

Arabic Cultural Profile – older people

PLEASE NOTE: This profile provides an overview of some of the cultural information relating to the diverse groups of Arabic speaking people who live in the South Eastern Region of Melbourne. This description may not apply to all people as individual experiences may vary. However this profile can be used as a guide to some of the issues that may concern your clients. Information about relevant services & activities is also included.

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Victorian Arabic Social services (VASS) in preparing this profile.

Introduction:

The terms “Arab” and “Arabic speaking people” describe a cultural group defined by a common language, history and heritage. There are 22 different Arabic states who are members of the Arabic League. They are: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen and United Arab Emirates. They are further divided into three geographic areas: the Middle East, Gulf countries and Northern African countries.

The Arabic nation is Arabic speaking and largely Muslim. There is great diversity in the ethnicity of the nation – the Arabic race is the largest group; other ethnicities are Kurd, Chaldean, Assyrian, African, Pharo and Armenian. There is diversity in religious practice as well.

Thus migration from a particular Arabic country may not indicate the migrant’s ethnicity, religion or language spoken at home. Some individuals think of their identity in nationalistic or sectarian terms. Although they speak Arabic and share Arabic culture, some individuals may refer to their identity as Lebanese (national term), Chaldean or Coptic (religious term) or Kurdish (ethnic term).

Arabic is spoken by most of the ethnic and religious groups of the Arabic world and is the language of the Holy Book of Muslims Al Qur’an (Koran).

Migration:

- The migration and settlement experience of Arabic speaking migrants varies greatly according to the social circumstances and the country from which they have come.
- In terms of total population numbers Lebanon and Egypt continue to be the largest source countries of overseas-born Arabic people in Australia.
- Wars and other civil strife in the Middle East affected the flow of migration to Australia.
- Recently (2006) there has been a flow of refugees coming from Iraq and Sudan.
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Migration from Lebanon:

- Lebanese migrants came in three waves: the first was before and after World War I due to economic factors, the second wave was the effect of World War II and the third wave was the immediate effect of the civil war in Lebanon in 1975.
- Majority of the two first waves were from Christian backgrounds with some from Muslim background and some number from Druze (a sect that originated from Islamic religion one thousand years ago), while the majority of the third wave were from Muslim background.
- Lebanese born and Lebanese descendants in Australia from all backgrounds now exceed 200,000. Early migrants worked in factories, as shopkeepers and in some professional positions, while a large number of recent migrants who came under Family Reunion Program face unemployment problems. Skilled Lebanese migrants integrated well into the community and into professional work. Depending on their socio economic background, some of the second generation young Arabic people face issues that are common to Australian youth in addition to issues related to being part of a disadvantaged community.
- Arabic migrants of the two first waves are reaching the retirement age now.

Migration from Egypt:

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- Egyptian born migrants who settled here after the World War II between 1947 and 1971 were Coptic Christians with some Egyptians from European backgrounds (eg. Greeks).
- In a smaller numbers, Muslim Egyptians arrived between 1970's and 1980's.
- Despite the fact that 90% of Egypt's population is Muslim, the majority of those who migrated here before 1976, and the more recent arrivals, are from Christian Coptic backgrounds and generally are well educated.

Migration from Iraq:

- In recent times, Iraq has become the largest source of Arabic migrants to Australia due to Iraq's involvement in the two Gulf wars and the recent "War on Terror".
- Majority of Iraqi migrants came under Humanitarian or Refugee Programs.
- Majority of Iraqi population are from Muslim background (Shia or Sunni), with smaller number being Kurds (Muslim Sunni), Chaldeans and Assyrians (Christians groups). However the majority of Iraqi migrants are Shia.
- The Iraqi in Australia congregate along ethnic and religious lines rather than national lines.

Migration from Sudan:

- Over the last ten years Sudan has emerged as second to Iraq as a source of arrivals.
- Victoria receives a disproportionate number of South Sudanese arrivals into Australia under the Refugee and Humanitarian Program.
- The percentage of Sudanese arriving under the Humanitarian Scheme is approximately 95%; the largest identified group amongst them is the Dinka.
- Other communities are the Nuer, Chollo, and sub communities such as Equatorian and Nasir communities. Most Sudanese read and speak Arabic (Egyptian dialect), the official language of Sudan, in addition to their own tribal languages and dialects.
- The level of English proficiency is very low in general.

Local Demographics: Arabic residents in the South East Region (ABS 2011)

	City of Greater Dandenong	City of Casey	Cardinia Shire
Total population of LGA	135,605	252,382	74,174
Total no. of Arabic speaking residents	3,054	3,596	213
Arabic (inc Lebanese) speaking residents, 55 + yrs.	418	545	15

Language:

- Arab migrants speak a common mother tongue Arabic, however their speech may be specific to a locality and have a particular dialect or vocabulary which also marks a more specific identity. Some of those dialects are Lebanese, Syrian, Jordanian, Palestinian (these are very similar), Egyptian and Sudanese (with a common Egyptian dialect), Algerian, Tunisian, Moroccan (a mixture of Arabic and a bit of Bedouin and French) and Bahraini Omani, Kuwaiti & Saudi Arabian which all have a common Gulf dialect.
- Most Arabic educated migrants would also know one or two European languages (French, English, Italian or Greek).
- Arabic is spoken at home by 287,000 Australian residents (2011 census) making it the fourth (after Italian, Greek, Cantonese) most widely spoken community language in Australia.

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- It is the first community language in Sydney (142,647) where 68 % of Australia's Arabic speakers live. It is the fifth community language in Melbourne (45,736).
- English proficiency amongst educated migrants and Australian born is high while it is very limited with uneducated migrants and the older generation, the majority of whom come from rural background.
- Elderly people also lack English proficiency due to social isolation and lack of social networks outside the community.
- When professionals are communicating with Arabic elderly, it is preferable to use interpreters who can speak the same dialect, eg Lebanese Arabic speaking or Egyptian Arabic speaking. However in general, any Arabic speaker interpreter can be used.

Religion:

- The main religion in most Arabic countries is Islam, the second being Christianity, in various forms.
- Sunni and Shia are the two main streams of Islam. The differences between them arose around a dispute about the succession of leadership following the death of Prophet Mohammed. Shias believe that Imam Ali, cousin of the Prophet, should have been the successor, followed by other members related to the Prophet's family only. However, a leader not related to the Prophet's family who was one of the prophet's closest companions was named as his successor.
- Another religion, the Druze, mainly practiced in Lebanon and Syria, originated from Islam.
- The majority of Christian groups reside in the following Arabic countries: Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Palestine and Iraq. Christian Maronites (Catholic) and Christian Orthodox form 30 % of the population in Lebanon. Coptic Orthodox is a minority group in Egypt and Chaldeans/Assyrians and Christian Orthodox are minority groups in Iraq. There was a small Jewish population in Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq and Morocco before the Creation of Israel and the current conflict between Arabs and Israelis.
- Religious practices are well observed, (such as fasting during Ramadan for Muslims and at Easter for Christians). Muslims pray five times a day at specific times (at dawn, noon, mid afternoon, sunset and in the evening). Friday lunch prayer for men is preferably in their local mosque.
- Wearing the traditional Hijab (head scarf) for Muslim women is a noted practice amongst overseas born and recently, amongst young Australian born women.

Attitudes and issues with ageing:

- The Arabic speaking communities have a high regard for their elders. They are considered a blessing in the family. Their opinion is respected and valued. To care for them is considered as part of the religious duties, in particular for Muslims.
- There is a high expectation that the family looks after their parents at home.
- It is very common for elderly people to look after their grandchildren.
- These attitudes are changing in Australia, due to family members struggling to meet their own economic needs. As a result some of the elderly are becoming isolated, lonely and depressed. Most of the aged people who migrated in the first and second wave used to be factory workers, while the recent migrants in the 90s and to date, rarely worked and were sponsored by their children. The latter groups are more accepting of social welfare services than those in the previous waves.
- To seek help outside the family in order to care for an elderly person might be seen as a failure in their responsibility and obligation to support and care for their elders.

Attitudes to disability and mental illness

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- A strong cultural stigma is attached to mental illness. Many mental illnesses are not considered as such ,eg. depression, therefore people may be reluctant to access mental health services.
- There is now more awareness amongst the new migrants reflecting the changes in awareness back in the homelands.

Customs /Values

- A patriarchal social structure is the norm, although this is being challenged today.
- Family relationships between the nuclear and extended family are very important, family being central to life.
- Elderly members of the family have a strong role in family decision making, but this is changing with Australian born and new migrants.
- Family honor is an important cultural value, and extremely important for people who migrated from rural background.
- A great deal of social life revolves around the family events and religious events.
- Arabic people from all religious backgrounds have established their respective religious and social institutions.
- Wearing black when in mourning is still prevalent.
- Arabic people keep close contact with relatives in homeland and often travel to spend their holidays with overseas families. Many send money to support families, some send medicines.
- Arabic people will offer guests food and drink as an essential part of their hospitality.
- Gender issues can effect relationships with the wider community and should be considered when offering a service, matching where possible a client with a worker or interpreter of the same gender.
- Personal relationship is very important in building trust of services or workers.

Communication Styles:

- Arabic people in general tend to express their emotions quite openly; they have an expressive communication style.They may not use the word 'please' if they are asking for a favor but they will show their politeness in their tone.
- Social gatherings are usually divided into gender groups in traditional communities.
- It is normal that people from the same gender (men/men, women/women) to shake hands and kiss on the cheek. In some exceptional and modern life style families those rules might change.
- With Muslim women who are wearing hijab and Muslim men, there may be reluctance to shake hands with opposite gender. It is advisable that workers do not initiate the move and leave it to the Muslim person to decide.
- Arabic people are very sociable. Family visits and gathering are very common.
- Arabic people might show their appreciation in return to a service provided to them by expressing lots of blessing words.

Health Beliefs and Practices

- Arabic people may use western medicine concurrently with herbal remedies or traditional healing practices.
- Elderly people may ask professional health workers for advice on a variety of health matters even unrelated to their field of expertise. Some uneducated Arabic people might accept the advice of a friend about the type of medicine they need to take.
- Doctors and qualified medical people are well accepted and respected by Arabic speaking community members. Medical diagnosis should be given to the closest family member preferably older son or daughter.
- Elderly people may face difficulty reading health information and promotional materials in Arabic as many of them might be illiterate in their first language.

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- People prefer to communicate through a personal contact who can speak the same dialect.

Naming Conventions:

- Older Arabic people prefer to be addressed by “Um” for women and “Abu” for men, and adding the name of their elder son eg.UM Hassan (the mother of Hassan), Abu George (the father of George) as a sign of respect. It is always advisable to check with the elder person on how to address them. Abu? Or Um? Otherwise address them as Mr. and Mrs. or if a doctor, as Dr.
- Members of the same family from Iraqi or Egyptian background may have a different surname because they sometimes use the name of the person’s granddad as a surname instead of the family name.
- Younger generations call their older relative as Aunty or Uncle out of respect.

Greetings:

English Greeting	Arabic	Closest English Pronunciation
Hello	مرحبا	Marhaba
Good Morning	صباح الخير	Sabahelkheir
Good Afternoon	مساء الخير	Massaelkheir
Goodbye	مع السلامة	Ma’aelsalama
Yes	نعم	Na’am
No	لا	La
Thankyou	شكرا	Shoukran

Key Arabic Festivals /Significant dates:

- Independence dates for each of the Arabic countries are celebrated according to the respective national calendar.
- Most of the other celebrations are based around religious occasions.
- Muslim’s celebrations and events are calculated according to the Islamic lunar calendar (called Hijriah year).The calendar marks the important event of the prophet Mohammad’s migration to Madinah and the beginning of an Islamic state in Madinah (a city in what is now Saudi Arabia). The Hijrah year coincided with the year 622 A.D.
- Most important for all Muslims is Ramadan (the fasting month) followed by Eid Al-Fitr coming at the end of Ramadan. Eid Al Adha comes two months and ten days later when Muslims are asked to perform the duty of pilgrimage to Mecca.
- Ramadan is the most important religious occasion for all Muslims.It is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. It is a blessed and holy month because it is the month in which the first verses of the Qur’an were revealed to Muhammad.Furthermore, Ramadan is the month in which Muslims fast daily from dawn to sunset to develop piety and self-restraint.Each year Ramadan occurs 10 days earlier than the previous year because it follows the lunar calendar (The lunar year is 10 days shorter than the western or Gregorian calendar that we follow)
- Muslims mark Ashoura, the 10th day of the month of Muharram in the Islamic Calendar. Ashoura commemorates the martyrdom of Husaynibn Ali, the grandson of Muhammad at the Battle of Karbala and it is for Shia day of mourning.
- For Christian Arabs you can refer to religious observances practiced by all Christians in general eg. Christmas and Easter, noting that Coptic Christians celebrate Christmas on the 7th of January and according to the Eastern Church calendar they also celebrate Easter at a different time.

Services & Activities useful for older Arabic people in the South East Region of Melbourne

Organisation/Contact	Services/Activities
Victorian Arabic Social Services	

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<p>(VASS)C1, 1-13 The Gateway Broadmeadows Vic 3047 Tel: (03) 9359 2861 Fax: (03) 9359 2899</p> <p>Email: mail@vass.org.au</p> <p>VASS South East Office Fridays Southern Migrant & Refugee Centre 39 Clow Street Dandenong 3175 Ph:97671995 Fax:97068830 Iman Allaf 0421990216 Maisaa Olabi 97985227</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Strengthening Program • Information and Referral • Healthy Ageing Program • Planned Activity Group on Thursdays (older Casey residents only) <p>Eligibility: South Eastern Region</p>
<p>Coptic Hostel 18 St. Kyrillos Place, Hallam, 3803</p> <p>Phone: 9796 3018 Fax: 9796 4323 www.coptichostel.org.au</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Residential Aged Care Facility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low and Low Care • Culturally tailored services including meals
<p>Islamic Society Of Melbourne Eastern Region (ISOMER) 1273 Wellington Rd Lysterfield 3156 Ph: 97529455</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Retirement Home for Elderly</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Multicultural facility</p>
<p>Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre</p> <p>39 Clow Street Dandenong 3175 Ph: 9767 1900 Fax: 9706 8830</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multicultural PAGs core and high • Positive Ageing Programs- strength training, warm water exercise and tai chi • Outing Groups • Carer Support Program • Volunteer Visiting Program • HACC Access and Support • Community Visitors Scheme <p><i>Eligibility:</i> <i>Greater Dandenong, Casey & Cardinia</i></p>
<p>Vision Australia 454 Glenferrie Road Kooyong Ph: 9864 9533 Fax: 9864 9544</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arabic Telelink Program • Free <p>Open to all HACC clients Operates weekly</p>

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<p>Contact for CALD Telelink Ph: 1800 458 555 or 9864 9555</p>	
<p>Arabic Women Seniors Group</p> <p>Jan Wilson Community Centre Halton Rd Noble Park North</p> <p>Contact : Iman Allaf :0421990216</p> <p>Arabic Men Seniors Group Planned Activity Group MacKay St Centre Contact: Ziad Nachar 97985227</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social, recreational, educational and cultural activities. • Referral to appropriate services and information provision. Meets every Thursday , 11.00am -1.00 Pm • Social, recreational, meeting for Arabic speaking men • Occasional meeting on Tuesday 10 am -12.00 noon
<p>Arabic Senior Citizens Group c/o New Hope MRC 40 Grattan St, Prahran 3181 Contact: Mona Jabbour, by leaving message for her at New Hope MRC. Tel: 9510 5877- 0411470919</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social, recreational, educational and cultural activities. • Referral to appropriate services and information provision. Meets every second Monday.
<p>Australasia Coptic Society Contact person Secretary Raafat Grigis Mobile 0402036338</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lunches, social activities, board games, information, art and craft, outings Meets every second Sunday 2.00pm - 9.00pm
<p>Antiochian Community Support Association (ACSA)</p> <p>32 34 Plunkett Rd. Dandenong 3175</p> <p>Contact: Margaret Kharoufeh Ph: 97922066</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Senior Citizen Group</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arabic speaking seniors • Social interaction, guest speakers <p>Meets every second Friday, 10.00 – 12.00 pm</p>

*** This resource list of services (other than Council HACC), has been prepared for aged care staff in the Council areas of Greater Dandenong, Casey and Cardinia. Some services and activities listed are in fact available to residents beyond these three municipalities.**