Study for consideration of inclusion of 'Arab' as an ethnic group on ethnicity profile forms

A. Introduction

The National Association of British Arabs in conjunction with the British Arabs Forum, works to promote the Arab communities presence in the UK. In order to facilitate this, its seeks to establish 'Arab' as a separate ethnic profile group on governmental and non-governmental statistics.

B. History of Arab Immigration

The UK today is home to a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-faith community and the added feature of inter-ethnic marriage makes racial classification progressively more complex. Included in this rich mosaic are British Arab citizens – perhaps 500,000 of them – originating from a wide spectrum of Arab countries. In fact, and this is frequently overlooked – or possibly deliberately ignored – Arabs are arguably the longest-resident, non-European ethnic group in the British Isles. Their presence is largely a consequence of Britain's colonial past although it is known that the Romans brought Arab archers with them and established a town called 'Arabiya' which is now South Shields.

In the 19th century, Yemeni seamen called *Lascars* sailed with British ships and many stayed to work in the docks and related industries, or the burgeoning rail network. London's East End, Tyneside, Liverpool and Cardiff became centres of small Arab communities. By 1948 there were nearly a thousand Arabs in Tyneside, some marrying local women, thus giving birth to the hybrid British-Arab identity that many native-born British-Arabs, especially those of mixed ancestry, are now establishing. In the 1950s, many of these migrated to Birmingham and Sheffield. A number of Somalis from what was British Somaliland also settled in the same areas as a result of serving on British ships. Frequently overlooked, but vitally important, the traditional trading skills of Syrians and Lebanese brought them to 'Cottonopolis' – Manchester. The famous Arab historian Albert Hourani was born there.

Large-scale Arab immigration began after 1945, with the Palestinians; followed by Egyptians and Sudanese coming for professional advancement, and the 1960s saw Moroccans seeking a better life or more political liberty than was found at home. Political repression in the home countries has continued to be a major reason for Arab immigration, bringing in the decades spanning the 1960s to the 1990s, Iraqis, Egyptians, Sudanese, Algerians, Somalis and some Gulf Arabs[1].

Al Rasheed[3] noted that 'Arabs are disproportionately represented among foreign university students in Britain, and higher education in Britain has provided an important path to settlement for skilled individuals.' In addition Labaki in 1992[3] noted that 'Highly-skilled Arab settlers (UK-educated or otherwise) fill professional positions as engineers, doctors, professors and business people. They are also employed in the many Arab businesses, including banks, newspapers and broadcast companies which established branches in London during the oil boom, or which re-located to London during the civil war in Lebanon'. As a consequence of this the British Arab population is disproportionately, though not exclusively,

represented in higher educational and employment categories and in upper-middle-class residential areas.

Greater London is the main centre for British Arabs, with an estimated 300,000 in the capital. There are also traditional areas of Arab settlement such as Sheffield, where many Yemenis moved to work in the steel industry.

Many Arab immigrants, whether coming for economic, professional or political reasons, always had the hope of returning home one day. However, it has become increasingly clear that the 'hope' of return was actually the 'myth' of return. 'Home' is now Britain.

The bulk of Britain's Arab population come primarily from Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt and Morocco. Their numbers place them among the largest non-Commonwealth immigrant groups in Britain today (Nagel 2002)[4].

In respect of religion; among the Muslim Arabs, there are both Sunnis and Shia. There are also a number of Christians whose numbers include Eastern Orthodox, Copt, Catholic and Assyrian. At the last count there were 17 Coptic churches in the British Isles with about 15,000 families.

C. Problems facing British Arabs

British Arabs are a racially and religiously diverse community and the situation is more complex with the burgeoning second generation who are sometimes of mixed heritage.

1. Arabs do fit easily into the current conceptions of immigrant-host society relations. British Arabs are virtually invisible within British society as a group, apart from negative public stereotyping. They face discrimination in many aspects of life such as work, education etc; however, given that the standard ethnic profiling forms which now feature so commonly do not contain 'Arab' as a separate entity, this is impossible to monitor.

2. This lack of identification as a group also means that they are under-represented in both public life and in positions of authority in the private sector commensurate with their numbers.

3. Their exclusion from official statistics means that major future planning and development issues do not include this group. These issues include, for example, planning of health and education needs. Increasingly medical research looks at the health needs of particular groups within the community from which to plan future health requirements. As with many other immigrant groups now settled here, Arabs have health needs and problems which are particular to them and unless there is a reasonably accurate guide to their numbers on which to base research, these health needs will go unheard. This also applies to the field of education.

4. The absence of accurate information also has consequences for the requirements of Citizenship as recently introduced by the Home Office in that the absence of monitoring makes planning possible.

5. In psychological terms, they find the lack of recognition as a group to be increasingly unacceptable. This applies to both first and second generation Arabs, who are still obliged to tick 'other' or 'mixed other' as their ethnic background. They feel particularly aggrieved because despite the fact that they consider themselves to be British, they are unable to find a suitable category of ethnic origin which applies to them.

6. In addition, the use of the criteria of 'colour' is found to be unacceptable for Arabs. Even within one Arab country there is a total spectrum of colour from white to black and Arabs find it demeaning to categorise themselves under this section for deep cultural reasons.

7. Because of negative media-stereotyping over many years, Arabs continue to appear more as *foreigners* than as minorities and takes no account of their role in the professional and business life of Britain.

9. In the pursuit of greater accuracy, the National Association of British Arabs receives requests from such bodies as the General Dental Council regarding the numbers of Arabs and the possible introduction of ethnic profiling on their individual record bases. This is just one illustration on how their absence in ethnic profile forms leads to confusion and lack of knowledge which other groups try to address by approaching us for this information.

D. Current status of knowledge

It is our contention that there are approximately 500,000 Arabs, both first and second generation, in the UK.

We have studied the census returns produced by the 2001 census and based on those findings, it would appear that there were:-

100,822 people of Middle East origin;
68,715 of North African origin.

These figures compare to 102,000 identified in the 1991 census of individuals born in the 'Middle East' and North Africa. Neither however identified British-born children of Arab immigrants. Ethnic classification data from the 1991 census also provides further limited insight into the size of the Arab population via the two 'other' categories – black-other and other-other which include 65,191 individuals of 'North African, Arab or Iranian' descent. A breakdown by place of birth indicates close to 50,000 individuals born in Arab states and Arabs account for about a further one third of those in the other-other category born outside the British Isles.

There were in addition:-

219,754 who identified themselves as 'other ethnic group' (excluding Chinese);
1,345,321 who identified themselves as 'other white';
155,688 who identified themselves as 'other mixed'.

I note the numbers of people answering the 'religion' section also. However, this does not assist Arabs who, whilst in the main are of the Muslim faith, also contain a proportion of Christians and secular who would not have completed this section.

One of the pitfalls of attempting to enumerate an ethnic group from an area, estimated by the WHO to cover 5.25 million square miles, is its sheer diversity. Whilst those listed as Middle East/North African have attempted to put their geographic origin, the majority would prefer to have their ethnic background identified. I would like to point out for your information that the countries which classify themselves as Arab, who belong to the League of Arab Nations are:-

African Arab Countries:
Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Sudan, Djibouti, Comoros.

Asian Arab Countries:
Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Yemen.

E. Problems of enumeration within census

It has been noted that the 1991 census was the first in British history to include questions about ethnicity and 'race'. However, this census also revealed that the *exclusion* of certain groups was as instructive as the *inclusion* of other groups. Estimates based on foreign-born labour statistics within the 1991 census estimated the Arab population at about 200,000 people – thereby exceeding the estimated populations of Britain's Bangladeshi and Chinese communities, who do have census categories. Additionally, cross-tabulations of place-of-birth data and 'race'/'ethnicity' reveal that British Arabs (or at least foreign born British Arabs) have scattered themselves in several different categories including white, black and other; whilst those born in Britain are completely invisible in the census[2].

At the current time, there appear to be bureaucratic difficulties in including a separate box for Arabs in the ethnic profile section. Attempts have been made to overcome this by adding Middle East as place of origin on the census forms. However, this does not overcome the geographical diversity of Arabs (see section 'D').

Neither does the census in its current state answer the needs of second generation Arabs (whether mixed or not) who, in the absence of a category of ethnic origin, are excluded.

F. Conclusion

The lack of recognition of Arabs as a separate ethnic group, and hence their exclusion, has serious consequences for the planning of services and monitoring of such problems as racial discrimination.

In areas where there are large clusters of Arabs such as central London, health authorities and educational bodies have taken such steps as translations of health

guidance material in Arabic and the provision of translators in hospitals to cater for this. However without more accurate data, such services will remain haphazard.

We are fully aware of the bureaucratic hurdles to be overcome in establishing any ethnic group as a category for official statistics. However, we believe that it essential both, as previously stated for planning and development of services, but additionally to allow this large group of British residents to feel that they are fully recognised within Britain.

In conclusion we would very much welcome the recognition and acceptance of 'Arab' as a separate ethnic group.

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