

# Arab Muslims

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The term *Arabs* initially referred to the ancient nomadic tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, which is considered their ancestral home. Their most sacred religious shrine is also located there, the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Today the term embraces some 200 million people, most of whom live in the Middle East and across northern Africa. Others have emigrated to the Americas, Europe, Australia and elsewhere. *Arab* has been extended to include those people who share the Arabic language, customs and Islam, the most powerful force of the Arab world. Although most Arabs are Muslims, they do not make up a single race. The formation of a Palestinian State would make 22 nations of the Arab world. The international Arab League was formed in 1945.

Arabs have lived for numerous generations in arid regions with few natural resources. During the last two centuries Arabic society has developed an urban character. The discovery of valuable oil deposits in several Arab countries has led to rapid economic growth, to Arabic becoming an official UN language and to changes to the traditional lifestyle.

## What Is Islam?

The people of Queensland are increasingly conscious of being part of a society composed of people from different ethnic backgrounds and beliefs. It is very important to recognise and respect one another's differences and similarities. This will help us understand ourselves as one, though diverse, society.

Muslims believe in one God, Allah, who has neither son nor partner. No-one has the right to be worshipped but Him alone. No-one shares His divinity, or His attributes. God revealed the religion through Muhammad, who is believed to be the direct descendant of Abraham.

The *Qur'an* is the Holy Book of Muslims. It contains many stories that are familiar to Christians and Jews. It also contains scientific knowledge that was discovered by scientists only during the twentieth century.

All able Muslims are required to pray five times every day. Prayers are offered in Arabic. Muslims pray towards the Ka'ba, which is situated in Mecca.

Every year most Muslims must fast by refraining from food and drink from sunrise to sunset, for about 30 days during an Arabic lunar month called Ramadhan. Fasting makes people more aware of the plight of the poor and helps to develop their willpower to discipline their desires. Some people are discouraged from fasting, such as the very young and the old and people suffering from ill health.

Every year, Muslims from different parts of the world converge on Mecca in Saudi Arabia to perform the pilgrimage Hajj. Once in their lifetime, Muslims are commanded to go on this pilgrimage though people in poor health or without financial means are also exempted.

Muslims are not allowed to eat pork meat or the meat of animals of prey. Other meat may be eaten if it is 'halal', meaning that the animal has been slaughtered according to Islamic law. Muslims are also prohibited from drinking alcohol.

## **Women in Islam**

People around the world are often confused about the meaning of Islam and culture. Islam is a religion given by God. On the other hand, culture and customs are created by people and passed on from generation to generation. Through time the boundaries between true religion and culture may have become less clear, leading to the acceptance of some cultural features and customs into the religious belief system of most Muslim societies. This is especially true for Muslim women since in some countries women are not always treated according to the true Islamic laws but are subjected to the customs and culture rule of a particular Muslim country or even their family.

Islam declares women and men are equals. There is no difference between men and women as far as their relationship with Allah is concerned. In the family women are highly protected and the highest respect is bestowed on mothers. Islam also gives women the right of inheritance and of individual independent ownership. Family ties are very important, and Muslim women play major roles within their extended families.

Many Muslim women wear the hijab, a covering that conceals everything except the face and hands.

## Muslims in Queensland

Only a small number of Arabs have settled in Queensland when compared with Sydney, where two-thirds of Australia's Arab population live. In addition, some of the settlers who were born in Arab countries may be Greeks from Egypt or former French colonists from Algeria. They left long ago as part of the process of decolonisation.

Arabs from some countries, notably Iraq, are settling in Queensland for political reasons.

According to the census of 1991 and the one in 1996, Queensland had a Middle East-born and North Africa-born population as shown below. Between the years there was an increase of settlers to Queensland from all source countries and areas.

Country	1991	1996
Bahrain	66	70
West Bank/Gaza Strip	3	78
Iraq	130	278
Jordan	71	144
Kuwait	51	98
Lebanon	1101	1143
Saudi Arabia	63	118
Syria	139	172
United Arab Emirates	41	104
Algeria	131	181
Egypt	1384	1467
Libya	55	78
Morocco	97	136
Sudan	45	121

The majority of Muslim people living in the State come from countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan, South Africa, and Fiji. There are also Australian converts, some of whom are married to Muslim partners who came here as migrants. The

majority of Queensland's Muslim people live in Brisbane while others have settled on the Gold Coast and throughout the State.

The Arab Muslim community in and around Brisbane comprises many well-educated and professional people working in government departments and in educational institutions. They are doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers, accountants and engineers participating in the Queensland work force. Others have their own small businesses such as restaurants, shops or commercial firms. A large number of Muslim men and women staff and students are in Queensland's nine universities.

There are more than twenty mosques in Queensland, and most of them are in the Brisbane area. In the mosque people pray, meet other Muslims and practise their religion. Most Muslims practise Islam in a traditional way and form and maintain personal bonds. Arabs usually follow lives that are deeply influenced by their inherited religion and culture, but they express themselves freely and respect the given Australian cultural and legal framework. Arabs in Queensland feel very much a part of Australian society.

Arab and non-Arab Muslims, especially groups of families, also meet socially. Strong ties are maintained by families originating from specific regions or countries to overcome isolation. They need each other to feel and develop a sense of belonging, perhaps even to compensate for the absence of the extended families they left behind in their countries of origin. Some Islamic and non-Islamic organisations have already been formed in Queensland to assist Arab and other Muslims in maintaining their much needed bond. An Islamic school has been opened in Brisbane to provide education for Muslim children.

In Brisbane, Muslims and their friends can easily find most of their traditional foods. There are several stores and restaurants offering a variety of traditional halal foods.

There are considerable economic advantages for Queensland trade by having Muslims in our community. Some of them are professionally engaged in trade with their former home countries and have a particular understanding of the markets with Muslim populations and their specific requirements.

The first Muslims to come to Queensland in the nineteenth century were the Afghan camel drivers who were forced to live outside of the mainstream society. Today Arab Muslims wish to be seen as part of the

mosaic of the people of Queensland. In a genuine pluralist society everyone can actively and freely participate in the life of a country. Mutual understanding and respect are required by all participants.