

“Arab Heritage in the USA”

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A few weeks ago, in a conversation with our new Arab League Ambassador, H.E. Abdulkhalig Bin Rafea, we talked about the influence of Arab culture in the United States.

Some of you might be surprised to learn the extent to which Arab culture is inextricably tied to America’s heritage, and vice-versa.

For example, consider this: In the top ten list of languages that have contributed the most words to the English language, Arabic is #6.

That’s somewhere between 2,338 words and 6,500 words – depending on whether they worked their way into the English language *directly* or *indirectly*, often via Spanish. We’re talking about everything from Alcatraz, Algebra, and Almanac on one side of the alphabet, to Zenith on the other.

From the Beginning

Arab and Islamic cultures were clearly present at America’s founding. In fact, they were in the New World even *before* America’s founding.

In 1492, for example, Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus depended heavily on the ninth century calculations of Abu Al Abbas Aḥmad Al Farghani. Based in Baghdad, Al Farghani was one of the world’s greatest astronomers and cartographers. Columbus was versed in Arabic which, at the time, was a *lingua franca* for the world.

Fast forward now to 1670 in Boston, when Captain John Smith – yes, of Jamestown fame – played a role in bringing coffee to America. Smith had been exposed to coffee from Mocha, Yemen, during his time with the Ottomans. In seventeenth century Massachusetts, coffee quickly replaced beer as the leading breakfast drink. (Downing beers for breakfast, it’s no wonder that American colonists staged the Boston Tea Party!)

Fast forward again, this time to 1904, when St. Louis hosted the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, otherwise known as the World’s Fair. Many inventions were showcased at that wondrous global gathering, but one in particular changed the course of history for almost everyone.

That’s right, I’m talking about the invention of the ice cream cone, which has been attributed to two Syrian immigrants, Ernest Hamwi and Abe Doumar.

These two fellows were making *zalabia* at the Fair one day when the stand next door, which was serving ice cream on a plate, ran out of plates. They rushed over, deftly wrapped the ice cream in a *zalabi*, and – just like that! – they created a new American tradition that became a sensation at the 1904 World’s Fair.

I love this story because it captures the American immigrant experience: Borrowing from the traditions of the Old World to create and customize something for the New World. We are told that “necessity is the mother of invention,” and this ice cream cone story is all about innovation, timing, Lady Luck . . . and good taste, of course.

Traveling America’s Blue Highways

Over the years, I’ve been privileged to visit all 50 U.S. states, usually by car. Traveling those back roads, which we call “blue highways,” one learns a lot about the heart of America . . . and Americans. I have really come to appreciate what these small communities have to offer from coast to coast.

I am proud to come from the “flyover” states of Iowa and Nebraska. Most air travelers fly right over the Heartland, oblivious to the breadbasket of America. But we don’t mind because we are quietly preserving and celebrating the best quality of life in the USA!

Our VIP tables tonight are named after famous places in the Middle East and North Africa. But these are also *American* towns and cities – typically in flyover country – that take their names from the Arab world: Cairo (Illinois), Palestine (Ohio), Tripoli (Iowa), Tunis (Texas), Casablanca (New Mexico), and Memphis (Tennessee).

Many of these towns were little more than whistle stops on railroad lines. Because they resembled their namesakes in the Arab world, the evocative names stuck. Like the tiny town of Arabia, not far from my family farm in Nebraska. Arabia abuts Nebraska's Sand Hills, which cover nearly 20,000 square miles, with sand dunes towering 300 feet into the sky.

Other communities, by contrast, were established by homesick Americans of Arab descent. These names helped them to create a connection between the old country, which they would never see again, and the United States, which offered the promise of a better life.

There are many such examples, but nobody compares to Lebanon. There are 47 towns and cities named "Lebanon" in the United States, which speaks to the ability of Americans of Lebanese descent to assimilate to their new home in the USA.

There may be 47 Lebanons in the USA, but there is only one Elkader, and it is in my home state of Iowa. The Founding Fathers named the city after Emir Abdulkader al-Jaza'iri, a leader of global proportions and the father of modern-day Algeria.

Discovering Arab Heritage in Unlikely Places

Sometimes, Arab heritage in the United States may be found in unlikely places. Like Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Ancient Philadelphia – the "City of Brotherly Love" – is a site known today as Amman, Jordan.

We know that ancient Carthage is located in today's Tunisia. But did you know that there is a direct connection between ancient Carthage and Washington DC? It is called the Carthage Stone – carved and crafted over a millennium ago – which today occupies extraordinary placement at the top of the Washington Monument.

And then there is California, which acquired its name in a roundabout way from the Arabic word *Khalifa* (“Caliph”).

In the year 1510, during the Inquisition, a Spanish novelist wrote a story about a mythical warrior queen named Califia (derived from *Khalifa*), who ruled over a legendary land called California. This land was famous for its gold, evoking a spirit of great opulence. So, when the Spanish began exploring the mineral-rich lands of today’s West Coast, they called this New World “California.” And the rest is history!

Speaking of California, some of you may remember a movie called “Bagdad Café,” a German film that became a cult classic in Europe. I decided to visit the town of Bagdad, California, on America’s historic Route 66.

Bagdad is a little South of Death Valley National Park, a little West of the Mojave National Preserve, and a little North of Joshua Tree National Park. So, you will not be surprised to learn that Bagdad has the dubious distinction of holding the record for the longest dry streak in the United States: 767 straight days without rain, from 1912 to 1914.

With a welcome mat like that, Bagdad emptied out and eventually turned to dust. But I’m happy to say that you can still visit the Bagdad Café – just down the road in Newberry Springs, California – which is open every day of the week. I recommend the buffalo burgers!

Creation of the U.S. Camel Corps

To the south of Bagdad, near the Salton Sea, I came upon one of the largest sand dune systems in the USA, stretching 40 miles north from the U.S.-Mexico border. This system, called the Algodones Dunes, is biologically unique on a global scale. This site has been used for numerous movies, including *The Garden of Allah* (1936), *The Road to Morocco* (1942), and *Return of the Jedi* (1983).

The Algodones Dunes, with sand dunes that are hundreds of feet high, are reminiscent of comparable ergs in Saudi Arabia. So, perhaps it should be no surprise that Algodones (Spanish for “cotton”) is derived from *Al-Qutn* (Arabic for “cotton”), which we know today as “cotton” in English.

The desert terrain in the American Southwest is better suited to camels than to horses. This helps to explain why the United States Camel Corps (USCC) was established there in 1856 at the initiative of the U.S. Secretary of War, a certain Jefferson F. Davis. The ambitious goal of the USCC was to transport people and freight across the western deserts by camel.

To lead this program, Davis brought a Syria-born camel driver to the USA named Hi Jolly. There are many stories about Hi Jolly, a prospector, desert guide, mail courier, and freight hauler. What is clear is that he endeared himself to local populations in Arizona and California.

Like so many things, the Camel Corps ended when the Civil War began. But the legend of Hi Jolly lived on.

Today, one may visit the Hi Jolly Monument, as I did, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in the year 2011. Like millions of other migrants to the USA who lost their original names, “Hajj Ali” will forevermore be remembered as “Hi Jolly,” his new name for the New World.

Date Production in the “Sahara of the Southwest”

Camels aren’t the only things from the Arab world that have thrived in the “Sahara of the Southwest.” It turns out that this area in California and Arizona is ideal for growing dates, which explains why it is the center of U.S. date production.

Dates grown most successfully in this region are Medjool and Deglet Noor, primarily from Iraq and North Africa. And where one finds dates, I discovered, one also finds date shakes.

Just down the road from the Algodones Sand Dunes, I started seeing signs for date shakes. I was in the middle of nowhere – *this had to be a mirage!*

But there I was, ten minutes later, pulling into “Westmorland Date Shake” in the modest town of Westmorland, California.

Westmorland's population has dropped below 2,000, but Westmorland Date Shake attracts visitors from all over the region.

The proprietor is a fellow named Ahmad Fejleh, and he welcomed me into his shop . . . which is also a grocery store, of course, carrying Middle Eastern delicacies.

It turns out that Ahmad came to the USA from Syria in 1977 and, as a student, he began selling dates to the Muslim community during this Holy Month of Ramadan.

Fast forward to 2007, when he transitioned from wholesaler to farmer/retailer. Three years later, his Aya Farm was certified organic.

Ahmad recently told local media, "I planted the trees and grew the trees. And now, the trees have given us a little fruit and a lot of work."

Al' America: Travels Through America's Arab and Islamic Roots

Some of the factoids that I referenced tonight came from Jonathan Curiel, author of *Al' America: Travels Through America's Arab and Islamic Roots*. Curiel's book is an easy and entertaining read, exhaustively researched.

For example, I would not have known that the home of P.T. Barnum – the greatest showman on earth – featured multiple minarets and was inspired by Moghul Taj Mahal. This extraordinary home – which Barnum called Iranistan – revolved around Byzantine, Moorish, and Turkish architectural styles.

Curiel also points out that The Alamo, a tiny building in Texas that looms large in U.S. history, is styled after Spanish and Moorish architecture of Muslim Andalusia. The Alamo's sister missions near today's San Antonio, according to the U.S. National Park Service, "reflect the architectural traditions of Spain, combining the styles of the Renaissance with Moorish design and craftsmanship."

And it was Curiel who informed me that the favorite book of Elvis was *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran. When Elvis needed solace, he retreated to the calming, illuminating pages of *The*

Prophet. In fact, it is said that Elvis memorized the entire book and could recite it chapter and verse.

Think about that. P.T. Barnum, The Alamo, and Elvis. Three quintessentially American icons that are all linked to the Arab and Islamic worlds in their own ways.

Arab Migration to the USA

Most of us in the USA are descendants of immigrants.

In 1912, 154 Arabs went down on the Titanic – mostly laborers and craftsmen, traveling in steerage, who were on their way to the USA to realize their dream of starting afresh in the New World.

My Lebanese grandfather made that long trip to America by boat during this same time period, and he might well have crossed on the Titanic. Fortunately for me and my family, he came across on a different ship, and his American story – our American story – began at Ellis Island in New York.

The experience of Ahmad Fejleh, the producer of date shakes, is a typical Arab-American success story. Entrepreneurs come to the USA with very little in their pockets. They work hard, they keep their heads down, and they quickly assimilate to American society. In Ahmad's case, he has established a successful family business that stands a good chance of becoming multigenerational.

Arab immigrants – like millions of others who migrated to America – typically retained close ties to family in the old country while also contributing to the well-being and development of local communities here in the USA.

These were some of America's earliest goodwill ambassadors, *citizen diplomats*, who helped to change perceptions – and the world – through their words and deeds.

Immigration has always played an outsized role in the success of the United States. Our nation has benefited from the technology, expertise, innovation, work ethic, and labor of our immigrant communities.

Today, these ethnic communities are an integral part of America's social fabric, our multicultural heritage, enabling us to become the greatest country on earth.

Our Gastronomic Journey Draws to a Close

Food is at the heart of the U.S. – Arab experience, and one could devote an entire book to that topic alone. In fact, some have already done so.

Suffice it to say that certain foods from the Arab world – like hummus, tabbouleh, babaghanouj, and falafel – have become nearly as mainstream in America as pizza, burgers, and hot dogs.

Which brings us back to where we began tonight's gastronomic journey. Our virtual tour across the USA and halfway around the world ends where it began, with the humble ice cream cone.

In that spirit, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being here, and please enjoy your dessert!