

*“Let’s Talk About…” is a column in our monthly newsletter where we will learn one thing at a time about how we can love others the way they want to be loved. We will learn something each month that helps us understand and respect people who are different from us a little more deeply.*

## Let’s Talk About Arab Americans

Since 2021, April in the United States has been recognized as Arab American Heritage Month. It speaks volumes that this national awareness month only received federal recognition 3 years ago. And yet, it is not surprising. I was 8 years old when 9/11 happened. I have never known an America without strong anti-Arab sentiment. One poor neighborhood near my high school was locally rumored to protect terrorists. In retrospect, I am very clear that the reputation had everything to do with the ethnicity of that neighborhood’s residents and nothing to do with its (average for the area) crime rate.

So it may surprise you that since the early 1900s, Arab Americans (who come from 22 different countries in the Middle East and North Africa) have been considered white in U.S. census data. At the time, the alternative was being grouped in with Chinese and Mongolian people, who could not become citizens. So, some Arab Americans went to court to prove their whiteness, and eventually won. But in reality, we know that the Arab American experience is drastically different from the European American one. Due to the lack of a specific, accurate option on the census survey, there is no way to be sure what proportion of this people group gets lumped into the options of white, Asian, or Black.

There is a push now to change the options for the 2030 census so that this minority can have the benefit of more comprehensive data that evidences the systemic injustices and health issues and other unique challenges of this particular group of people. You can learn more about this effort in this PBS article from last year: [Why Arab Americans are pushing for a ‘Middle East or North African’ category on the census | PBS NewsHour](#)

And in the meantime, how can we support our Arab American neighbors?

1. Learn Arab American stories. Chat with neighbors about their heritage. Additionally, PBS has some great resources for experiencing cultural practices and artistic expressions by Arab American creators: [Arab American Heritage Month: Facts, Activities & Resources | PBS](#)
2. Learn about Islamic holidays. Not all Muslims have Arabic heritage, and not all Arab Americans are Muslim, but there is a lot of overlap in these identities. Additionally, in many Arabic countries, non-Muslims have to know Islam’s holidays in a similar way to how non-Christians in the United States are expected to know about Christmas and Easter. Learning about the fasting practice of Ramadan and the pilgrimage practice of Hajj can deepen understanding of our neighbors and help us to support others’ ways of living out devotion to God.
3. Finally, notice the automatic thoughts and feelings that pop up sometimes for you. Maybe this means reminding yourself that “Allah” is just the word god in Arabic. Maybe it’s a reminder that head coverings are a self-expression of one’s culture or religion, not at all about hiding one’s identity. It is okay to have these built-in racial biases; we all do. Our task is to notice them and consciously choose not to listen to them.

*Our “Let’s Talk About…” column is one place where we can help one another learn how to be better allies for all our neighbors. If you have a question you’d like answered, or if there are things you wish others in our congregation better understood about your own marginalized identities or those for whom you are already a strong ally, please submit suggestions to <https://forms.gle/E9eRqZJLgVagbDZ9> or email me directly at [virginiag@smokyhillumc.org](mailto:virginiag@smokyhillumc.org).*