# British Arabs: Identity, Politics and Community

Results of an exploratory survey by the Atlantic Forum

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## The Atlantic Forum
### Open Source Thinking

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# Contents

# Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a pioneering exploratory survey of Arabs in Britain, which has important implications not only for this community and its representatives, but also for key political actors in the UK.

Based on a diverse sample of 355 Arabs living in Britain, representing 22 nationalities, the study provides a wealth of information on a group about which very little reliable information was previously available.

The results confirm that the term "British Arab" is a meaningful one with which people of Arab ethnicity living in Britain do identify, regardless of their national origin. They also indicate a strengthening of pan-Arab identity within the community over time, with the youngest respondents, many of whom will have been born in the UK, being most likely to express the strong view that their Arab identity was important to them.

Although the overall sense of "Arabness" emerging from the findings was very strong, respondents also reported a high level of personal interaction with non-Arabs, demonstrating that strong identification with the Arab community co-exists with successful integration into the wider British community. It was also found that a substantial minority of the sample also trace their background to white ethnicity, which suggests that a significant amount of inter-marriage may have been occurring over time between the British Arab community and the native British population.

While many British Arabs consider their own identify as both British and Arabs to be clear, however, many appear unsure about how cohesive the British Arab community as a whole is. Relatively few were involved with or aware of British Arabs organisations and most expressed fairly low levels of personal involvement in the British Arab community and its politics.

Most respondents recognised, however, that a British Arab organisation could perform a large number of important roles for the community, such as speaking with a unified voice and lobbying the government on domestic and foreign policy issues.

The research findings challenge the commonly held view that this community has very low levels of participation in British politics, as it was found that political interest and participation rates among the sample were close to those reported for the UK population as a whole. Moreover, a significant minority reported a high level of political participation, such as being actively involved in a political party.

Although many respondents expressed optimism that politics could address social problems and change society for the better, and saw UK politics as relevant to their own lives, almost half said that they didn't identify with any British political party, and many expressed the view that politicians don't listen to them or represent their interests.

When asked to choose which UK political party most closely represents the interests of British Arabs, there was a wide spread of results, but the Liberal Democrats came out top with a quarter of respondents opting for this party. However, respondents were most likely to identify personally with the Labour Party or the Liberal Democrats.

The specific political issues identified as most important to the respondents were the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the War in Iraq, UK policy towards the Middle East, Health and Education. For the Arab community within the UK, the most pressing issues were seen as the need for greater unity and cohesiveness among Arabs in Britain and to address problems of discrimination.

Around a third of respondents had experienced at least one form of harassment or discrimination relating to their race or religion, and many had experienced more than one

form. Most had experienced negative public portrayals of Arabs, for example in the media, advertising or political speeches. Only 10% had not experienced any form of harassment, discrimination or negative public portrayals of Arabs or of their religion in the UK.

This study has important implications for the British Arab community and its representatives as well as for UK politicians and policymakers, the media and many other social actors. For the UK government, for example, there is a need to proactively tackle the problem of discrimination and racism towards Arabs, and to generate better official data on this group. Political parties should consider cultivating stronger links with the British Arab community and addressing their domestic and foreign policy concerns, in order to gain political support from this group. There is a clear need for British Arab organisations to be more proactive in raising awareness of their role among the community and to represent the interests of British Arabs more effectively in the UK political arena.

As well as generating a wealth of information about the British Arab community, the study provides a very successful research model for further research among this community, as well as identifying key issues on which future studies might focus. It is recommended that further research in this area might include a larger-scale national survey of British Arabs, as well as qualitative research to investigate the issues arising from the study in more depth.

# Foreword

As the introduction to this groundbreaking report by the Atlantic Forum notes, Arabs have a long history in the United Kingdom, stretching back at least to Roman times.

Modern British Arabs are a diverse community, tracing their heritage not only to all the countries of the Arab world, but beyond it, to parts of Europe, Asia and Africa, as well as to communities in England, Scotland and Wales. Some have long-standing links with the United Kingdom; others are more recent arrivals, for work, education or the chance to build new lives. They are, as this report highlights, proud to call themselves British and proud to call themselves Arabs.

Over many years, the Arab community has played a significant and positive role in the UK, achieving at the highest levels of medicine, business and academia, as well as making valuable contributions in the fields of entertainment and sport.

We share important common values: an emphasis on education and a belief in the importance of family and community. And we share the common goal of building a strong, safe, prosperous Britain. British Arabs are also an important bridge to the modern Arab world, with which the UK maintains long-standing and deepening ties.

Despite this, surprisingly little is known definitively about the British Arab community. Unlike larger ethnic minority communities, comparatively little research has been done on the political identities and beliefs of Arabs in Britain and little consideration given to the challenges this community faces. As politicians, we need to continue to work together with the British Arab community to improve and encourage representation of Arabs in public life.

This exploratory survey is an important first step in understanding this community. I hope it will provide politicians and the media with valuable information with which to understand this growing group, pave the way for further research and aid in the continuing contribution of the Arab community to British society.

**John Austin MP**

# Introduction

Arabs can be defined as a group of people who share a common heritage and culture and who have evolved over the Millennia with dynamism and the wheel of history. Their roots, like Aramaic, the source of the Arabic language, have grown not only deeper and deeper, but have spread wider and further than any other civilisation and, in so doing, absorbed extensive cultural feeds throughout the generations ... The Arab identity... is a sense of belonging rather than a rigid racial code, which in this multicultural era is a positive concept with all the merits to flourish in a democratic multicultural Britain.[1]

This description of Arabs, from the National Association of British Arabs, accurately portrays the rich history and geographical expansion of the Arab community, but the reference to a "sense of belonging" raises questions about the extent to which Arabs in present-day Britain form part of a cohesive group with a shared identity, not to mention whether the description of a "democratic and multicultural Britain" is one which British Arabs can relate to.

In fact, although links between the Arab world and the UK go back centuries, and Arabs have lived in substantial numbers in Britain since Yemeni sailors arrived here during the 19th century, very little is known about Britain's present day Arab community. Since "Arab" is not used as a classification in the census or in most ethnic monitoring systems, and "place of birth" data cannot be used to determine racial identity, no accurate statistics exist on the numbers of Arabs living in Britain or on their characteristics and views. NABA reports that there are half a million Arabs living in the UK, but that figure is not certain. The lack of statistical data on the Arab community means that their specific cultural needs cannot be taken into account when planning services at local level, such as education and health or funding for community facilities.

Because no one knows much about the British Arabs, it is also easy for politicians to overlook their interests and concerns and for the media to misrepresent them. To exacerbate this problem, the Arab community in the UK reportedly has low levels of participation in British politics: NABA reports that there are no Arab parliamentarians and few at local government level, and argues that their views therefore go unrepresented in electoral structures. The low level of political participation among British Arabs has been attributed to a range of factors including inexperience of exercising their citizenship rights due to a lack of political freedom in their home countries. The events of 9/11 and their experiences or awareness of Islamophobia may also deter British Arabs from being politically active.

According to the NABA website as well as other sources, British Arabs commonly experience a wide range of racism and discrimination, which take a range of forms such as direct racist attacks, misrepresentation in the media, and economic discrimination in the labour market.

The practicalities of this discrimination manifest themselves through the media, the entertainment industry, through political marginalisation by the Government and political parties, hate speech and in economic discrimination.

Yet most of the information we have about Arabs in Britain is anecdotal in nature or based on small-scale research. We don't really know much at all about the characteristics of the community, what their experiences are of living in Britain and what their views and concerns are on political issues.

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1 Jalili, I. (1999). A Romanticized Definition of Arabs. Retrieved from http://www.naba.org.uk/.

## The Study

This study by the Atlantic Forum, a London-based independent think-tank, attempts to fill in some of the information gaps about the British Arab community, by collecting survey-based data from Arabs in the UK. Conducted between spring and winter 2008, the survey focused on three main areas that are crucial to a better understanding of this community and their interests:

- Identity: Who British Arabs are and how they define themselves.

- Political Beliefs and Parties – What British Arabs think about politics, what issues matter to them and which political parties they like and dislike.

- Community & Activism – What do British Arabs think the biggest challenges for their community are – and how do they think they can be solved?

### Survey Methods and Responses

A self-completion survey questionnaire was distributed to everyone on the mailing lists of major British Arab organisations. The survey included more than 30 detailed questions, aimed at exploring British Arabs' sense of identity and community, and their political participation in the UK.

Recipients were invited to forward the questionnaire to other British Arab friends and contacts. The questionnaire was also distributed via Facebook, a popular social networking site among younger Arabs.

A total of 355 completed or partially-completed questionnaires were received, which is considered to be a very good response to a survey of this type. For most questions, there were at least 255 usable responses, and for many there were 355 usable responses.

The use of English rather than Arabic for the survey questionnaire, its electronic distribution via the internet, and the concentration of British Arab organisations in the London area may have resulted in the under-representation of some segments of the British Arab community.

Despite this limitation, which should be taken into account when interpreting the findings, the study still represents a major contribution to improved knowledge about British Arabs.

# 1. Identity

## Who are the British Arabs?

The lack of an Arab classification in the UK census and official surveys and monitoring means there is lack of accurate information on the overall numbers and socio-demographic characteristics of Britain's Arab community.

Estimates of the overall number of Arabs in Britain vary wildly, NABA puts the figure at around half a million, but another online source reports that only around 104,000 individuals in England and Wales claimed some Arab, North African or Middle Eastern ethnicity in the UK census, or around 176,000 people based on place-of-birth information.[2]

Data from a statistical report commissioned by the Greater London Authority provides evidence of a major gender imbalance within a number of nationality groups, notably the Algerians and Yemenis, in which the vast majority are male. The GLA survey also provided evidence on the socio-economic distribution of Arabs in London, revealing that many are significantly over-represented compared with the general population in professional and managerial jobs, but also differences between nationality groups within the Arab population in terms of their occupational profile. This study found that students were disproportionately over-represented among the London-based Arab population, particularly in the case of some nationality groups such as Kuwaitis, Omanis and Saudis[3]

Although the present study is not based on a representative sample of Arabs in the UK, it does have wider geographical coverage than the GLA survey. Moreover, there is no particular reason to suspect that any nationality group should be under-represented in the study (although some groups may be somewhat over-represented due to the sampling methods). The following sections describe the sample in terms of their socio-demographic and economic characteristics, and add to what is currently known about the characteristics of British Arabs.

## Gender, Age & Geography

Overall, roughly half of all respondents who provided information on their gender (n=254) were male (54.7%) and the remainder female. 46.5% said they had been born in the UK, although 3.5% (9 respondents) did not answer this question.

The sample included a good spread of respondents by age group, as shown in Figure 1.1. The majority were aged either 26 to 40 (39%) or 18-25 (35%) but all age groups were represented.

2Economic & Social Research Council (n.d). About British Arabs. Downloadable paper on Citizenship, Community & Integration: Perspectives from Arab American & British Arab Activists website. Retrieved from http://www.arab-communities.org/downloads/about-british-arabs.pdf.

3Economic & Social Research Council (n.d). About British Arabs. Downloadable paper on Citizenship, Community & Integration: Perspectives from Arab American & British Arab Activists website. Retrieved from http://www.arab-communities.org/downloads/about-british-arabs.pdf.

**Figure 1.1**
Age distribution
of respondents
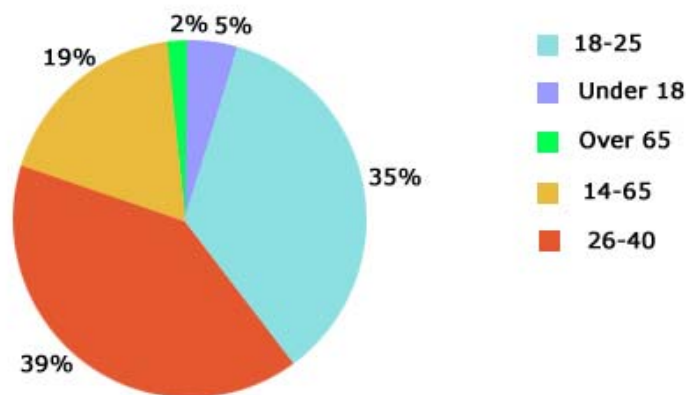


As might be expected due to the sampling methods, more than half (56.7%) of respondents were living in London. However, most areas of the UK were represented, with substantial minorities of respondents living in other parts of the South East (9.1%), the West Midlands (7.5%), Yorkshire and the Humber (7.5%) and the North-West (6.3%). This reflects what is already known; that the largest Arab communities outside of London and the south east are in Liverpool, Birmingham and Sheffield.

## Language, Education & Employment

When asked about the primary language of communication used with friends, family and at work, a difference emerged in relation to the main language used in different contexts. With family, Arabic rather than English or another language was reportedly used as the primary language by nearly two thirds of respondents (64.2%), yet 80.7% reported using English as their main language of communication with friends, perhaps reflecting high levels of friendships outside the Arab community. Perhaps unsurprisingly, nearly all respondents (96.1%) used English as their primary language of communication at work.

In providing information on their educational qualifications, the respondents were shown to be an extremely highly qualified group, on the whole. Incredibly, 83.1% were educated to at least first-degree level, and 94.5% had at least A-levels. For the UK population as a whole, in contrast, it was reported that in Spring 2003 only 16.3% had a degree or equivalent, and 48.9% had A levels or higher.[4]

If this sample were indeed representative of the whole Arab community in the UK, it would be by far the highest educated ethnic group in Britain. Although there are likely to be inherent biases in the sample, for example due to the inclusion of individuals who are in the UK specifically for the purpose of education, and the over-representation of those with access to computers and the internet, the findings still suggest that British Arabs are on the whole a very well-educated group.

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4 National Statistics (2003). Population of working age by highest qualification, spring 2003. Retrieved from http://www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=7743.

**Figure 1.2**
Highest educational level of respondents
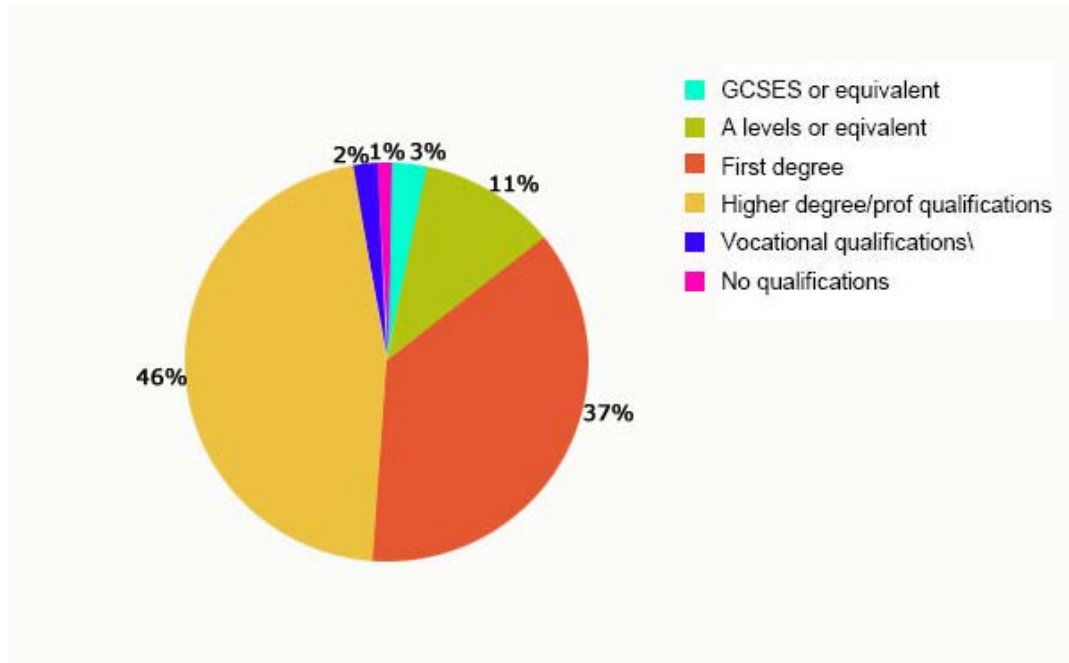


Respondents were also asked in which sector they had most recently worked. Although the possible range of answers was based on sectors of employment rather than types of jobs, the responses provide further support for the suggestions that the Arabs covered by this study are a well-qualified group of relatively high socio-economic status.  Although the largest single category were students (18%), significant percentages said they were most recently employed in medical or scientific jobs (13.8%), management, professional and related jobs (12.2%), the financial industries (8.7%), creative industries (11.4%) or teaching (7.5%).

## Cultural, Racial, Ethnic and Religious Identity

Country of birth information from the British census suggests that there may be particularly large numbers of Arab people in England and Wales originating from Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, Algeria, Yemen and Syria.  This was largely borne out by the results to this study. Although not based on a representative sample, the results do suggest that the survey has successfully covered all main nationality groups in the Arab community.

Altogether, 22 different countries of origin were represented in the sample by at least one respondent. However, the largest percentages of the 355 respondents were from Egypt (36.1%)[5], Iraq (19.7%), Yemen (11%), Lebanon (10.7%) and Palestine (10.4%). Other countries that were fairly well represented included Syria (4.8%) and Saudi Arabia (3.9%), while 3.9% of the sample reported having "mixed ancestry".

However, when asked specifically in a different question whether they traced their background to a different (non-Arab) ethnic group, 170 respondents indicated that this was the case, with more than half of these (n=90) saying they also trace their background to white ethnicity.

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5 A large number of Egyptian organisations participated in the survey, which may have skewed the results. It is our belief that a more representative sample would show the percentage of Egyptians among British Arabs to be closer to the percentage of Iraqis in this sample.

Further investigation of the data revealed that, of these 90 respondents, 40% (n=36) said that they mainly traced their background to Egypt. The remainder were spread across a range of Arab or Middle Eastern backgrounds, with the largest numbers from Iraq (14 respondents), Yemen (11) and Lebanon (8). All age groups were well represented among these 90 respondents, indicating that finding is not likely to be related to generational factors.

However, two-thirds of the respondents claiming some white ethnicity had been born in the UK, compared with 46.5% of the whole sample. This may indicate that a significant amount of inter-marriage has been occurring over time between the British Arab community and the native British population. If so, British Arabs seem to differ in this respect from other ethnic minorities in the UK, such as south Asians, who commonly marry within their own community.

Around four fifths of respondents (79.2%) to the current study reported that their religion was Islam, with the next highest percentages (9.9%) reporting that they were Christian, or had no religion (6.8%). Both Shia and Sunni Muslims were well represented among respondents, as indicated by responses to a question about religious denomination, with Sunnis unsurprisingly forming a majority since most non-Iraqi Arabs are Sunnis.

## Personal Identity

One of the main objectives of this research was to examine how British Arabs define themselves, in terms of ethnicity and other factors. Respondents were therefore asked how they would describe their own identity, against a list of possible factors based on ethnicity and on other ways of defining one's identity. First, they were asked to tick all those listed factors which they felt described their identity, then a subsequent question asked them to indicate how they describe their primary identity.

The distribution of answers to both questions is shown in Figure 1.3.

Of all the factors listed, "British Arab" was used by the highest percentage of respondents (26.5%) to define their primary identity; this was also cited as at least one of the factors describing their identity by almost half of all respondents (46.2%). These findings therefore confirm that the term "British Arab" is a meaningful one with which people of Arab ethnicity living in Britain do identify, regardless of their national origin.

At the same time, nationality is clearly important as a factor defining the personal identity of many people within this group. An individual Arab nationality (e.g. Lebanese, Egyptian) was the factor cited as defining their primary identity by the second highest percentage of respondents, 20.8%, and more than a quarter indicated that their nationality was one of the factors defining their identity, whether this was defined in terms of a single Arab country nationality (27% gave this response) or a mixed British-Arab country nationality (e.g. British-Yemeni) (28.2%).

On the other hand, smaller percentages of respondents indicated that they held a pan-Arab identity, with just 9% saying that "Arab" was their primary identity, although 20.3% cited "Arab" as one of the defining factors of their personal identity.

**Figure 1.3**
Factors defining
Personal Identity
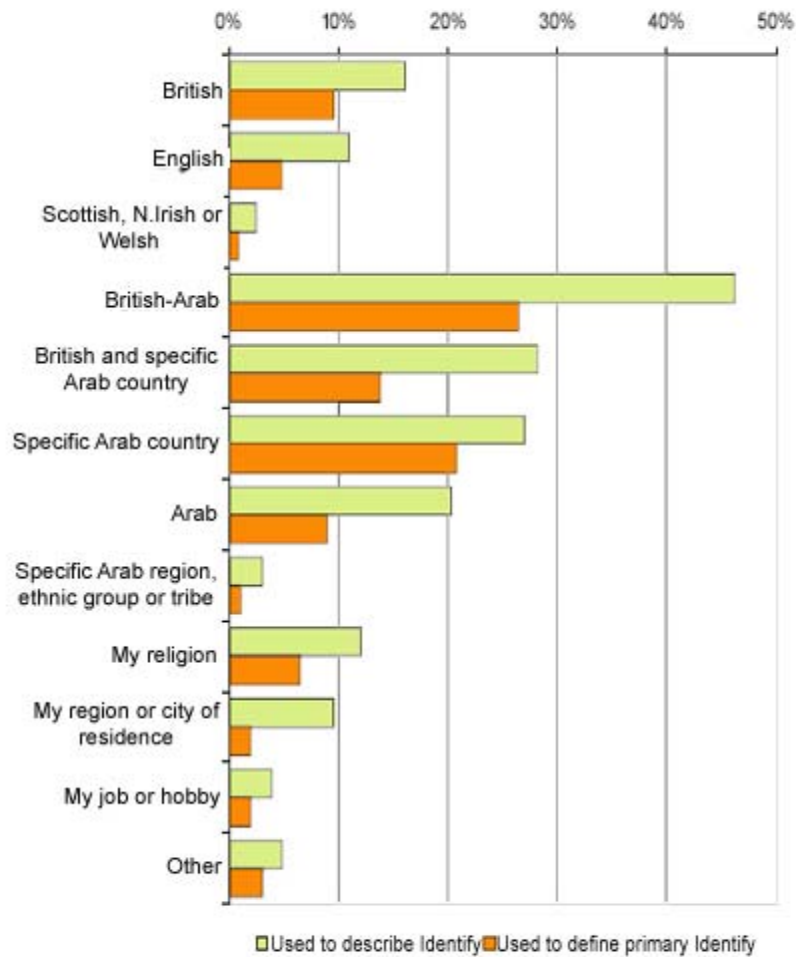


These results also demonstrate the importance of factors such as ethnicity and nationality in defining identity, at least among British Arabs. Only a minority of respondents (6.5%) indicated that their religion was the main determinant of their personal identity, although 12.1% saw this as one of the defining factors. Very small numbers of respondents indicated that other factors such as their job or area of residence defined their identity.

The importance of ethnicity to the self-identity of participants in this study was confirmed by their responses to a question which investigated this more directly: when asked about the importance of ethnic heritage in defining them as a person, more than half (54.4%) said that this was very important, and a further 32.4% that ethnic heritage was somewhat important.

In order to explore any important differences within the British Arab community in ways of defining self-identity, the survey findings regarding the primary determinant of identity were broken down by gender, place of birth (UK/other) and age group. The percentages of each of these sub-groups citing particular factors as defining their primary identity are shown in Box 1.1 (less commonly cited factors excluded). It was not possible to provide a reliable comparison between Muslims and non-Muslims since Muslims accounted for the majority of the sample.

Box 1.1: Definitions of Primary Identity by sub-groups

|  | Males | Females | Born in UK | Born outside UK | Aged under 26 | Aged 26-40 | Aged over 40 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| British Arab | 31.7 | 22.6 | 22.9 | 33.9 | 24.8 | 22.5 | 43.1 |
| British/ Specific Arab country | 15.1 | 17.4 | 17.8 | 15.0 | 19.8 | 10.8 | 19.6 |
| Arab | 7.9 | 11.3 | 8.5 | 9.4 | 11.9 | 9.8 | 3.9 |
| Specific Arab country | 15.1 | 21.7 | 17.8 | 18.9 | 15.8 | 24.5 | 9.8 |
| My religion | 3.6 | 8.7 | 6.8 | 3.9 | 7.9 | 5.9 | 2.0 |
| Base (n): | 139 | 115 | 118 | 127 | 101 | 102 | 51 |

The data indicate that there are relatively few differences within these particular sub-groups of the sample in terms of how they define their primary identity. Moreover, seemingly large percentage differences may not be significant where the bases are of very different sizes. The most interesting findings are that:

- Respondents born outside of the UK (33.9%) are more likely those born in the UK (22.9%) to define their primary identity as "British Arab".

- There is some evidence that respondents aged over 40 are more likely to define themselves as "British Arab" (43.1%) than those aged 26-40 (22.5%) or under 26 (24.8%)

- Male respondents are more likely (31.7%) than female respondents (22.6%) to define themselves as "British Arab" while females are more likely (21.7%) than males (15.1%) to define themselves in terms of a specific Arab nationality.

- Although only a minority of all age groups defined their main identity in terms of their religion, this was notably higher in the case of people aged under 26 (7.9%) compared with people aged over 40 (2%).

## Group Identity

Previous qualitative research into the British Arab community conducted by Nagel (2007) found evidence that members of this community were very willing to integrate into their host society, with integration being defined as mutual accommodation and respect between groups rather than conforming to the majority culture.[6] The current study investigated a range of issues relating to the group identity of British Arab respondents and their relationships with both the British Arab community and the wider British community.

First, respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements regarding the ways in which they relate to the Arab community and other groups.  The distribution of answers for the sample as a whole is shown in Figure 1.4.

**Figure 1.4**
Views on Group
Identity
(n=355)
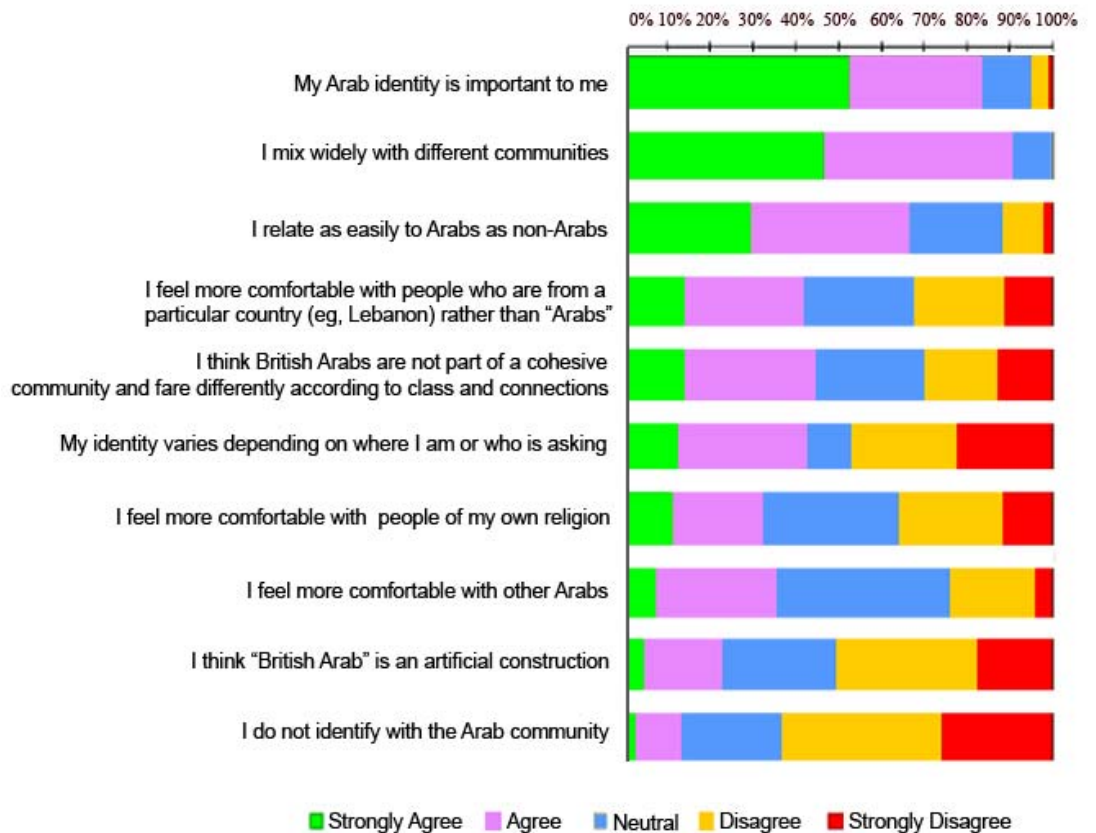


The evidence is that respondents are well integrated with both the British Arab community and with other communities. It indicates a high level of mixing with non-Arabs, no doubt reflecting the nature of everyday life in Britain, since most were employed or still in education, but at the same time a strong sense of identity and belonging to respondents' own racial and religious community.

6 Nagel, C. (2007). Community, Immigration and the Construction of Citizenship. Economic and Social Research Council. Information retrieved from http://www.lboro.ac.uk/service/publicity/news-releases/2007/03_arab_citizenship.html.

Overall, the sense of "Arabness" emerging from these findings is very strong, with the statement "my Arab identity is important to me" receiving the highest percentage of "strongly agree" responses (52.7%), and "I do not identify with the Arab community" receiving the lowest level of agreement. At the same time the spread of answers demonstrates that strong identification with the Arab community co-exists with successful integration into the wider British community. For example, 85.9% of respondents either agreed or agreed strongly that they mix widely with different communities and 66.4% in total agreeing or agreeing strongly that relate easily to both Arabs and non-Arabs.

## Cohesive Community or a Class Apart?

An apparent contradiction emerged here, however, in relation to whether British Arabs form a unified community. Although more than a quarter of respondents had indicated in relation to an earlier question that their primary identity is "British Arab", the survey also revealed that 44.2% of all respondents agreed that British Arabs are not part of a cohesive community and fare differently according to class and connections.

This seems to indicate that while many British Arabs consider their own identify as both British and Arabs to be clear, they are unsure how cohesive the British Arab community as a whole is.

In order to explore these findings further, the data was broken down by sub-groups within the sample. Box 1.2 shows the percentages of respondents who agreed or agreed strongly (in total) with several key statements, within the main sub-groups of gender, age group and whether born in the UK.

Box 1.2: Percentages of sub-groups agreeing or strongly agreeing with listed statements:

| | Males | Females | Born in UK | Born outside UK | Aged under 26 | Aged 26-40 | Aged over 40 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| My identity varies depending on where I am or who is asking | 35.2 | 43.5 | 44.9 | 33.9 | 48.5 | 35.2 | 27.5 |
| My Arab identity is important to me | 84.2 | 90.4 | 94.1 | 80.3 | 92.1 | 86.3 | 78.5 |
| I mix widely with different communities | 87.7 | 87.8 | 86.4 | 88.2 | 85.1 | 90.2 | 88.2 |
| I think British Arabs are not part of a cohesive community and fare differently according to class and connection | 47.4 | 47 | 44.9 | 49.6 | 35.7 | 59.8 | 45.1 |
| Base (n): | 139 | 115 | 118 | 127 | 101 | 102 | 51 |

Again, few differences emerged between sub-groups in the sample in terms of their responses. Two key findings are worthy of note:

- Although a large majority of all sub-groups agreed that their Arab identity was important to them, the percentage doing so was somewhat higher among those born in the UK (94.1%) than among those born elsewhere (80.3%), and was also particularly high (92.1) among the youngest age group

- Respondents aged under 26 were more likely (48.5%) than those aged over 40 (27.5%) to report that their identity varies depending on where they are or who is asking. Females and those born in the UK were also slightly more likely than males and those born elsewhere to give this response.

It is difficult to interpret these findings without further information on why respondents answered the way they did, but the results seem to indicate a strengthening rather than a weakening of pan-Arab identity within the community over time, with the youngest respondents, many of whom will have been born in the UK, exhibiting a clear Arab identity.

The finding that many respondents define their identity in different ways in relation to the context may perhaps be explained in terms of them saying they are from Britain when travelling overseas, or citing their Arab national origin if asked about their identify by a British person in the UK. An alternative explanation is that British Arabs describe their identity in different ways in an attempt to fit in with particular groups, for example calling themselves British when among other British people or Arab when in Arab company. Again, more information would be needed to fully understand the responses to this question.

## Experiences of Discrimination and Racism

It is often claimed that Arabs experience a range of different types of discrimination and racism in the UK, whilst being marginalised in the anti-discrimination legislation and policies which are mainly targeted at black and Asian ethnic minorities. Arab racism, it is argued, takes a wide variety of forms including direct media attacks or stereotyping of the community, racist violence and workplace discrimination. It is to a large extent inseparable from the growing problem of Islamophobia in the UK[7], since many Arabs are also Muslims, and a distinction is seldom made in the media between these and non-Muslim Arabs.

People happily write and say racist things about Arabs that they would not dream of saying about blacks or Jews - and usually they get away with it.[8]

Examples of media anti-Arabism can be demonstrated by headlines from The Daily Star such as 'Murdered by Arab scum', from The Sun such as 'Arab pigs out of Britain', or comments by The Sunday Times such as 'Johnny Arab', all of which incite racial hostility towards Arabs, stereotyping them as alien and murderous ... The common language shared by the UK and USA allows Hollywood films and TV series to be screened in Britain which frequently feature distorted views of Arabs as having values alien to the West, being terrorists or sexual predators bent on molesting blonde White women.[9]

[7] Nichols, M. (2008). Islamophobia in Europe. *Amateur Economists.* Retrieved from http://www.amateureconomists.com/view_articles_detail.php?aid=74.

[8] Whittaker, B. (2004). Another Rule for the Arabs. *Guardian.co.uk.*, January 12, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/jan/12/worlddispatch.race

[9] Jalili, I. (2002). Concerns of the Arab Community in the UK: A letter submitted to the Commission for Racial Equality. December 2002. Retrieved from http://www.naba.org.uk/content/theassociation/Reports/concerns_of_the_arab_community.htm.

This survey enables us to investigate the actual experiences of British Arabs with regard to racism and discrimination.

The findings give considerable cause for concern. When asked whether they had experienced various listed forms of discrimination, harassment or negative public portrayals[10] of Arabs or of their religion, only 35 out of 355 respondents (9.9%) indicated that they had not experienced any of these. The percentages reporting that they had experienced each form of discrimination, harassment or negative public portrayal of their race or religion are shown in Figure 1.5:

**Figure 1.5**
Experiences of
Discrimination
(n=355)
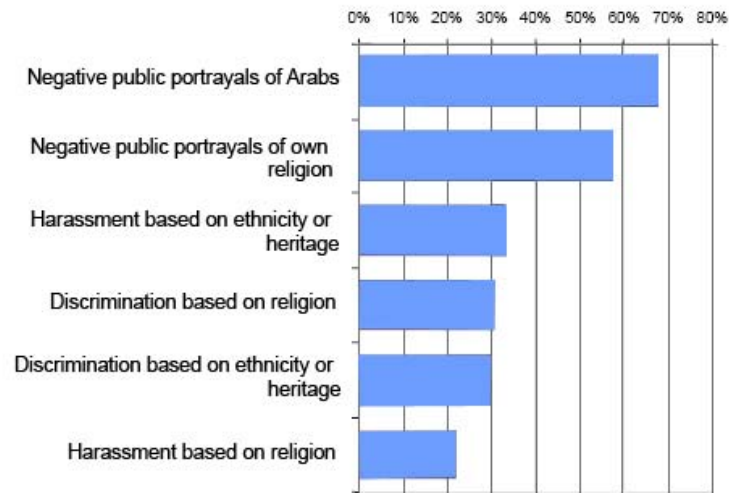


Each of the listed forms of discrimination, harassment or negative public portrayals of their race or religion had been experienced by a fifth or more of all respondents to the survey. The fact that negative public portrayals of Arabs had been experienced by the highest percentages of respondents, compared with harassment or discrimination, suggests that impersonal rather than personal discrimination or racist attacks have been most commonly experienced; nevertheless it is worrying that almost a third of respondents in each case reported having experienced some form of personal harassment or discrimination based on religion or ethnicity in the UK.

The fact that the majority of respondents to this survey were Muslim Arabs makes it virtually impossible to determine whether the harassment and discrimination is being directed at Muslims rather than at Arabs more generally. Even if non-Muslim Arabs are experiencing high levels of discrimination, this may be because they are thought to be Muslims. When examining the findings in more detail it was found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that Muslim respondents were significantly more likely (68.3%) than non-Muslims (16.7%) to report that they had experienced negative public portrayals of their own religion, and

[10] We defined: "Discrimination" as deliberate or indirect practices in public or work environments that disadvantage someone based on their ethnicity, heritage or religion; "Harassment" as behaviour that offends or creates a hostile atmosphere or treating someone less favourably based on their ethnicity, heritage or religion; "Public portrayals" as anything intended for public consumption, ie, newspapers, television, films, advertising, speeches, etc.

also more likely (35.2%) to report having personally experienced discrimination based on religion, compared with non-Muslims (7.1%).

In order to explore the issue of discrimination and racism against British Arabs further, the percentages of various sub-groups reporting personal experiences of discrimination or harassment related to their ethnicity/heritage or religion were examined, including the main nationality groups included in the sample (Box 1.3).

Box 1.3: Percentages of sub-groups who had experienced discrimination or harassment based on ethnicity or heritage

|  | Ethnicity-based discrimination | Religion-based discrimination | Ethnicity-based harassment | Religion-based harassment | Base (n) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Live in London/SE | 25.7 | 26.3 | 34.1 | 18 | 167 |
| Live other UK | 33.3 | 33.3 | 42.9 | 26.2 | 84 |
| Males | 32.4 | 24.5 | 41.7 | 18 | 139 |
| Females | 23.5 | 33 | 31.3 | 23.5 | 115 |
| Aged 25 or under | 21.8 | 31.7 | 29.7 | 22.8 | 101 |
| Aged 26-40 | 25.5 | 23.5 | 45.1 | 18.6 | 102 |
| Aged over 40 | 47.1 | 31.4 | 35.3 | 19.6 | 51 |
| Egypt | 21.1 | 36.7 | 30.5 | 22.7 | 128 |
| Iraq | 32.9 | 24.3 | 31.4 | 20 | 70 |
| Yemen | 30.8 | 30.8 | 61.5 | 23.1 | 39 |
| Palestine | 24.3 | 27 | 32.4 | 21.6 | 37 |
| Lebanon | 28.9 | 18.4 | 36.8 | 21.1 | 38 |

The results indicate that there are few differences between sub-groups in the British Arab population in levels of discrimination and harassment experienced. Where minor differences did emerge, they were primarily related to factors such as age, gender and location of residence rather than between nationality groups (the 61.5% of Yemenis who had experienced ethnicity-based discrimination may be unreliable since it is based on a relatively small number of respondents). This suggests that where discrimination and harassment occur, they are targeted at British Arabs in general, rather than specific nationalities within the Arab community.

Although the differences are fairly minor, the results indicate that British Arabs living in other parts of the UK may be experiencing slightly more discrimination or harassment than those living in London and the South East.  Slightly higher percentages of males than

females reported experiencing more ethnicity-related discrimination and harassment, but more females reported religion-based discrimination, but again the differences are fairly small and might not emerge in a larger, more representative sample. Similarly, although respondents aged over 40 were more likely than younger respondents to report having experienced ethnicity-based discrimination, this may be unreliable due to the small sub-sample size.  On the other hand, it is quite feasible that older British Arabs who have lived and worked in Britain for a longer period of time will have been more likely to have experienced discrimination at some stage of their lives.

# 2. Politics: Political Beliefs and Parties

## Political Perceptions, Participation & Parties

Previous evidence, largely anecdotal, is that there is a low level of participation of British Arabs in UK politics. It has been argued that Arabs ought to raise their levels of political participation in order to be able to defend their interests as citizens in the UK, as well as helping to further Arab causes internationally.[11]

Existing small-scale research with British Arabs, however, has provided some evidence of significant levels of social and political activity at least at local level in the UK, whether this activity is focused on maintaining links with the Arab world or building new socio-political communities.

A great deal of activism in these communities – including charity work, cultural and arts organisations, and political groups – reflected continued identification with the Arab world ... But the study also revealed that not all those questioned were able, or willing, to maintain close links with the Arab world. Many, in fact, were focusing their energies on building communities and social-political networks in the localities where they had settled.[12]

In order to explore British-Arab views on and participation in British politics, and to examine some of the issues underlying these, the survey asked a series of questions about respondents' general views on politics and their perceptions of and interest in British politics.

## Views on the Political Process

Respondents were first asked which of a series of statements most accurately reflected their own feelings about politics.

There was a mix of views on the effectiveness of politics to deal with social issues and problems: more than a fifth of respondents in total who answered this question expressed the view that today's politics are either ineffective (16.7%) or a complete waste of time (5.1%), and the most common single response, given by nearly a third of the sample (30.6%) was that other methods of addressing issues, such as business or religion, are at least as effective as politics, if not more so.

On the other hand, more than a quarter of the sample (25.5%) were optimistic that politics could not only change social problems but can change society fundamentally for the better, while a further 22.1% saw politics as an effective way of dealing with social issues: combining the latter two categories suggests that British Arabs are positively disposed towards politics as a means of addressing social issues and problems.

## Which matters more – British politics or Arab politics?

Exploring this further, the survey asked whether UK politics or the politics of another country were more relevant to them, personally. Almost half (48.3%) indicated that both UK politics and those of another country were equally important to them. Of the remainder, a larger number of respondents indicated that UK politics were more relevant

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11 McRoy, A. (n.d). Operation Arab Vote. Retrieved from http://www.naba.org.uk/.
12 http://www.lboro.ac.uk/service/publicity/news-releases/2007/03_arab_citizenship.html
Nagel, C. (2007). Community, Immigration and the Construction of Citizenship' Economic and Social Research Council.

to them (n=65) than the politics of another country (n=45), perhaps reflecting a greater focus on how politics affects their everyday living conditions in the UK.

Those who said that another country's politics were equally or more important to them than UK politics (n=175) were asked to indicate which of a list of reasons why (as many as applicable). The findings, ranked by popularity as a response, are shown in Figure 2.1.

**Figure 2.1**
Reasons for interest in 'other' country politics (n=175)
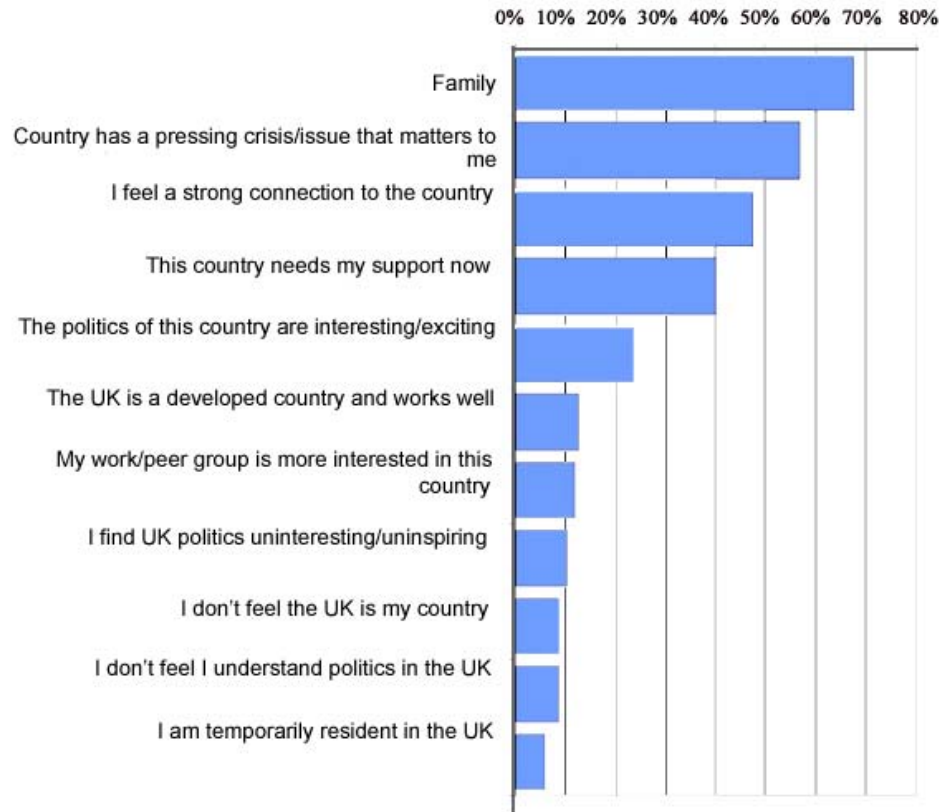


The importance of this is in demonstrating that where respondents identified with the politics of another country, their interest in these was mainly driven by pull factors relating to particular ties with that country, rather than push factors relating to a lack of interest with UK politics or a lack of identification with the UK itself.

## The most important political issues for British Arabs

In order to examine the issues of perceived importance to British Arabs, respondents were asked to rate the importance to them personally of a number of political issues.  The results for the 294 respondents who answered this question are shown in Figure 2.2.

**Figure 2.2**
Importance to respondent of particular political issues (n=294)
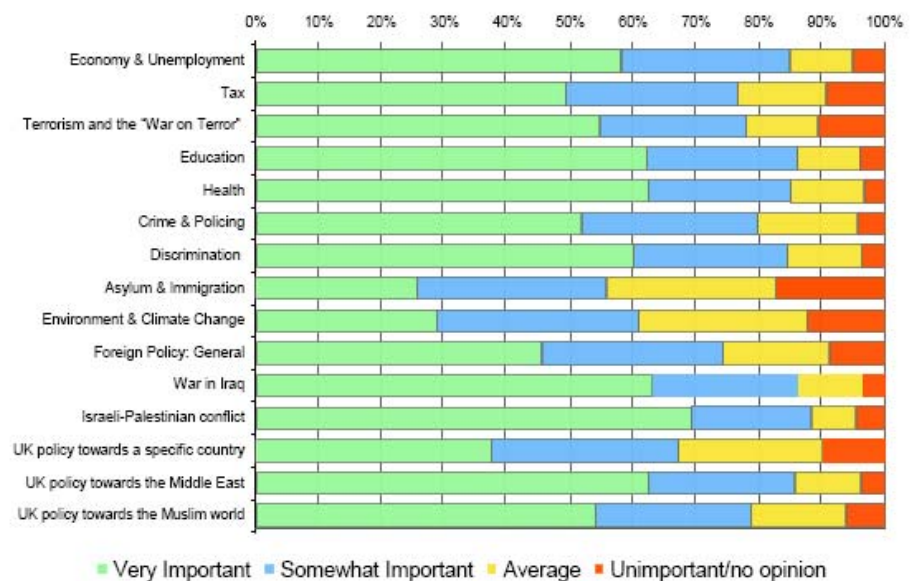


The overall results indicate that British Arabs have a high level of interest in most main domestic and foreign policy issues.  Although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the issue rated as very important by the highest percentage of respondents (69.4%), this was very closely followed by a number of foreign and national policy issues including the War in Iraq (63.3%), UK policy towards the Middle East (62.9%), Health (62.9%) and Education (62.6%). Interestingly, despite high levels of Arabs seeking asylum in recent years, of all the issues listed, asylum and immigration was the issue which the lowest percentage of respondents saw as "very important" and which the highest percentage saw as unimportant or had no interest in (17% in total).

## Political Parties, Policies and Voting

When asked which UK political party they most identify with, almost half of all respondents who answered this question (n=294) said that they do not identify with any British political party. Of the remainder, there was no concentration of support for any one political party, although respondents were more likely to identify with either the Labour Party (17.7% of all respondents) or the Liberal Democrats (15.3%) than the Conservative Party (8.8%). A significant minority (7.8%) said they identified with Respect: the Unity Coalition.

Respondents were also asked which political grouping they felt best represented them – in other words, took their interests into account or was perceived to be on their side, regardless of whether they agreed with the political grouping's policies in general.

Although there was again a split of responses to this question, the Liberal Democrats received a quarter of all responses (24.5%), followed by the Labour Party (18.4%), then Respect: the Unity Coalition (13.3%). Only 11.9% said that UK Muslim organisations (such as the Muslim Council of Britain or the Muslim Association of Britain) best represented their interests, despite the high percentage of Muslims among respondents.

Respondents were next asked which major political party was putting forward the best policies on a range of policy issues, such as the economy and unemployment, tax, the "War on Terror", Discrimination and Foreign Policy. In response to this, the highest percentages of respondents in almost every case said that they did not know which party had the best policies on each of these issues, with the exception of the Economy & Unemployment, and the War on Terror. In the case of these two issues, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats, respectively, were seen as having the best policies by around a third of respondents, although similar percentages in each case also said they did not know which party has the best policies.

Of the 210 respondents who were eligible to vote at the last UK general election, two-thirds (65.7%) had exercised this right, a percentage that is slightly higher than the corresponding figure for the UK general population, which was 59% in 2001. The findings therefore indicate that, as a group, British Arabs are keen to exercise their right to vote but have yet to feel a strong affiliation for any particular political party. This suggests that a political party that was able to articulate a message that resonates with this group might be in a position to secure a significant bloc vote, especially in London, which has a large British Arab community.

## Political Participation

Respondents were asked how they would characterise their own level of political participation generally (n=294). The most common response was average, defined in the questionnaire as "taking an interest in different political parties, voting regularly", but around a third of all respondents (32%) said they had a low level of interest in politics. On the other hand, 12.5% said that their level of political participation was high, in that they were actively involved in a political party or civil society group or regularly made their views known on political issues via the media or to elected representatives, and three percent of the sample (9 respondents) reported their level of participation to be very high, in that they had stood for or been elected to political office.

Recent research on political participation among the UK population as a whole found that 29% had at least a fairly high level of interest in politics. Only 59% of those eligible voted in the 2001 general election, and although levels of non-electoral political participation have been increasing over time, whilst 42% had signed a petition, only 16% had contacted an MP and 5% had contacted the media.[13] Our survey findings indicate, therefore, that far from having particularly low levels of participation in politics, British Arabs are similar to the general UK population in their levels of participation and interest in politics. However, it is not known to what extent this sample is representative of the wider population of British Arabs; the findings regarding political participation may be somewhat skewed due to the sampling methods used, which will have over-represented those who are affiliated with Arab associations, and perhaps the more highly-educated British Arabs. Nevertheless, the study is important in demonstrating the existence of a substantial British Arab community who are actively interested and involved in politics, and also in providing an opportunity to examine the reasons why some British Arabs do not participate in the political system.

13 Bromley, C., Curtice, J. & Seyd, B. (2004). Is Britain Facing a Crisis of Democracy? CREST Working Paper Number 106, June 2004. CREST Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends. Retrieved from http://www.crest.ox.ac.uk/papers/p106.pdf.

## Reasons for low political participation

Those respondents who said that they had only an average or low level of interest in politics were asked about the factors stopping them from being more involved. Respondents could tick as many factors as they wished from those listed, and the results are shown in Figure 2.2.

**Figure 2.3**
Factors stopping respondents becoming more involved reasons for low/average political participation
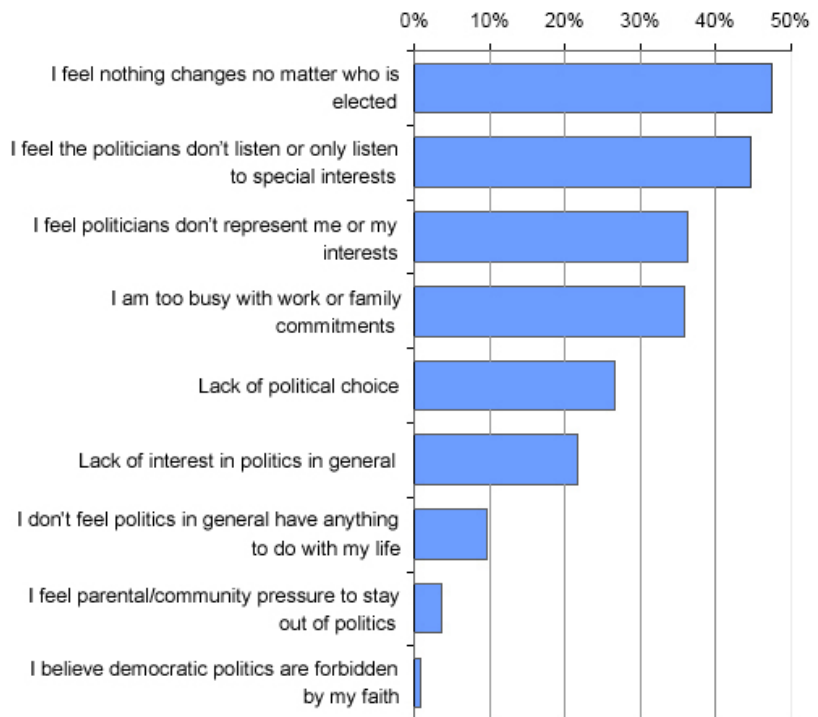


These findings indicate that many British Arabs are not confident that politics can be used to improve their lives or represent their interests. Almost half of those (47.6%) who reported that their level of political participation was just average or low expressed the view that politics does little to change conditions, regardless of which party is in power, and similarly percentages felt that politicians do not listen to them (44.8%) nor represent their interests (36.3%). However lack of time was also commonly given as a reason for not participating more fully in politics (35.9%). On a more positive note, very few respondents indicated that pressure from their family, community or religion prevented them from participating in politics (4.4% in total).

## How to increase political participation

However, when this group of respondents was asked what would encourage them to participate more fully in politics, the results were more revealing. On the positive side, only a small minority (3.9%) indicated that nothing would persuade them to become more involved in politics. Seeing concrete changes in UK policy as a result of political pressure was the factor identified as being most likely to encourage more political participation among the British Arabs in this survey, with 60.4% ticking this response.

Moreover, a large proportion (43.6%) indicated that a greater British Arab presence in politics would encourage them to participate more. More worryingly, the results indicated that a third of participants (32.5%) who do not actively participate in British politics feel

that the UK government is against their interests, community or religion. Moreover, 16% indicated an expectation of being punished if they expressed their opinion, although it is not clear from the available data where they thought the punishment might come from (Figure 2.4).

**Figure 2.4**
Factors that would encourage fuller political participation
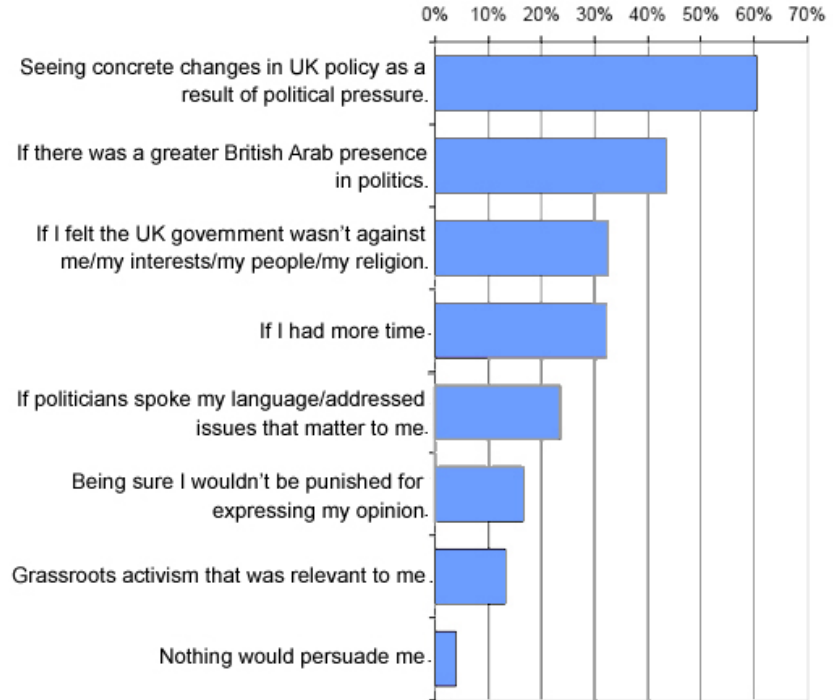
# 3. Community and Activism

## Community Involvement

Respondents were asked how they feel about the British Arab community, in general. The results, shown in Figure 3.1, were very mixed, with a third of respondents overall (33.1%) indicating that they were reasonably or very optimistic about the British Arab community is doing in Britain, while a quarter in total (24.8%) said that they were pessimistic or very pessimistic.

**Figure 3.1**
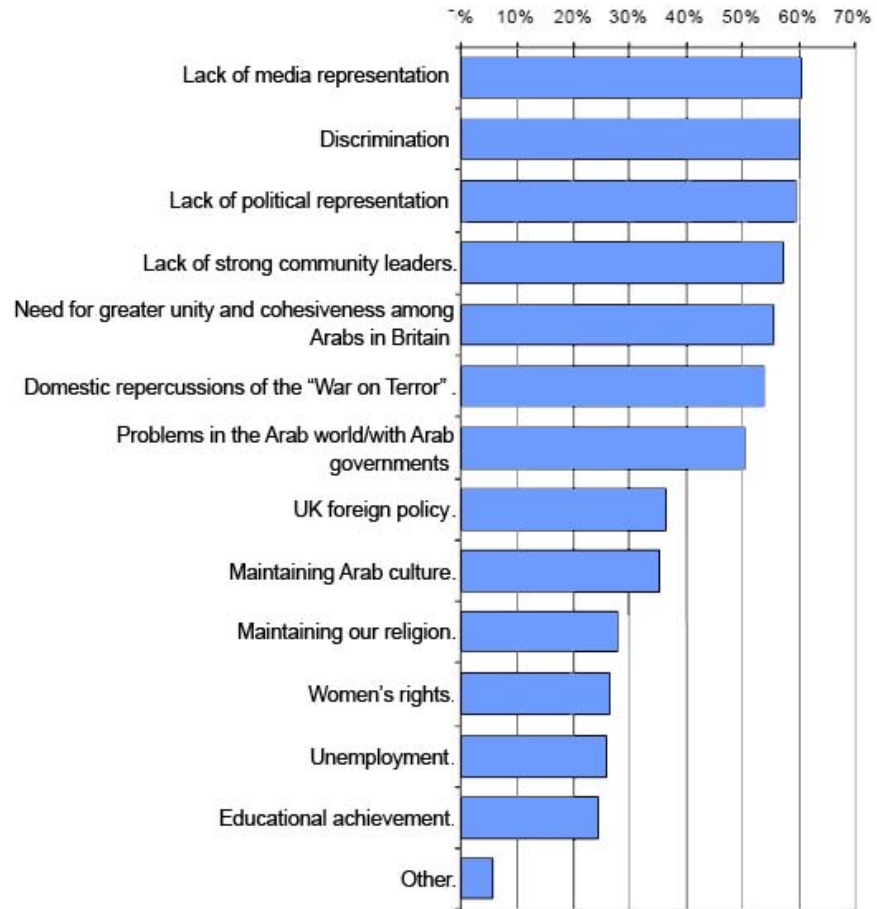Views on the British Arab community
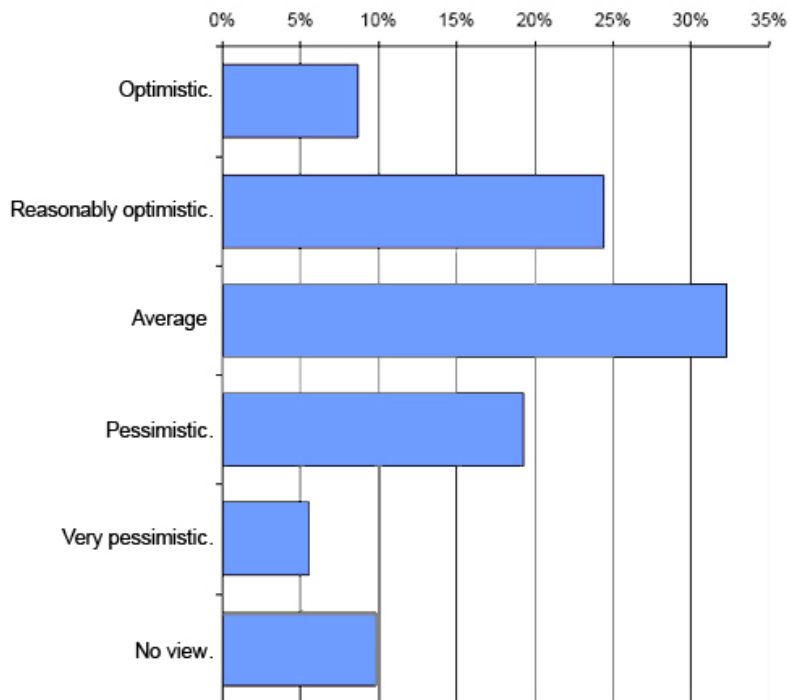


## The most pressing issues for the British Arab community

When asked to indicate which of a list of issues they saw as most pressing for the British Arab community, most of the items listed were ticked by relatively high percentages of respondents, as shown in Figure 3.2.  It is not possible to determine from the survey findings how strongly respondents feel about each of the issues listed, or whether they would have identified them voluntarily as problems or challenges for their community, but the results are particularly useful in providing an indication of how issues compare with one another in term of their significance to British Arabs.

Notably, all the factors listed were cited by at least a quarter of all respondents as being pressing issues for the British Arab community.  Those issues regarded as pressing by the highest percentages of respondents, were lack of media representation (60.6%), discrimination (60.2%), a lack of political representation (59.4%), lack of strong community leaders (57.5%), closely followed by the need for greater community unity and cohesiveness and domestic repercussions of the "War on Terror".

**Figure 3.2**
Most pressing
issues for the
British Arab
community

Just fourteen respondents mentioned "other" pressing concerns for the British Arab community. Asked to specify which, answers included poor integration of the community into British culture, a lack of support and facilities for Arab people, and concerns about Arab youth such as increasing radicalization or the use of drugs and alcohol. The lack of differentiation between Arabs and other ethnic groups (in popular discourse) was also mentioned.

In order to investigate further the views of respondents on the most pressing issues facing the British Arab community, they were asked to indicate which single factor was the most urgent for the community. The top two most urgent issues were identified as:

- The need for greater unity and cohesiveness among Arabs in Britain (15.7% of respondents)
- Discrimination (14.2%)

## What would make the biggest difference in the future?

Next, the survey asked the research participants to indicate which of a list of factors would, in their view, make a positive difference to the British Arab community over the next two to five years. The distribution of responses is shown in Figure 3.3.

Nearly all of the factors listed were seen by a significant percentage of respondents, between one quarter and two-thirds in each case, as being likely to make a positive difference to the British Arab community, with the most commonly-cited factor being "a more positive profile for Arabs in the media". The importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for British Arabs was also highlighted here, with a solution to this being mentioned by the second highest percentage of respondents. Indeed, when asked which single factor would be likely to make the biggest difference to the British Arab community, "a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" emerged as the factor cited by the highest proportion of respondents, 21.7%, followed by "British Arabs speaking with one unified voice (17.7%).

Eleven respondents cited "other" factors that they thought would be most likely to make a difference to the British Arab community. These included improved integration into British society, a better standard of education within the Arab community and for the British Government to take a more proactive role in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**Figure 3.3**
Factors that would most make a positive difference over next 2-5 years
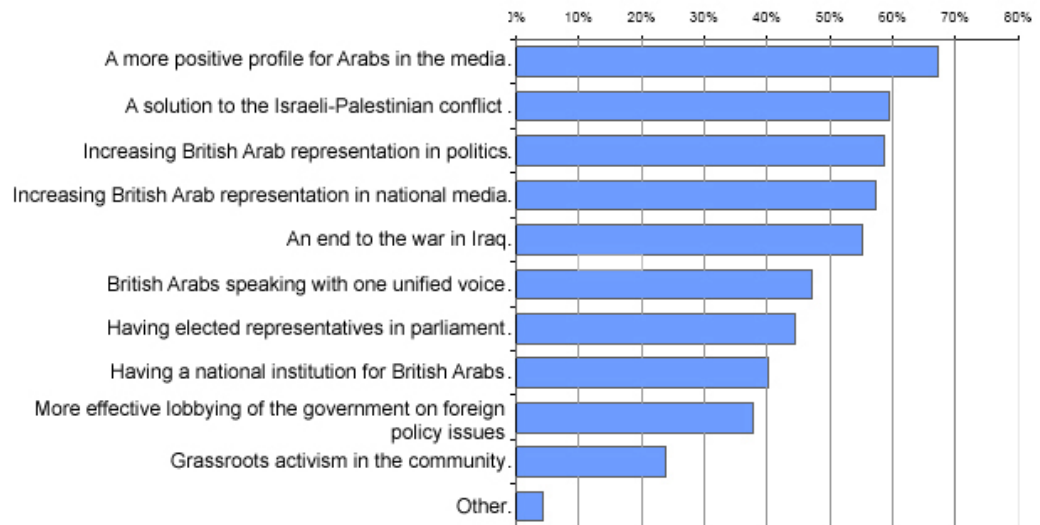


## British Arab organisations

One way to gauge the development of a community is through the strength and number of its institutions. The British Arab community has contributed significantly to charitable and educational institutions, both within the British Arab community and across the UK.

However, efforts to form political organisations have been less sustained and knowledge of these organisations appears to be limited. Only 16.9% of the British Arabs who participated in this survey reported that they were currently involved with a British Arab

organisation, while only a further 20.9% were aware of at least one British Arab organisation but not involved with them. A high proportion (62.2%) indicated that they were either not involved with or not aware of any British Arab organisations.

Of those who noted which organisations they were aware of, by far the most well-know organisation was the Council for the Advancement of Arab British Understanding, known as CAABU, a national organisation that aims to strengthen ties between the UK and the Arab world. There was also considerable awareness of NABA, the National Association of British Arabs, as well as the more recently formed British Arab Association (BAA).[14]

Other organisations mentioned were often associated with particular communities: the British-Syrian Society, British-Yemeni Society, British-Egyptian Society.

## What should a British Arab organisation do?

Respondents were next ask to rate a number of specified possible roles of a British Arab organisation, from most important to least important, using a 6-point scale.  The outcome of this, along with the average rating receiving by each item, is shown in Box 3.1.

Box 3.1: Perceived relative importance of possible roles of British Arab organisations

| Relative Importance | Role | Rating Average |
|---|---|---|
| 1 (most important) | Speaking on behalf of British Arabs with a unified voice | 4.06 |
| 2 | Lobbying the government on domestic concerns of British Arabs | 3.96 |
| 3 | Lobbying the government on foreign policy concerns of British Arabs | 3.89 |
| 4 | Providing education, training and networking opportunities for British Arabs | 3.28 |
| 5 | Supporting and coordinating the work of local and regional organisations | 2.92 |
| 6 (least Important) | Promoting Arab culture, language and literature | 2.87 |

Overall, speaking on behalf of their community with a unified voice was seen as the most important role of British Arab organisations, followed by lobbying the government – with lobbying on domestic concerns and lobbying on foreign policy concerns being regarded as almost equally important. However, the broad spread of answers to this question indicated that all of the listed possible roles of British Arab organisations were regarded as important.

## Political participation in the British Arab community

Finally, respondents were asked about their own level of political participation in the British Arab community, defined in terms of contributing time or money to organisations or groups whose primary purpose is political or social in nature, rather than charitable or

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[14] CAABU's dominance may not be surprising: it was formed in 1967 and is the largest such organisation in Europe. NABA can be contacted at www.naba.org.uk; BAA can be contacted via the Arab British Chamber of Commerce at www.abcc.org.uk

humanitarian. Overall, the findings indicated relatively low levels of participation, with 36.6% of respondents indicating that they had an average level of involvement in the sense of just taking an interest in the community, while 32.7% specifically reported a low level of involvement, and indicated that they rarely take an interest in community politics. At the other end of the scale, 16.5% reported a high or very high level of political involvement in the British Arab community.

Those respondents who said that they have only an average or low level of political participation in the British Arab community were asked to indicate which of a list of factors stopped them from becoming more involved. The distribution of responses is shown in Figure 3.4. This revealed that the lack of political involvement in British Arab organisations on the part of many individuals is not due to any reluctance to become involved, but is attributable more to a lack of awareness of such organisations and how to become involved in them. This highlights a need for improved awareness-raising within the community on the part of British Arab organisations.

**Figure 3.4**
Factors that would encourage fuller political participation in the British Arab community
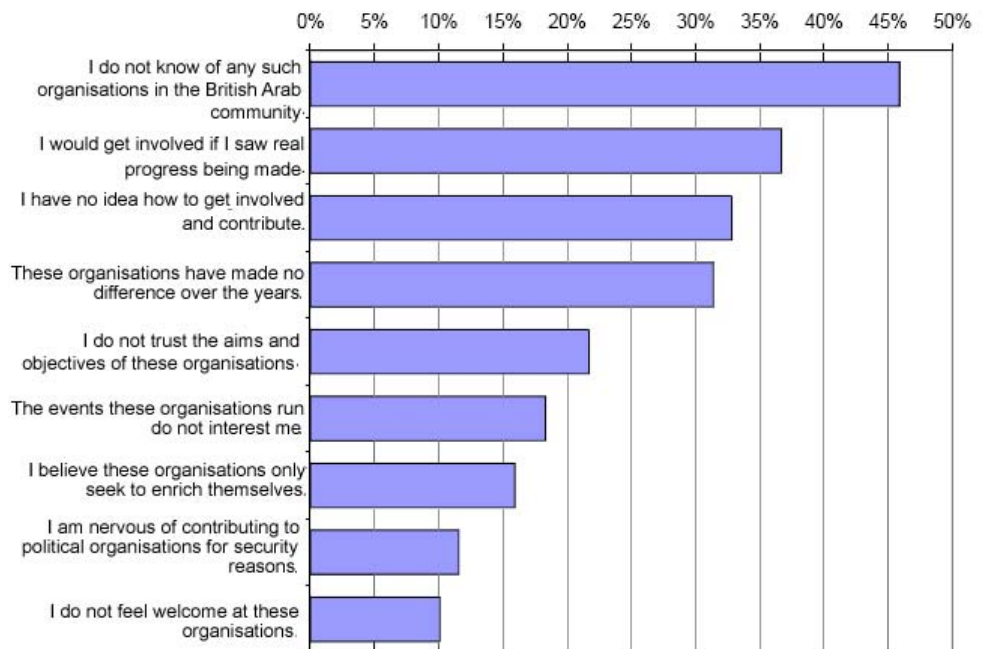
# Summary and Recommendations

## Relevance of the Study

This survey of British Arabs, conducted between spring and winter 2008, provides a wealth of information on the characteristics and views of Arab people in Britain, a group about which very little reliable information was previously available. The findings are likely to be of considerable interest to the British Arab community itself, and also to academic researchers, UK government policymakers and politicians, providers of health, education and other social services and the organisations who represent British Arabs. As well as generating important information about the British Arab community, the study provides a very successful example of survey research among a group that has been under-studied in the past. This might be used as a model for future larger-scale, more representative surveys of British Arabs or other ethnic minorities.

It should be noted that the survey was not based on a strictly representative sample, and the findings cannot therefore be generalised to the whole community of British Arabs. In the absence of a sampling frame for use in generating a representative sample, convenience and snowball sampling techniques were used to contact people in the British Arab community. It is expected that the sampling methods and use of an electronic survey may have resulted in some over-representation of more educated British Arabs, regular users of computers/the internet and certain nationalities such as Egyptians. Moreover, the use of non-probability sampling methods precluded the use of statistical significance testing on the results, and where differences have been flagged up between sub-groups these should therefore be regarded as indicative rather than conclusive.

Nonetheless, the study findings are based on the views of a very diverse range of respondents in terms of gender, age, nationality, religion and UK region of residence. British Arabs from 22 different countries of origin were included in the sample. Around half were women, and almost half were living in regions of the UK outside London. Around four fifths of respondents were Muslim, with the remainder mostly Christian.

The sample was found to be very highly educated, with almost all respondents having at least A levels and most holding a first degree; if it were representative of the whole Arab community in the UK, this would be by far the highest educated ethnic group in Britain. However, more extensive quantitative research is needed to obtain reliable information on the educational and other characteristics of British Arabs.

## Main Findings

The survey findings confirmed that the term "British Arab" is a meaningful one with which people of Arab ethnicity living in Britain do identify, regardless of their national origin. Interestingly, people born outside of the UK were found to be somewhat more likely (33.9%) than those 33.9%) are more likely those born in the UK (22.9%) to define their primary identity as "British Arab".

Although only a minority of 9% indicated that they held a pan-Arab *primary* identity, a large majority agreed or strongly agreed that their Arab identity was important to them. The percentage doing so was somewhat higher among those born in the UK (94.1%) than among those born elsewhere (80.3%), and was also particularly high (92.1) among the youngest age group. The results therefore seem to indicate a strengthening rather than a weakening of pan-Arab identity within the community over time, with the youngest respondents, many of whom will have been born in the UK, exhibiting a clear Arab identity.

The study provides a great deal of evidence that respondents are well integrated into both their own ethnic or religious communities and British society. Although the sense of "Arabness" emerging from the findings was very strong, respondents also reported a high level of personal interaction with non-Arabs, no doubt reflecting the nature of everyday life in Britain, and demonstrating that strong identification with the Arab community co-exists with successful integration into the wider British community.

It was notable that quite a large number of respondents (n=90) said that they also trace their background to white ethnicity, and that two thirds of these were born in the UK. Although further research is needed to fully explain this finding, it seems to suggest that a significant amount of inter-marriage may have been occurring over time between the British Arab community and the native British population. If this were the case, it would distinguish British Arabs from other major ethnic minority groups in Britain who tend to marry within their own communities.

Although many respondents identified themselves as "British Arab", 44% agreed with the statement that, "British Arabs are not part of a cohesive community and fare differently according to class and connections". This seems to indicate that while many British Arabs consider their own identify as both British and Arabs to be clear, they are unsure how cohesive the British Arab community as a whole is.

There was indeed evidence from the survey that the community is not very cohesive or unified at present; almost two-thirds of respondents indicated that they were either not involved with or not aware of any British Arab organisations, and a similar proportion indicated that they had either a low level of involvement in the British Arab community and its politics or just a general level of interest. Most respondents recognised, however, that a British Arab organisation could perform a large number of important roles for the community, such as speaking with a unified voice and lobbying the government on domestic and foreign policy issues.

On the other hand, the study has generated information on the views and activity of British Arabs in relation to UK politics which challenges the commonly-held view that this community has very low levels of political participation, with political interest and participation rates close to for the UK population as a whole, and a significant minority reporting a high level of political participation, such as being actively involved in a political party. Although the study may have over-represented people with higher levels of political interest and participation, nevertheless it is important in demonstrating the existence of many politically active people within the British Arab community.

The findings also suggest that political participation among British Arabs might be higher if any political party or interest group were perceived to better represent their interests. Although many respondents expressed optimism that politics could address social problems and change society for the better, and saw UK politics as relevant to their own lives, almost half said that they didn't identify with any British political party, and many expressed the view that politicians don't listen to them or represent their interests. More worryingly, the results indicated that a third of participants (32.5%) who do not actively participate in British politics feel that the UK government is against their interests, community or religion. When asked to choose which UK political party most closely represents the interests of British Arabs at present, there was a wide spread of results, but the Liberal Democrats came out top with a quarter of respondents opting for this party. More generally, respondents were more likely to identify with the Labour Party or the Liberal Democrats than the Conservative Party.

The findings indicate that, as a group, British Arabs are keen to exercise their right to vote but have yet to feel a strong affiliation for any one party. This suggests that a party that was able to articulate a message that resonates with this group might be in a position to secure a significant bloc vote, especially in London, which has a large British Arab community.

The specific political issues rated as highly important by respondents were the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the War in Iraq (63.3%), UK policy towards the Middle East (62.9%), Health (62.9%) and Education (62.6%). For the Arab community within the UK, the most pressing issues were identified as the need for greater unity and cohesiveness among Arabs in Britain and problems of discrimination. When asked which single factor would be likely to make the biggest difference to the British Arab community, "a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" emerged as the factor cited by the highest proportion of respondents.

Finally, the survey results confirmed that many British Arabs have experienced discrimination or harassment relating to race or religion, and that most have experienced negative public portrayals of Arabs, for example in the media, advertising or political speeches. A third of all respondents reported having experienced harassment related to their ethnicity or heritage, and almost a third in each case said that they had experienced discrimination related to their religion or related to their ethnicity. Only 10% had not experienced any form of harassment, discrimination or negative public portrayals of Arabs or of their religion in the UK. There was some indication that British Arabs living in other parts of the UK may be experiencing slightly more discrimination or harassment than those living in London and the South East, but further research would be needed to prove or disprove this finding.

## Policy Recommendations

This study has important implications for the British Arab community and its representatives as well as for UK politicians and policymakers, the media and many other social actors. A few key recommendations arising from these are highlighted below:

**For government, we recommend:**

- Proactively tackling the problem of discrimination and racism towards Arabs in the UK, by, for instance, ensuring they are not marginalised in anti-discrimination legislation and policies.

- Including "Arab" as an ethnic classification, for example in the Census of Population and in Ethnic Monitoring schemes, in order to generate better national and regional information about this group for use in providing community services.

- Recognising that citizens often have several 'pull' factors that influence their political identity. British citizens who trace their ethnic heritage to other parts of the world, whether other European countries, the Middle East, or further afield, retain cultural ties with that heritage. Governments that strive to be forward-looking and inclusive ought not to force citizens to choose among their various cultural ties. Recognising that ethnicity and culture, whether Arab, Scottish or other, is not a bar to the full benefits and obligations that comes with British citizenship.

**For political parties, we recommend:**

- Developing stronger links with the British Arab community and addressing their domestic and foreign policy concerns. Significant levels of political support are likely to be forthcoming, especially for a party that is seen to play an active role in helping to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

- Moving beyond the perceived link between community and politics. This survey suggests strongly that British Arabs, as a group, do not identify with any one

political party, offering all the main parties significant scope to carve out messages that resonate with British Arabs.

**For British Arab organisations, we recommend:**

- Raising awareness of their role and their activities, and proactively recruiting members from the British Arab community.

- Focusing efforts particularly on British Arabs in the younger age groups, who exhibit a particularly strong Arab identity. Tailoring events to this demographic would be particularly helpful, stressing young leadership and community effort.

- Representing the interests of the community more effectively in UK politics.

**For the media, we recommend:**

- Using the improved knowledge base about British Arabs to better report this group and its interests, so as not to encourage misunderstanding about British Arabs or provoke racism against them.

- Sensitivity in the use of language and imagery, as has already become commonplace for other equivalent community groups, such as the black community and the Jewish community.

- Increased care in generalising about Arabs, both in terms of equating Arabs with other ethnic groups (such as British Asians), and failing to distinguish between Arabs as an ethnic group and the many different faiths (Coptic Christianity, Sunni Islam, the Druze faith) Arabs adhere to.

## Research Recommendations

Although this study represents a major advance in research on the Arab population of the UK, its main limitation is the lack of a statistically representative sample, which means results cannot be generalised to the whole British Arab community. As a result, significant information gaps remain for other researchers to address.  The study provides a valuable model on which future research can build, including the development of a detailed questionnaire that might be used in a larger-scale survey.  It is recommended that future research in this area might usefully include:

- A larger-scale, national survey of British Arabs, which attempts to achieve a more representative sample of the community.

- In-depth qualitative research using in-depth issues or focus groups, to explore the issues underlying some of the key findings of this research. For example, it would be interesting and useful to examine the phenomenon of an emerging pan-Arab identity among younger British Arabs or to investigate how UK political parties might better engage with specific groups within the British Arab population.

## Conclusion

This report has presented the results of a pioneering survey of British Arabs, which has important implications not only for this community and its representatives, but also for key political actors in the UK. The study confirms some commonly-held perceptions about Arabs in the UK, such as the high levels of racism and discrimination experienced by this group, and challenges other commonly-held beliefs, for example about their low levels of political interest and participation. Overall, the study provides a wealth of information on how British Arabs see themselves, their community, and British politics, draws out the implications of these findings for a range of actors, and provides recommendations for future research to build on the knowledge base about British Arabs which it has created.

# Notes

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## About The Atlantic Forum

The Atlantic Forum is an independent think-tank based in London. We are dedicated to making accessible, relevant, forward-looking policy ideas. We are non-partisan and work with policy-makers and analysts across the political spectrum.

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The Atlantic Forum
77 Beak Street, Soho, London
W1F 9DB

Email: info@atlanticforum.org
**www.atlanticforum.org**

## About the editor

Faisal Al Yafai is an award-winning journalist who has worked for the BBC and the Guardian. He has lived in several Arab countries and reported from across the Middle East. He is a Winston Churchill Fellow for 2009/2010.