

# Arab Americans are a much more diverse group than many of their neighbors mistakenly assume

April 12 2023, by Yasmin Moll

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Marking April as Arab American Heritage Month—a time to learn about the history, culture and contributions of [our nearly 4 million strong](#)

community—is [gaining traction](#) across the country.

In 2022, Joe Biden made history as [the first U.S. president to recognize the month](#), which he did [again in 2023](#). States such as [Illinois](#) and [Virginia](#) have passed legislation to make the celebration an annual event, and dozens more [have commemorated it](#).

This recognition is important, given the simplistic ways Arabs are often portrayed in American culture. From TV stations to [entertainment media](#), people of Arab descent are often stereotyped as violent, oppressed or exotic. Nevertheless, as [an anthropologist](#) who studies religious and racial dynamics in Arab societies, I am concerned that as the celebration of "Arab American heritage" becomes more mainstream, the diversity and complex stories of Arab Americans' many different communities may be papered over. In short, Arab Americans are not a monolithic group.

## **Arab Christians**

In 2023, Arab American Heritage Month overlaps with the second half of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. For many in the United States, this overlap seems natural, given how often Islam is conflated with Arab identity. But just as most Muslims around the world [are not Arab](#), not all Arabs are Muslim.

While the 22 countries that make up [the Arab League](#) all have Muslim majorities, Christian communities predate Muslim ones in the region. Indeed, Christianity began in the Middle East, with the [Palestinian city of Bethlehem](#), which is revered as Jesus' birthplace, an important pilgrimage stop for Christians from all over the world. During the first significant wave of Arab immigration to the U.S. in the [late 19th century and early 20th century](#), families more often than not were Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian Christians.

Today, most [Americans of Arab descent](#) identify as Christian. While the Arab community in the greater Detroit area, a short drive from where I live and work, [is majority Muslim](#), that sets it apart from many other Arab communities in the U.S.

[Arab American Christians](#) are themselves diverse, identifying as Protestants and Catholics, and with a variety of Eastern Christian traditions, such as Antiochian and Coptic Orthodoxy.

Furthermore, some sects of Christianity have become intertwined with specific ethnic identities. For example, some Coptic Christian Egyptian Americans [refuse the label](#) "Arab," even if they grew up speaking Arabic at home or learn the language to connect with their family roots. This refusal is often rooted in Copts' collective experiences of marginalization in Egypt, where they face [many restrictions](#), including on [repairing and building churches](#).

## **From Mizrahi Jews to Shiite Muslims**

Just as Christianity is an integral yet complex part of Arab heritage, so is Judaism. Arab Jews, often called [Mizrahi Jews](#), have existed since ancient times and helped shape Arab heritage through their [philosophical, poetic and political contributions](#) across centuries.

To be sure, Israel's establishment and its occupation of Palestinian territories has complicated Arab Jewish identities, with [new forms of antisemitism](#) becoming more common within many Arab communities. Still, there is [growing interest](#) among scholars and Arab American Jews themselves in learning more about [this history](#), as well as the Jewish background of beloved pan-Arab celebrities such as [Layla Murad](#), an iconic midcentury Egyptian actress.

The San Francisco Bay area for generations has been home to the

Egyptian [Jewish Karaite](#) community. Karaites reject the authority of the rabbinic oral tradition used by more mainstream branches of Judaism such as Reform, Conservative and Orthodox groups in the U.S. Here in the U.S., as in Egypt, members struggle for recognition as a religious minority within a religion that is itself a minority, Judaism.

Arab American Muslims are not a monolithic group, either. Over half identify as Sunni, 16% as Shiite and the rest with neither group, according to a [2017 Pew poll](#). Of course, the diversity of beliefs and practices within Sunnism and Shiism, the largest two branches of Islam, are themselves present within [Arab American Muslim communities](#) as well.

Finally, many Arab Americans identify with no religion at all, or with other faiths beyond the Abrahamic traditions.

## **Many nations, one box**

Arab heritage not only includes a variety of religious traditions, but encompasses a wide range of ethnic and racial identities. It is difficult to make generalizations about Arabs, whose skin tone, facial features, eye colors and hair textures embody the rich histories of human migrations and settlements that characterize western Asia and northern Africa.

The U.S. census erases this internal diversity, however, by categorizing Arabs and other Middle Easterners as "white." Arab American advocacy groups have [long argued](#) that the form's categories do not reflect the actual experiences of the vast majority of Arab Americans, who are not treated as white in their everyday lives. And Arab identities in the U.S. are becoming only more complex, given the diversity of national backgrounds reflected in the [more recent waves of Arab immigration](#) from the 1960s to today.



## Complicated identities

Asking that Arabs check the box as "white" also marginalizes Black Arabs. The term [Afro Arab](#) is growing as a term of self-description for Black Arab Americans seeking to make space for their multifaceted identities and heritage. Black communities are a part of every Arab country, from [Iraq](#) to [Morocco](#).

These dual identities are still fraught, given the pervasiveness of anti-Black racism within some Arab communities, which often stems from the legacies of [the trans-Saharan and Ottoman slave trades](#). An estimated 15% of Tunisians, for example, are descendants of [enslaved Black people](#) from sub-Saharan Africa. Tunisia abolished slavery in 1846, two decades before the U.S., yet it passed a [law prohibiting racial discrimination](#) only in 2018, making it the first Arab country to do so. Still, Tunisia's president recently provoked outrage after he gave a [racist speech](#) targeting African migrants and Black Tunisians.

Around the world, Black Arabs have consistently [criticized](#) such racism, especially after the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in the U.S., which sparked a [regional reckoning](#) with anti-Blackness.

As the Sudanese-American museum curator Isra el-Beshir [put it](#), "I am an African person, who speaks Arabic and who as a result of speaking Arabic has Arab cultural tendencies. But I do not racially identify as an Arab. It's still murky territory for me that I am trying to navigate."

## 500-year journey

In her historical novel "[The Moor's Account](#)," which won the Arab American Book Award in 2015 and was [a Pulitzer Prize finalist](#), Laila Lalami recounts the experiences of Al-Zammouri, more commonly

known as Estebanico. Based on true accounts, Lalami narrates how he was enslaved and brought to current-day Florida by 16th-century Spanish colonizers. Al-Zammouri's name reflects his Moroccan hometown: Azemmour, a city famed for its ocean breeze. His identity—Black and Arab; Muslim, then Catholic—reflects the complexity of the Arab world while bringing to light the complex origin stories of America itself.

Ideally, heritage month celebrations will create more opportunities to reflect on stories like Al-Zammouri's, which portray how rich and diverse Arab American identity is—really, many different identities rolled into just two words. If heritage months are an opportunity to celebrate the diversity of America, the diversity of the Arab community itself should not be overlooked.

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