Muslim and Arab Americans present many distinctive cultural, traditional, linguistic, and religious sets of features. It is important to talk “sets of features” rather than features, because of the great diversity within and between these groups (Al-Badry, 2001). A clear understanding of this multiple diversity, within and between, may be one of the two most critical factors that would help US educators succeed in their interaction with learners from these backgrounds. The other factor is the unenviable “group of interest” stigma imposed by the US media, on these groups, for the past five decades, a stigma exacerbated by the events of 9-11 and their aftermath, and deepened even more following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Neither the religion of Islam nor the Arabic language unites US pupils and students whose ancestry is from what is referred to as the Arab world or the Islamic world. In many instances, quite the opposite is the case. A student of Christian Lebanese descent shares very little with a classmate from an Iranian Shi’a Muslim background, or with a child whose parents Nation of Islam African Americans, except for the externally imposed stigma they all confront.

Ethnic, racial, and religious classifications are predictably fraught with inaccuracy and tentativeness. The same is true when referring to Arab Americans and Muslim Americans. We have the impression that these two designators refer to two specific group in the US—each distinct from the other, until we focus a bit more carefully on the ethnic characteristics of these groups. In addition to an obvious overlap between the two groups, that is Arab Americans who happen to be Muslims, (about 24 percent according to Census 2000 data), we also have the even more important fact that Muslim Americans are a much larger group which includes such non-Arabs such as Iranians, Turks, Pakistanis, Indians, Indonesians, just to name a few national origins of Muslims from outside the Arab region. Thus, even before getting into complicating geopolitical factors, we already have two important but confusing factors when we deal with Arabs and Muslims in the US: (i) the fact that only one in five Arab Americans is Muslim, and (ii) the fact that all Arab Americans combined themselves represent just a fraction of a larger Muslim American community.

Who are these Americans of Muslim and/or Arab descent, and how many Americans have a Muslim or Arab origin?

In this essay we will answer these questions in a way that will help American educators to develop some but reasonable shorthand classifications of their students’ cultural background, while encouraging to keep in mind the overriding diversity of each community, (to help them succeed in their instructional mission), so as not to alienate some their charges by committing avoidable blunders. The quick answers about the size of these populations can be taken from the Census 2000 and from recent survey numbers:

- 1.25 to 3.5 million Arab Americans
- 1.1 to 7.0 million Muslim Americans

The wide gaps between low and high estimates are a reflection of the politically charged nature of these estimates. For the purposes of this essay, we suggest using the working estimates for 2008:

- Arab Americans: 3 million
- Muslim Americans: 5 million

Some character features, and beliefs, often found among Arab Americans are:

- The family is very important and everyone loves children.
- Men and women are different and complementary
- The older the wiser
- Beyond a certain degree of striving the person should accept what comes their way
- Dignity, honor and reputation are more valuable than material success. Honor (or shame) is collective, and can affect the community, particularly one’s family
- Group solidarity is more important than individual advantage or success
• Much depends on God’s will
• Arab cultural heritage is rich, and one can be proud of it
• The Arab region suffered excessively from colonialism and exploitation
• Total assimilation may be harmful to family mores
• Arabs are wrongly stigmatized and Western media is biased against Islam and against their culture

We have to recognize that the US Census Bureau does not provide an Arab classification option, nor does it request religious affiliation in the short Census form. Since the court decisions of 1913-1917 about Syrian immigrants, administratively, citizens and residents of the US who come from the Middle East and North Africa are classified as “White.” In what follows, we will discuss Muslims and Arabs in the US under these two major classifications, provide major important demographic data and other facts about them, while emphasizing that one has to maintain the caution about the “within and in between” diversity of these American communities.

Arabs’ Demographics in the US:
As this chart shows, the majority of Arab Americans are Christian. That includes the denomination “Orthodox” which is an Eastern Christian church older than Protestantism. Although only four groups are mentioned in this chart, other religious communities have lived in the Arab and Muslim regions of the world. Some of them have emigrated to the US, hence the presence of Arab Jewish Americans, Bahai Americans, Druze Americans, etc. The following histogram demonstrates that one third of Arab Americans are of Lebanese origin, and about half of all Arab Americans have ancestry in just four Arab countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic Name</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lebanese</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egyptian</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syrian</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestinian</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordanian</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moroccan</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Arab” or “Arabic”</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Arab</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(of a total of 22 Arab countries)
Source: US Census Bureau, Census 2000 special tabulation

The unaffiliated categories “Arab” of “Arabic” as well as “Other Arab” in the histogram refer to self-identified Arab Americans who did not specify which Arab country they consider to be their ancestral home. They (or their parents) may have migrated in two or more stages (to Europe, then the US, for example).
### Muslims’ Demographics in the US:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Muslim Americans:</th>
<th>Who Are They?</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion who are...</td>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-born Muslims</td>
<td>65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab region</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Africa</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native-born Muslims</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Foreign-born Muslims | 65 |
| Year immigrated: | | |
| 2000-2007 | 18 |
| 1990-1999 | 21 |
| 1980-1989 | 15 |
| Before 1980 | 11 |
| Native-born Muslims | 35 |
| Percent who are... | | |
| Converts to Islam | 21 | |
| Born Muslim | 14 | |

Source: Pew Social and Demographic Trends

The table and the pie charts about Muslim Americans tell an entirely different story. For example, a larger percentage of Muslim Americans come from the non-Arab regions of Pakistan, Iran and Other South Asia, than from Arab countries. The same applies to native-born Muslims (65 percent), of whom more than half are converts to Islam, and more than half are African American (converts and descendents of Muslims).

### How Muslims Came to America:

Slave narratives in the US are a living and eloquent testimony to the presence of Islam on this land for hundreds of years (Procter, 2004). R.A. Judy has written about this Muslim and Arab legacy in the early US in his book *Disforming the American Canon: The Vernacular of African Arabic American Slave Narrative* (Judy, 1993). However, the number of descendents of Muslim slaves forcibly removed from Africa to America may be small today due to the separation and sale of slave families. Many African American Muslims converted to Islam during Jim Crow period and in more recent times. It is not until the late nineteenth century that significant but still small numbers of Muslims and Arabs started trickling into the Americas, not as slaves but as immigrants. They were originally referred to as Turks, and possibly as Syrians, but not Arabs. Then, during the twentieth century, a century of global wars, civil wars, and liberation wars, more Muslims and Arabs were forced to leave their homelands and seek safety and opportunity elsewhere. A testament to the exodus in the early twentieth century may be found in great literary names such as Gibran Khalil Gibran, Michael Nu’aima, and many others, who wrote in Arabic from their exile in America, and, as in the case of Gibran, in English as well. More recently, the late Edward Said may have been, and still may be, the most prominent writer and social critic of Arab (Palestinian) descent, although Christian not Muslim.

### Arab Americans Focus on Education

Arab Americans have a strong commitment to family, and to educational and economic achievement. 94 percent of Arab Americans live in metropolitan areas, 85 percent of them completed a high school diploma. 40 percent of them have a college degree (compared to 24 for overall US), 17 percent of them have a post-graduate degree (9 percent for overall US). 88
percent of them work in the private sector. Their median income was 47,000 dollars in 1999 (higher by 5,000 dollars than the overall US per capita income). Arab Americans are younger, more educated, more affluent, and more likely to own a business (Al-Badry, n.d.).

American educators may be justified in not knowing enough about their Arab American and Muslim American students. It is the least studied ethnicity and the most stereotyped religion. The fact that the same group is at least subliminally associated with the considerable publicity their region of origin receives in the coverage of political and economic events (war and oil), makes the educators even more uneasy about the presence of these “ethnic” students in their classrooms. How can they help their students go beyond the defensiveness forced upon them, through guilt by association? The broad strokes used by the media in their coverage of violence, war, and economic turmoil, as well as the lack of information are two major reasons the educators may have a tough time playing their role efficiently.

**Family and Cultural Values:**

63 percent of Arab Americans are Christian. Only 24 percent are Muslim. However, the religious factor may not be a good predictor of the main family values. In general, Arab families are tightly knit well beyond the nuclear family itself. Christian and Muslim Arabs alike may keep a family-oriented way of conducting their lives while adapting to their immigrant environment in the US. Generationally, there often is slow but predictable erosion of certain traditional and somewhat conservative features. This conservatism would manifest itself in gender relations and the dynamic between men and women, which are affected by the mores of the host culture, and the requirements of economic struggle for survival and success. That often leads many Muslim American families to adapt, finding ways of doing things that may be quite different from what life in the former homeland taught the elders. Perhaps the most apparent change is the move to a more nuclear family, given the distance separating them from the community in their ancestral homelands, and the high degree of mobility in American life. This is not to say that there wouldn’t be residual features. Educators are well-advised to observe, listen, and inquire to discover what degree of adaptation/assimilation (or lack thereof) their students present in their behavior at school. Some male students may exhibit a typical patriarchal behavior of “protectiveness” toward female siblings and other close relatives that could be perceived as attempts to control. Just as in the case of social workers, the cultural competency of educators could make a big difference in engaging students of Muslim and Arab backgrounds. It may look like an uphill battle struggling against multi-faceted stereotyping based on media often irresponsible frenzies over terrorism incidents and the Iraq invasion, as well as over the Israeli-Palestinian long-lasting conflict.

**Parent's Involvement and the Language Gap:**

The involvement of parents in their children’s schooling is not foreign to immigrant Arab American parents. However, as in the case of many recent immigrants, the language gap may be a deterrent. First generation and recent immigrants in general may find it difficult to participate in an American PTA organization. Their own children would speak English more fluently, or even as a native tongue, with no accent, and may be reluctant to have their parents encounter schoolmates and school officials. This situation is not unlike any other minority. However, unlike other minorities, say Latinos or Chinese, the traditional appearance of Arab American parents, if they maintain the use of distinctive dress in the US, might be a particularly difficult feature for the school child to share with others, given the frequently virulent vilification, bordering on racist slander, of things Arab and Muslim, by the media and by popular culture, that stigmatizes the collective groups (Shaheen, 2001).

**Rooted, Well-educated, and Enterprising:**

As stated in the beginning, Arab Americans have an overall higher level of education across the board. They also have a higher median income and tend be employed in the private sector close to 90 percent of the time. Both Arab and Muslim Americans are mostly middle class and mainstream. About two-thirds of self-employed Arab Americans own incorporated business, more than twice the overall US average. The proportion of Arab Americans engaged in sales (33 percent) is twice the national average. Many Arab and Muslim Americans have achieved great
success in business, in the arts, and in sports. Educators would be better prepared to help their students if they learned about the careers of such Arab Americans as the dean of White House correspondents Helen Thomas, boxer Mohamed Ali Clay, CNN correspondent Christiane Amanpur, music historian Casey Kasem, astronaut-educator Christa McAuliffe, Ford Corp CEO Jacques Nasser, football star Doug Flutie, former senator George Mitchell, former White House chief of staff John Sununu, etc.

A “Group of Interest” Most Visible but Least Studied:
Certain traditional values, of Arabs and Muslims, with regard to family, community, and religion observance, are quite similar to those of some other minorities. However, two critical differences stand out and have to be seriously considered when dealing with Arab and Muslim American students. First, there is the fact that in federal statutes no legal classification as a minority exists for either Arab or Muslim. This absence of administrative and legal recognition as a community has led to undercounting them in censuses (by a factor of 3), and to their neglect in demographic and other group-centered social studies and surveys, hence the lack of data to help us understand who the Arabs and the Muslim are. Second, there is the unwanted and traumatizing situation of being associated with terrorism and war, and being perceived, irrationally, as potential threats to the US. Those two peculiarities make even harder for educators to equip themselves with the necessary information to understand the cultural background Arab and Muslim students in the classroom. The confusion is made even worse by frequent publications produced by self-appointed “researchers” and pundits in ideologically loaded think tanks and media outlets. These “researchers” have a vested interest in reaching preset conclusions that justify fear of Islam and of Arabs. Educators may be at a loss trying to navigate the torrent of polemical literatures claiming to explain who Arabs and Muslims are, how many of them live in the US, and what makes them tick. The opposite situation is also equally problematic. Some of the pundits and “researchers” who attempt to counter the islamophobic torrent of literature online, on TV, in the movies, and in all media, may go overboard at times in their defensiveness, crossing into the territory of unjustified and unhelpful apology and bias. Even the vocabulary to describe these groups is a contested territory: Although, just like Jewish Americans, the great majority of Arab Americans are of Semitic origin, the word anti-Semitism and its derivatives do not apply to prejudice against them. The civil rights advocates of the larger group, Muslim Americans, have coined a new phrase to refer to anti-Muslim prejudice: Islamophobia—a well justified move. However, even the latest versions of word-processing software (MS Word 2008) do not acknowledge it. The accusations, the prejudice, and the sweeping generalizations about Muslim Americans and about their religion are borne by Muslim self portraits as shown by one of the recent studies of Muslim views, done by the Pew research Center (see right).
Concluding Remarks
It may be asking too much to expect American educators, who are overworked, and always inadequately compensated, to make individual efforts to become conversant in the culture of each cluster of minority students in their classrooms. On the other hand, it is inexcusable to allow prejudice from popular culture and tabloid-style media to jeopardize the learning environment of any group. Cultural competency should be a requirement fulfilled by a joint effort between educators, parents, community, and government. Lip service statements by government officials and documents (web sites and other publications) are not sufficient, not by a long shot. The various parties involved in the design, management, conduct, and supervision of education will have to step up and creatively devote the resources necessary to put the educational system on the path to continuing improvement. One critical dimension of that improvement should be the campus and classroom atmosphere. Arab Americans and Muslim fellow citizens should not carry a burden that is not theirs to carry. Prejudice, bias and racism are not scourges that victimize only the federally identified minorities. If a group of students sharing a common ethnic or religious feature are excluded, made invisible, put on the spot, or feared just for who they are in times of war and tragedy, as Arab and Muslim citizens of the US have been, that is a failure of our society and our system, not a failure of self-presentation by the victims. The achievements of the civil rights struggle are only as good as the level of inclusion accorded the all the groups in society, including the weakest. Over the past many years Arab and Muslim Americans have become the least protected in the US, and perhaps the weakest.
References

Joseph Progler, “Ben Ali and His Diary: Encountering an African Muslim in Antebellum America,” Journal of Arab and Muslim Perspectives (Fall 2004)

Demographics of Arab-Americans
http://www.aaiusa.org/arab-americans/22/demographics
Accessed 17 March 2008

El-Badry, Samia, Arab American Demographics, Arab-Americans Well-Educated, Diverse, Affluent & Highly Entrepreneurial, Over 4 Million Americans Trace Ancestry to Arab Countries, http://www.allied-media.com/Arab-American/Arab%20american%20Demographics.htm
Accessed 17 March 2008

Hattab Samhan, Helen, By the Numbers, http://www.allied-media.com/Arab-American/Arab_demographics.htm
Accessed 17 March 2008


Accessed 17 March 2008

Accessed 17 March 2008


Accessed 17 March 2008


Accessed 17 March 2008

Accessed 17 March 2008

Accessed 18 March 2008

Accessed 17 March 2008

Accessed 19 March 2008

Read, Jen'nan Ghazal, *The sources of gender role attitudes among Christian and Muslim Arab-American women*, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0SOR/is_2_64/ai_104733009](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0SOR/is_2_64/ai_104733009)
Accessed 19 March 2008

Accessed 19 March 2008