

“Who is Arab?,” Arab Indianapolis, Dec. 17, 2020, ArabIndianapolis.Com.

By Edward E. Curtis IV

Let’s start with a simple answer. If people call themselves Arab, then generally speaking, we should take their word for it.

Today, the people who refer to themselves as Arabs live mainly in North Africa and West Asia (also called the Middle East). As of 2019, the World Bank estimated that the total population of Arabs was 428 million. Arabs also live in other parts of the world, including the United States, where 2 to 3.7 million people claim Arab ancestry.

But what else makes an Arab person “Arab”?

It’s not race. Arabs can be white, brown, or black.

It’s also not religion. The majority of Arabs are Muslim, but there are also Arab Christians and Arab Jews, among other religious minorities and people without any religious affiliation in the Arab world. In the United States, Arab American Christians may be more numerous than Arab American Muslims.

Today, the term “Arab” is much more akin to the label of “Latino/a” or “Hispanic.” It is often used by Arab people to say that they share a common heritage that is tied, one way or another, to the Arabic language.

People called Arabs lived in ancient Syria and Arabia hundreds of years before the Common Era. An early myth of their origins is that they are the children of Ishmael. Their language was spoken by a relatively small number of people until Muslim political authority extended beyond the Arabian Peninsula. During the Middle Ages, Arabic became the predominant language of traders, scientists, philosophers, lawyers, scholars, poets, religious teachers, and mystics across North Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Europe, including Spain and Sicily.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the term Arab took on a different meaning as it became associated with the political movement to establish independent nation-states in North Africa and the Middle East. The idea that people shared a common heritage was a powerful way to bridge or even repress various differences under a common national banner.

In the United States, the term “Arab American” has a history that is tied for many to political empowerment and cultural pride. Before World War I, most Arab Americans in Indianapolis and the rest of the country traced their roots to Syria, which then included the countries of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan. After World War II, the number of Arabic-speaking people from other countries increased. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the term Arab American became increasingly popular as an ethnic label.

“Arab Indianapolis” explores this history in an intimate way, highlighting the rich diversity and contributions of individual men and women who have been part of the Arab American community since the late 1800s. We celebrate our Arab American heritage without apology

while also being sensitive to the diversity of and even the shortcomings of our community. In other words, we embrace our full humanity.