



Arab Media Watch
for objective British coverage of Arab issues

Study: The Term 'Arabic' in the British Press

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Introduction

The term 'Arabic' is frequently used in the British mainstream press in a number of ways. Although some are negative through association with terrorism, there are far more positive connotations with the language to be found in the media.

Over a three-month period from August to October 2007, Arab Media Watch monitored and analysed every use of the term 'Arabic' in the mainstream British press.¹ The findings have been divided into categories for the sake of convenience, though certain examples could be grouped under other headings.

Negative Portrayals

Terrorism

The term 'Arabic' is frequently mentioned in the context of terrorism or security: in 42 articles in 13 British national newspapers during the monitoring period. The connection in the popular imagination between the Arabic language and matters relating to terrorism - particularly documents or discussions - is seemingly assured.

Guardian

The Guardian reports several instances in which the term 'Arabic' is used in connection with terrorism or security.

The chief points to emerge are that detectives investigating the de Menezes shooting would expect to find names of "Arabic or Asian" origin in the suspect's mobile phone; reported coded conversations about jihad / terrorist planning are held in Arabic; studying the language abroad is the cover of choice to use when attending a terrorist training camp; and even the Cornish National Liberation Army made threats sent by email via an Arabic web-hosting service.

When Mohammed Atif Siddique, a student charged with possessing "suspicious terrorism-related items," was found guilty, it was reported that in court, Glasgow Metropolitan College lecturer Alexander Paterson, who taught him, said he saw him looking at a website with Arabic writing. This was part of the incriminating evidence.

Independent

Osama bin Laden, who broadcasts his messages in Arabic, is said in his latest video message to be wearing "Arabic robes" instead of his customary combat jacket.

¹ Outlets monitored for this study were: Daily Express, Sunday Express, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror, Daily Star, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Financial Times, The Guardian, The Independent, Independent on Sunday, The Observer, The Sun, News of the World, The Times and Sunday Times.

Sunday Times

The Sunday Times reports on "virtual jihad," in which some radicals give themselves "provocative jihadist names such as Irhabi007 (Arabic for Terrorist007)."

Another piece reports official estimates that about 100,000 Muslim children "attend madrasahs or religious classes at mosques each day" in Britain, where the instruction they receive has traditionally focused on reciting the Koran and learning Arabic - but which does not do enough to increase their participation in British society.

Times

The Times also reports the use of the internet as a facilitator for terrorism, but says information such as pictures and diagrams of assault rifles and rocket launchers are available for download in Arabic from an academic Israeli website.

Another piece reports death threats to a Danish cartoonist who drew a cartoon of a Danish boy writing in Arabic: "Jyllands-Posten's journalists are a bunch of reactionary provocateurs."

Tabloids

When the term 'Arabic' is mentioned in the tabloids in connection with terrorism, the context is either the reporting of a court case in which a prosecution is being brought against an individual who has been found with terrorist-related material in Arabic, or the ease with which terrorist material in the language can be accessed on the web.

"Model students" seem particularly susceptible to the lures of terrorist material on the web in the tabloid reporting of terrorism issues in Britain.

Miscellaneous

The term 'Arabic' is used in a number of miscellaneous contexts. While the majority are positive - and detailed in the last section of this study - a few are negative.

Daily Express

The term 'Arabic' is used 10 times by the Express. Its chief concern is the aspect of the Madeleine McCann story that involves Morocco. It reports frequently that a search is on for a woman "wearing a black headscarf and brown full-length Arabic dress," and the publicity campaign is being conducted also in Arabic.

One other mention is to note - with dismay - that it is possible to take one's driving test in a number of foreign languages, including Arabic.

Sunday Times

The Sunday Times describes "falaka" as "a traditional Arabic torture where the soles of the feet are beaten with sticks," although it is more accurately described as Persian, but which came to the Arab world via the Ottoman Empire.

Positive Portrayals

Culture

Of the 26 times that 'Arabic' is referred to (at least once) in a cultural context during the monitoring period, the majority (17) are in connection with music. Other categories are writing (six), dance, theatre and film (one each).

Music

The newspapers convey that there are modern and classical formulations of Arabic music. Some articles note "Arabic grooves" as a feature of a particularly good nightclub; others note a taste for classical Arabic music taking hold in Algeria after independence.

Several papers describe chaabi music, which features classical Arabic influences; similarly, several papers review the latest album from Manu Chao, a Spaniard whose music displays a number of influences, including Arabic.

In other instances, an Arabic vocalist is described as having a "heavenly wail," while Led Zeppelin are said to exhibit a "rock-infused interpretation of the blues incorporated reggae, soul, funk, jazz, classical, Indian, Arabic and country music."

Writing

The Yacoubian Building, the "bestselling Arabic novel," is the Daily Telegraph's pick of the paperbacks during August. The Observer publishes an interview with the author Alaa al Aswany, which notes that the novel went through eight editions in Arabic in as many months.

The Observer also runs a feature on forgotten classics, including *A Season of Migration to the North* by Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih, first published in Arabic in 1966. It was the first book written originally in Arabic to be included in the Penguin Classic series.

The Independent notes that the arrival of the Arabic script in around AD645 allowed a new Tajik poetry to flourish in what is now Uzbekistan.

Dance

The Telegraph points out that flamenco has some of its origins in Arabic folk traditions.

Learning Arabic

Being able to speak Arabic as a non-mother tongue is almost universally seen as a sign of accomplishment, and the mainstream media detect a growing interest in the language.

In the business world, suggests the Times, Arabic features as a key language to learn to encourage success. The Independent notes the redrawing of the "linguistic map," saying teenagers are "clamouring" to learn Arabic (as well as Mandarin and Polish) due to "migration and shifting economic sands."

The Daily Mail and Financial Times note a similar trend in the growth of these languages. The Daily Telegraph speculates that the "new fascination with Arabic" has been fostered by "the war on terror."

Interpreters

The term 'Arabic' comes up frequently in connection with the controversy surrounding Iraqi interpreters and government intransigence concerning their right to seek asylum in Britain.

The Times accounts for seven of the nine mentions, and the other two papers using the term 'Arabic' (the Mail and Sunday Telegraph) are equally supportive of the interpreters. The reporting notes that the situation for Iraqi interpreters had reached a point where others from Jordan and Egypt had to be recruited at greater expense to make up the shortfall.

Meaning

During the monitoring period, 24 Arabic terms came up that were explained by the mainstream British press. Some are simple, direct translations, some are explained too briefly to be accurate, and some are mistranslated. It also comes across on several occasions that a considerable portion of the Spanish language is influenced by Arabic.

Daily Express

The Express explains that the word "mummy" in the ancient Egyptian sense comes from the Arabic "mumiya," which means "body preserved by wax or bitumen."

Financial Times

The FT clarifies that the correct etymology of Las Ramblas, a main street in Barcelona, comes from an Arabic word for a watercourse. The paper writes that there are some 4,000 Arabic-derived words in Spanish, which include "such basic and familiar nouns as the words for carrot, aubergine, cotton, lily, builder, mayor and watchtower."

Daily Mirror

The Mirror points out that "algebra" comes from the Arabic for "resetting."

Daily Telegraph

The Telegraph claims that "Philphil" is Arabic for "Papa" - although in this case the journalist must have misheard because it in fact means "pepper."

Miscellaneous

The term 'Arabic' is used in a number of varied contexts, gathered in this section under the heading of 'miscellaneous,' resulting in a variety of unconnected, largely positive facts.

Daily Mail

The Mail uses the term 'Arabic' 10 times in this category, noting that an attractive feature of a holiday resort in the United Arab Emirates is the waiters "serving cardamom-scented Arabic coffee and proffering water pipes."

Guardian

The Guardian makes 17 references to 'Arabic' under this category. It notes, for example, that further education these days involves "whole-family learning days, offering taster sessions in everything from African drumming to Arabic dance."

The paper's media section suggests that "Russia, France and the Arabic world, through al-Jazeera, now have their own take on the world." It is not made clear whose take they had previously.

Sunday Telegraph

The Sunday Telegraph uses the term 'Arabic' five times, on one occasion admiring a "restored 13th-century palacio with high, carved wooden Arabic ceilings and original frescoes."

Sunday Times

The Sunday Times uses the term 'Arabic' 10 times. Its miscellanea include the fact that the Mediterranean island of Pantelleria is famous for its distinctive "traditional Arabic domed, single-storey dammusi." Elsewhere, the paper reports that an on-demand book-printing machine has been developed that can print books straight away in various languages, "such as Latin, Cyrillic or Arabic."

Daily Telegraph

The Telegraph's 19 instances of the term 'Arabic' include a book reviewer noting that Mohamed Choukri, a Tunisian former street kid who changed his ways later in life, was "probably the oldest and most depraved schoolboy in history," but "mastered classical Arabic and became a teacher and writer and the laureate of Tangier."

The travel pages suggest a few items to enjoy whilst abroad: in Marbella, you should try "Arabic kebabs," and in Dubai, one is recommended to buy "Arabic slippers."

Times

The Times makes 23 references to 'Arabic' under the category of 'miscellaneous,' noting, for example, that the Turkish Baths in Harrogate are a mix of Victorian splendour and Arabic style, and that "coffee-drinking and hospitality are inseparable in Arabic culture," where there are "strict rituals" governing its serving and drinking.

Independent

The Independent uses the term 'Arabic' three times, the most notable of which is as follows: "Adelard of Bath, a 12th-century Somerset scholar, is credited with having helped to introduce many important mathematical concepts into Western thought, including the Arabic idea of zero."

Observer

The Observer uses the term 'Arabic' 11 times. A special supplement produced on Andalucia details the Arabic influence on the region, being evident in mosaics, the souk (market), alleyways, script carved into stucco decorating buildings, and even the social life.

Independent on Sunday

The Independent on Sunday uses the term 'Arabic' twice, reporting for example that Malta has a "unique blend of English, Italian and Arabic culture."

Daily Mirror

The Mirror uses the term 'Arabic' three times, suggesting a range of activities that the over-50s can engage themselves in, "from learning Arabic to pottery or yoga."