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By Edward E. Curtis IV

Arabic-speaking people began settling in Indianapolis in the late 1800s. Coming mainly from what today are the countries of Syria and Lebanon, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire, these immigrants were generally people of modest means who arrived in the United States in search of economic opportunity. Life in the eastern Mediterranean, as in most of the world, was changing. Even as the global economy expanded, many people were actually worse off as their traditional ways of making a living disappeared. During the same time, the United States was in need of cheap labor. America encouraged mass immigration. As a result, over a million immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe and the Ottoman Empire came to the United States before World War I.

Tens of thousands of them were Arabic speakers, and by 1910, about one thousand of those immigrants moved to Indiana. Some worked in area factories, while others, especially those who lived in the Syrian colony on Willard Street, made their living as peddlers. By World War I, the Syrians of Indianapolis also established successful businesses, including grocery stores and retail shops. Their male and female children, sometimes born in Syria and sometimes born in America, attended school and college or university. Some followed in their parents' footsteps as entrepreneurs; others became professionals and leaders in Indianapolis' public life.

Anti-immigration movements virtually cut off immigration from the Arabic-speaking world and other parts of Africa and Asia in 1917 and 1924. It would not be until after World War II that significant numbers of Arab people would once again come to the United States. In the 1950s, students from North Africa and the Middle East began to study in Indiana's colleges and universities. Then after 1965, when the United States reformed its racist immigration system, more and more Arabs, especially health care professionals and scientists, settled in the area. These Arabs, both Christians and Muslims, immigrated for what they saw as the unprecedented economic opportunity as well as the freedom to practice their religion without government interference or repression.

Some Arab immigrants, especially political exiles and refugees, also came to the United States in order to escape repression or violence in their homelands. Events such as the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the 1975 Lebanese civil war, the 1991 Somali civil war, the 1992 military coup in Algeria, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and 2011 Syrian civil war resulted in an increase in the Arabic-speaking population of Indianapolis.

In 2017, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that there were 28,314 Hoosiers of Arab descent. Marion County was home to 5,688 Arab Americans while 3,197 lived in Hamilton County. These two central Indiana counties accounted for almost a third of all Arab Hoosiers. People who trace their ancestry to Lebanon remained the largest single group of Arab Americans in the state. But from 2009 to 2016, there were significant increases in the number of immigrants from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, and Yemen.

According to the Arab American Institute, these numbers from the U.S. Census Bureau likely underestimate the number of Arab-descended people in Arab Indianapolis: "Reasons for the undercount include the placement and limitations of the ancestry question (as distinct from race and ethnicity); the effect of the sample methodology on small, unevenly distributed ethnic groups; high levels of out-marriage among the third and fourth generations; and distrust/misunderstanding of government surveys among recent immigrants."

Whatever the precise number of Arab Americans live in Greater Indianapolis, they have made a remarkable impact on the area. "Arab Indianapolis" unearths their stories, making them available for all to see and appreciate.