped manner.

Stereotype - a widely held but oversimplified or inaccurate idea of a particular type of person or thing.

Xenophobia - fear of or bias against foreigners.

In-Class Activities

1. Pre-Class Homework - Background Information

In preparation for the first class, provide each student with a copy of the Know, Wonder, Learn (KWL) Worksheet. Under the “Something I Know” column, ask students to write down 2-3 bullet points on facts they know about Arab Americans. Under the “Something I Wonder” column, ask students to write down questions they have about Arab Americans or ideas they want to explore in class. Students will revisit the KWL worksheet at the end of the lesson.

Next, assign the Introduction and Chapter 1 (pages 1-15) of the short book [*Arab Americans: History, Culture, and Contributions*](#) for homework to be completed before the first class period dedicated to this lesson. The book provides an overview of the history and demographic background of Arab Americans. The book is available for free download through the Arab American National Museum’s website (see hyperlink above).

2. Main Activity Part 1 - Arab American Identity and History

Pass out the student version of the worksheet “True or False: Facts about Arab Americans.” As a class, read out each of the statements and ask students to write

down whether they think each statement is true or false. After students have written down their answers, read off the correct answers from the teacher version of the worksheet.

Next, pass out a copy of the article “[Arab American Stories: History](#)” and the corresponding worksheet [Arab Immigration Timeline](#). Divide the class into groups of 3-4 students and ask students to read the article together, which discusses the history of Arab immigration to the United States. As they read, students should take notes on the worksheet.

If time permits, ask students to read an [interview with Mary Juma](#), an Arab American who immigrated to North Dakota from Syria in the 19th century. The interview focuses on her experience in the United States and humanizes the immigration process.

3. Discussion Part 1

Use the Part 1 Discussion Questions to guide students through a 10-15 minute class discussion about what they learned from the podcast and article.

4. Main Activity Part 2 - The History and Impact of Stereotypes

Show the following clips (00:00-03:06 and 47:23-48:23) of the documentary [Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People](#), which discusses Hollywood’s long history of portraying negative stereotypes about Arabs. Distribute a copy of the Cornell Notes worksheet and ask students to take notes as they watch. Note: We do not recommend showing other clips of the film due to images of violence and nudity. The suggested clips (00:00-03:06 and 47:23-48:23) have been carefully selected to feature the central arguments of Dr. Jack Shaheen and to avoid inappropriate scenes.

Once students have had the opportunity to identify and reflect upon dominant stereotypes about Arabs in Hollywood, show the [short video about Orientalism](#), which explains the origins of these biased depictions of Arabs. Provide the “What is Orientalism?” Worksheet and ask students to take notes as they watch. We recommend pausing the video at one minute intervals to give students time to ask clarifying questions and take notes since the material is dense. You may want to ask a student to volunteer to summarize each one minute interval to ensure students have grasped the main arguments.

5. Discussion Part 2

Divide the class into groups of 4-5 students and ask each group to discuss the following questions:

1. Where do stereotypes about Arabs come from?
2. What is Orientalism?
3. How do negative stereotypes impact Arab Americans?

Next, bring the class back together and use the Part 2 Discussion Questions to guide students through a 15-20 minute reflective discussion.

6. Main Activity Part 3 - Highlighting the Voices of Arab Americans

Choose 1-2 episodes from [Arab American Stories](#) to show to the class. These episodes feature diverse Arab American individuals discussing their own experiences, successes, and challenges. We recommend the following episodes:

- Episode 2: Bridge Builders
- Episode 10: Civic Leaders
- Episode 13: A New Generation

7. Discussion Part 3

Use this discussion to ask students to collectively brainstorm strategies to combat bias and discrimination against Arab Americans. Use the Part 3 Discussion Questions to guide the conversation.

8. Reflection

Dedicate the last 10-15 of class to leading a reflective discussion about the main takeaways from the lesson and any questions students may still have. Revisit the KWL worksheet that students completed at the beginning of the lesson and ask students to spend five minutes to write 4-5 facts they learned under the “Something I Learned” column.

9. Extension Activities - Consider these ideas for further student exploration:

- Ask students to independently research Arab American advocacy organizations in their communities. For community engagement activities, consider encouraging students to reach out to these organizations to interview them about their efforts, inquire about volunteer opportunities, or write about the achievements of these groups.
- Ask students to conduct research on the issue of Arab American representation on the U.S. Census.

Discussion Questions

Part 1: Arab American Identity and History

1. What is one fact that surprised you?
2. How did your understanding of Arab Americans change?
3. How would you describe Arab Americans to your friends or family?
4. What questions do you still have?

Part 2: The History and Impact of Stereotypes

1. Other than popular culture and the media, where else do you find stereotypes?
2. Why do stereotypes from the colonial era still exist today?
3. How do you think stereotypes impact Arab American youth in particular?
4. What questions do you still have?

Part 3: Highlighting the Voices of Arab Americans

1. Where can we find accurate, unbiased information about Arabs and Arab Americans?
2. What types of advocacy or social justice efforts do you know of that work to combat prejudice?
3. How can you as an individual become involved in combating prejudice?
4. How can we as a community become involved in combating prejudice?

Homework

Educators may choose to assign one or more of the following homework assignments.

- **Option 1:** Choose one of the projects from the Arab American National Museum's ["Counter-Narratives: Importance of Positive Images"](#) worksheet to complete at home. These projects ask students to independently research and create multimedia presentations about Arab American contributions. This activity reinforces students' understanding of the integral role of Arab Americans in US culture, politics, innovation, and other fields.
- **Option 2:** Listen to the NPR podcast ["Being Young and Arab in Post-Sept. 11 America"](#). In the podcast, Moustafa Bayoumi discusses his book, *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America*, which highlights the lived experiences of young Arab Americans after 9/11.
- **Option 3:** Choose an Arab American that had an impact on American history, politics, technology, or culture. Write one paragraph on their biography and one paragraph on the impact of their accomplishments. Below are some links to lists of famous Arab Americans:
 - <https://share.america.gov/arab-americans-who-have-made-difference/>

- <https://ing.org/national-arab-american-heritage-month/>
- <https://www.aaa-us.org/arab-americans/famous-arab-americans>

- **Option 4:** Develop an individualized “commitment to personal action” plan that builds off of the list of strategies to combat bias and discrimination against Arab Americans that students brainstormed in the Part Three Discussion. In this commitment, students will commit to using what they learned in class to help combat prejudice and improve perceptions of Arab Americans. Ideas for their action plan could include:

- Volunteer at an Arab American organization
- Visit an Arab American cultural center to learn more about Arab history and culture
- Create a video, poster, or podcast educating their community about Arab American
- Develop a social media campaign to raise awareness about bias against Arab Americans

Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection

Refer to steps 2-8 of the In-Class Activities section.

KWL Worksheet

Something I K now...	Something I W onder...	Something I L earned...

***Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* Cornell Notesheet**

<u>Topic:</u> <u>Source:</u>	Name: Class: Period: Date:
<u>Questions</u>	<u>Notes</u> (00:00-03:06) According to Dr. Jack Shaheen, Hollywood portrays Arabs as... Jack Shaheen studied more than ____ films. These negative stereotypes rob Arabs of their _____. Where did we inherit these stereotypes from? (47:23-48:23) Why is Jack Shaheen optimistic about the future? What should we do when we see anyone being vilified?
<u>Summary</u>	

True or False: Facts about Arab Americans (Student Version)

Read the following statements and mark which ones you think are true and which ones are false.

1. Most Arab Americans are Muslim.
2. All Arab Americans speak Arabic.
3. Arab Americans are integral parts of US culture, economics, and politics.
4. California has the largest population of Arab Americans.
5. Arab Americans have a higher average income than the national average.
6. 'Arab American' is an official minority group listed on the U.S. Census.
7. Arab Americans are very well educated.
8. All Arab American women wear *hijabs* (head scarves).
9. Arab American food includes dishes like *mansaf*, *hummus*, *tabouleh*, and *shawarma*.
10. Many Arab Americans consider family incredibly important.

Adapted from the Arab American National Museum's *Ten Things You Should Know about Arab Americans*
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/museum-podcast/id496559339?i=1000109739723>

True or False: Facts about Arab Americans (Teacher Version)

1. Most Arab Americans are Muslim.
FALSE. Approximately 50-60% of the Arab American population is Christian. The first Arab immigrants to the United States were mostly Christians from modern-day Lebanon and Syria. More recently, more Arab Muslims have immigrated to the United States from countries like Iraq, Somalia, and Egypt.
2. All Arab Americans speak Arabic.
FALSE. While many Arab Americans speak Arabic as their first language, some Arab American families have lived in the United States for generations and in many cases, don't speak Arabic.
3. Arab Americans are integral parts of US culture, economics, and politics.
TRUE. For generations, Arab Americans have made strides in all facets of American society. Famous Arab Americans include Salma Hayek (actress), Ramy Youssef (actor), Steve Jobs (co-founder of Apple), Khalil Gibran (writer and poet), Ilhan Omar (U.S. Congresswoman), and Robert Saleh (head coach of the NY Jets).
4. California has the largest population of Arab Americans.
TRUE. California is home to an estimated 400,000 Arab Americans. Other states with large Arab American populations include Michigan, New York, Illinois, and Texas.
5. Arab Americans have a higher average income than the national average.
TRUE. The average income of Arab Americans is 22% higher than the national average.
6. 'Arab American' is an official minority group listed on the U.S. Census.
FALSE. The U.S. Census does not yet recognize Arab Americans as an official minority group in the United States. According to the Census, Arab Americans are considered white, but many do not self-identify as white. For years, there has been a push by Arab American groups to have the U.S. Census recognize Arab Americans as a racial minority.
7. Arab Americans are very well educated.
TRUE. Compared to the national average, twice as many Arab Americans earn graduate degrees. Over 40% of Arab Americans have at least a college degree, compared to the national average of 34%. Arab Americans go on to use these degrees in fields as diverse as medicine, technology, law, and politics.

8. All Arab American women wear *hijabs* (head scarves).

FALSE. Although some Arab Muslim American women choose to wear the hijab as part of their faith, many women do not. The decision to wear a scarf is made on an individual or family basis.

9. Arab American food includes dishes like *mansaf*, *hummus*, and *tabouleh*.

TRUE. Arab American food is rich with spices and savory flavors. Arab Americans who trace their roots to different parts of the Arab region share different types of food. Mansaf, hummus, tabouleh are well-known Levantine (Lebanese, Palestinian, Jordanian, Syrian) dishes. Notable Egyptian dishes include *koshari* (lentils, pasta, chickpeas, and onions) and *foul mudammas* (fava bean stew). Somali food includes *sambusas* (fried pastries with meat and vegetables) and *anjero* (sourdough flatbread).

10. Many Arab Americans consider family incredibly important.

TRUE. Family is often considered the foundation of Arab American cultures. Arab American families often include extended relatives who gather together for celebrations and to support one another. For newer Arab immigrants to the United States, the family unit has provided a way to preserve cultural and religious traditions.

“What is Orientalism?” Worksheet

Take notes as you watch the video “An Introduction to Edward Said's Orientalism- A Macat Sociology Analysis.”

<u>Word Bank</u> Orient – Edward Said’s term for Asia, particularly the Middle East Enigmatic – mysterious Romanticizing – describing something in an idealized on unrealistic way Raucous – making a disturbingly loud noise	Deviate – to differ from Domineering – asserting one’s power over another in an arrogant way Dubious – of questionable value Deduce – come to a conclusion by reasoning Patronizing - treating someone as if you are better than them
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1. In Edward Said’s 1978 book *Orientalism*, he argued:
2. According to Said, because Western scholars could not understand Eastern cultures, they portrayed the Orient as:
3. Finish the sentence: “Said believed the West thought....”
4. Why did Said argue that Western scholarship was political?
5. Stereotyping became a justification for...
6. Edward Said’s book became the foundational text for...
7. The term ‘Orientalism’ describes...