

Arabs in Canada

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Editor's note: In light of the recently-introduced Anti-terrorism Act (Bill C-51), and the upcoming Canadian federal election, an investigation into the history of the Arab community in Canada is necessary. Bill C-51 could be used arbitrarily in derogation of civil rights of Canadians belonging to the Arab Community. The following article was originally published in November 2014.

Introduction: The Beginning

Exactly a century and a quarter ago, amid the numerous immigrants then pouring into Canada, a 19-year-old youth landed in Montreal. It was 1882, just 6 years after the establishment of Canada as a federal state, and Abraham Bounader from Zahle, a small town in The Lebanon (then part of Syria) overlooking the fertile Beka' valley, had become Canada's first Arab immigrant. By 1901, there were 2,000 others of Arab origin in Canada, by 1941 this number had grown to about 12,000 persons, and today it is estimated that there are about 600,000 Canadians of Arab origin (i.e., about 1.8% of Canada's total population).

Syrians (including Lebanese) have sailed forth from their relatively small, resource-poor land for many thousand of years. Their perpetual Odyssey has led them to the farthest parts of the earth. If one knows how to identify them, he can find Lebanese (and Syrians) in almost every country, in almost every major city. And so they came eventually to Canada; from one rocky shore to another. Gradually they make a new home; gradually they took root and grew. As they did, they transformed both themselves and their new country.

They voyaged not only to political liberty and stability and better economic opportunities although these were important motives. They voyaged, too, for adventure, for excitement, for the taste of something new. Their ancestors, the Phoenicians, sailed and traded throughout the ancient world and established colonies in several locations (Cadiz in Spain, and Carthage in Tunisia, are two famous examples). It is not known for certain what caused the Phoenicians to adopt their commercial role, but it is likely that their region's poverty in natural resources and the raggedness of its terrain were contributing factors. Certainly, these factors were of great importance in 19th and 20th century emigration from Lebanon.

Virtually all early Arab immigrants to Canada came from the regions included in the contemporary states of Lebanon and Syria. The earliest migrants from the Fertile Crescent were not distinguished as Syrians or Lebanese. Until 1956, Canadian immigration statistics grouped the two together.

Anecdotes of Arab immigrant pioneers reflect the importance of the steamship lines factor. One Colorado pioneer had jumped ship in Canada, and traveled south; a group of travelers

rejected in New York in 1885 returned to Halifax, and from there traveled overland to New York. Mr. Howar, builder of the famous Islamic Centre of Washington, D.C., journeyed by chance from his home in Palestine to Egypt, India, and England before arriving in the United States around the turn of the last century. He went to Washington because that was where the President lived. According to historical records, the first Lebanese to settle in Canada came via New York. In those early years, it was only the very adventurous few, mostly Lebanese and Syrian, who left home and ventured to seek their fortune in distant lands. The majority went to the United States, but few made it to Canada.

The immigration patterns of these early years illustrate clearly the factors that determined the rate at which immigrants, Arabs and others came to Canada. Immigration legislation provides excellent insight into the prevailing values and beliefs of the day. In the 19th and early 20th century, the salient view among most English Canadians was that the values and way of life of the “white race” were superior to all others. Preference was therefore given to British and American immigrants, followed by immigrants from western and northern Europe, then from the rest of Europe. Asians and Blacks were the least preferred of all immigrants and were allowed in only when there was a demonstrated need for their labour (e.g., building the Canadian Pacific Railroad in the 1890s allowed thousands of Chinese immigrants into Canada. Yet during the next 50 years, when “orientalophobia” was widespread among Anglophiles, less than a 100 Chinese were admitted into the country).

It was only in the second half of the 20th century that discriminatory restrictions on immigration began to ease. The Second World War forced Canadians to re-examine their view of immigrants. In the years leading up to the war, Canadians had become guilty of excessive human rights violations against local minorities, the most infamous of which was the treatment of the Japanese in 1942. But other groups suffered as well (e.g., Germans and Italians). The injustices committed against these minorities became all the more pronounced because the Second World War was to a larger extent a war against the concept of racial superiority. Canada’s joining of the United Nations in 1945 was the final blow to a long history of discriminatory practices against non-whites, and to the preferential treatment given to Anglophiles. It was then only a matter of time before artificial barriers to immigration had to come down even though old attitudes and beliefs persisted for a while longer and have occasionally surfaced since then.

The Post World War II Period

With each change in immigration laws and regulations, it became easier for Arabs to immigrate to Canada, mostly through sponsorship. The post WWII period witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of Arab immigrants to Canada. Unfavourable conditions in their home countries, coupled with more liberal immigration policies in Canada made Canada a choice destination for many an Arab immigrant.

The period following the War was one of social tranquility and economic prosperity in Canada. In the Arab world, this same period saw nothing but one disaster after the other (*Al-Nakba* in Palestine in 1948, the Suez War of 1956 following the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, the Six-Day-War of June 1967, the 1973 War, the Civil War in Lebanon, the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88, the 1991 Gulf War and subsequent invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, the Civil Wars in Sudan, Somalia and Algeria, and the continuing Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories). It was these “push factors” that largely determined the origin, religion and other socio-economic profile of Arabs who immigrated to Canada.

Canada Egyptians are a case in point. Starting in the mid-1950s there was a significant upsurge in the number of Arab immigrants from Egypt even though their number in Canada until 1954 was relatively insignificant. Yet within a period of less than twenty years, (1956-1974), over 17,000 Arab immigrants who came to Canada gave Egypt as their country of origin. Today, Egyptians (as well as Iraqis) are only second to the Lebanese in making up the Canadian Arab population.

The Egyptian immigrants of the 1950s and 1960s were largely Copts and middle class Muslim Egyptians who were disaffected with the socialist transformation of their country by President Nasser. Concerned about religious and economic freedom, they left their country in search of better living conditions elsewhere. Many came to Canada.

The same was, and still is, true for immigrants from other Arab countries, especially Iraq, Palestine, Sudan, and the North African states of Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, and Morocco. The precarious balance that had kept in check volatile and explosive religious and political forces in the Lebanon came apart with horrendous consequences for the Lebanese people in the mid-seventies. A civil war erupted with a level of destruction not seen anywhere in many generations. Tens of thousands of Lebanese came to Canada where many of them had relatives who could either sponsor or nominate them. Some came under the new immigration category of business investors while other came as refugees. Many, in the latter group, were probably of Palestinian origin.

More recently, the human catastrophe that has befallen Iraq precipitated a massive wave of Iraqi immigrants to Canada. The same can be said about the Palestinians. These people have been direct victims of the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, the subsequent Israeli expansionist policies in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and scapegoats for Arab conflicts. The number of Palestinians in Canada is significantly higher than those reported by either the Census or immigration statistics. Because they do not have their own state, Palestinians hold the citizenship of various Arab and non-Arab countries, so that when they come to Canada, Palestinians are likely to be counted as nationals of the countries from which they have just arrived (e.g., Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates), or of countries whose citizenship they hold (e.g., Jordan and Syria).

The Changing Profile of Arab Canadians

The period following WWII, particularly the last five decades, has witnessed not only a substantial growth in Arab immigration to Canada, but also significant changes in the socio-economic characteristics and national origins of Arab immigrants.

Prior to 1954, virtually all Arab immigrants to Canada were from Syria and Lebanon, the majority of them were Christians who came from the many villages and towns that dot the Lebanese and Syrian mountains. After 1945, the national origins of Arab immigrants became far more diversified; their composition in Canada became more representative of the Arab world by region, religion, and social class.

Arab Canadians can be found in virtually all Canadian provinces and major urban centres. However, Ontario, and to a lesser extent Quebec, have always been the provinces of choice for immigrants from the Arab world since the 1950s. According to the most recent Census figures, Ontario is now home to more than 40% of the total Arab population in Canada. The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) alone is home to almost half of Ontario Arabs and close to one-

fifth of all Arab Canadians. Such residential concentration has proven to have quite an impact on social and institutional development. It has resulted in the formation of Arab cultural niches. In Toronto, for example, one can drive along a two-kilometre stretch of Lawrence Avenue and find Arab stores dotting both sides of the street; supermarkets whose shelves stock all kinds of Arabic (and Middle Eastern) food and other products, a bakery that produces and sells thousands of pita bread daily, confectionery/sweet shops whose colourful delights match – in sight, if not always in taste – the best that is produced anywhere in the Arab world. There are also a number of restaurants, which in recent years have been responsible for introducing Canadians to such Arabic foods as *Falafel*, *Hummus*, *Couscos*, *Tabouleh* and so forth. On a typical Saturday, the parking lot of what must be dubbed the “Nasr Plaza” is crowded with people who speak different dialects of Arabic and exchange pleasantries, gossip, and news about the local community and their home countries. The same developments have occurred elsewhere in Mississauga, Montreal, Ottawa, Edmonton, London, Windsor, Hamilton, Halifax and other major urban centres throughout Canada.

Age and Sex Composition

The age and sex composition of an ethnic group has social, economic, and even political consequences. Masculinity ratios – number of males per 100 females – for example, may have an impact on the rate of mixed marriages. Also, the age profile of a group will have an effect on such economic factors as participation in the labour force, and the demands that are placed on such social services as health, education, and employment benefits.

Arab Canadians, when compared with other Canadians, tend to have a younger age profile. This may be due to the fact that the great majority of the Arab Canadian population is made up of recent immigrants who tend to be younger in age. Initially, they also maintain the relatively high fertility rate of the Arab world.

The net effect of this age distribution is that (1) the per capita demands made on government health and other support services for seniors of Arab origin is less than that of the average for the total Canadian population; and (2) that the relatively younger profile of the Arab Canadian population will contribute positively to future entrants into the labour force.

For the Arab community in Canada, there are considerably more males than females. As a result, masculinity rates for Arab Canadians are quite high, especially when compared with national averages. A shortage of females within one’s own ethnic group will, out of necessity if nothing else, force eligible males to seek marriage partners from outside the group. Some may overcome this problem by finding a mate from the “old country”, but the majority will be left with no option but to seek a mate outside their own ethnic group.

Religious Affiliation and Diversity

Although the great majority of Arabs, well in excess of 90%, are Muslims, the religious affiliation of the first wave of Arab immigrants to Canada which lasted until the WWII was predominantly Christian. They brought with them a version of Christianity which, at least in name, was not all that easily recognizable to the average Canadian Catholic or Protestant. They were mostly Melkites, Syrian Orthodox and Maronites.

In the post-Second World War period, the proportion of Muslim Arabs immigrants increased

dramatically with the upsurge of immigration from the Arab world. Those Arab immigrants who came from Egypt in the 50s and 60s were largely Christian. They brought with them a version of Christianity known as Coptic, a Christian sect with deep historical roots in Egypt. The same can be said about Christian immigrants from Iraq who belong to the Assyrian and/or Chaldaean branch of Christianity.

In Canada, the early history of the Arab Muslims goes back to the last half of the 19th century when a few began to immigrate to North America from the Greater Syria area. According to the Canadian Census, in 1871 there were only 12 Muslims in Canada - all living in Ontario. In 1931, there were 645 Muslim residents, probably mostly Arab, spread throughout different regions of Canada. Small size and relatively even geographical spread underlay the slow development of Mosques and related Muslim institutions. In 1938, as many as 20 families residing in Edmonton, Alberta, built the first Canadian Mosque - declared a historic site in 1978 - in that city.

After the Second World War, the Muslim population increased rapidly, mostly in Ontario. Today, there are well over 1.2 million Muslims in Canada - about 33% being of Indo-Pakistani origin, followed closely by Somalis and other Arabs. There are also a good number originating from East and South Africa, the Caribbean, Iran, Turkey, and Europe - principally from Albania, Bosnia and Croatia. Canada is home to roughly 1.2 million Muslims Canadians (about 3.6% of Canada's total population).

By far the largest Islamic religious education and community services are concentrated in the Greater Toronto Area. In this prosperous Canadian city, the Muslims have established a series of religious institutions to cater to the nearly 300,000 members of these Toronto Islamic organizations. To meet the expanding need, old mosques are being expanded and new ones are continuously being built.

The Arab Canadian community has undergone a remarkable degree of institutional development involving religious, social, and secular organizations. The most prominent of secular and pan-Arab Canadian organization is the Canadian Arab Federation (CAF) that was founded in 1967 as a direct by-product of the Six Day War of June of that fateful year. Currently, there are numerous newspapers and other types of popular Canadian Arab media outlets. Both the religious and secular ethnic institutions have provided a link with the ancestral land, reinforcing the maintenance of cultural and linguistic identity. At the same time, they have played an important role adaptive role, encouraging acculturative change and integration with the host society.

A Socio-Economic Profile of Arab Canadians

The first wave of Arab immigrants to Canada which lasted until the WWII was characterized by people who were mostly uneducated and unskilled. They were quite young, single, and primarily interested in making money (A good example of that generation is the family of Leon's Furniture Stores). Handicapped by their limited knowledge of North American culture and the English language, they sought jobs that did not require familiarity with either of these. The majority of them made a living working as industrial labourers, as peddlers or as shopkeepers.

The more recent immigrants from the Arab world, however, have been better educated, more professionally qualified and more adept at coping with the demands of modern society. Add to this the emphasis that Arabs have traditionally placed on education, and the

result is an Arab community in Canada whose members, on average, enjoy high levels of educations, of income, and of occupational status.

The economic adaptation of the early Arab immigrants was often linked with a keen desire for economic and occupational success. (The story of Clair Haddad and her remarkably successful career in the fashion industry could be used as an example). Many of the early Syrian immigrants entered the labour force through peddlery, an independent but relatively low status occupation. Through devotion to hard work, frugality and reciprocal support, the three elements of what can be described as the “Levantine Ethic”, peddlers often experienced a steady rise in their economic fortunes and a broadening of their entrepreneurial functions (The story of the founders of Leon’s Furniture stores is an excellent example).

The post-war immigrants entered Canada with higher average educational and occupational qualifications and the majority of them planned to follow professional and other white collar careers. Thus the economic/occupational characteristics of the typical Arab immigrant have been changing.

Economic adaptation is a central life concern, relevant not only to the material but also the social, psychological and spiritual well-being of the individual immigrant and his/her ethnic community. Throughout the years, Arab immigrants and their descendants have entered all levels of the occupational hierarchy, some of them achieving renown in their respective fields (Clair Haddad: Fashion designer, Leon’s Furniture; the late Joe Ghiz, former premier of PEI is a powerful symbol of how Prince Edward Island’s Lebanese community has overcome prejudice and won the respect of the Islanders; virtually every Canadian university has one of more faculty member who is of Arab origin).

Adaptation to Canadian Life

The successful adjustment of Arab immigrants requires both linguistic and psychological adaptation. It requires that they learn or improve their knowledge of one or both of Canada’s official languages and, as well, that they develop new attitudes and commitments, which may be reflected in such things as acquiring Canadian citizenship, deciding to make Canada a permanent home and developing a general liking for Canadian society and culture.

The acculturation experience, how an ethnic group adapts to the host society, is greatly influenced by (1) how it is perceived by the other dominant groups; (2) how it perceives the other groups; and (3) how it perceives itself.

It is generally accepted that the higher is the level of education or occupational status, the easier it is for the immigrant to cope with the challenges of entering a new society. Among other things, education provides a person knowledge, language and conceptual skills, and problem solving tools that enable him/her to deal better with the demands of acculturation. Good occupational qualifications also make it easier for the immigrant to deal with one of the most pressing practical problems upon entry, finding a job.

There has been a strong tendency for immigrants from the Arab world to be favourable to permanent residence in Canada and to the acquisition of Canadian citizenship. There is no doubt about their generally positive feelings towards the new way of life, despite attachment to certain aspects of the Arab heritage. Having experienced both East and West,

and having chosen the West, Arab immigrants see acculturative change, in the form of integration, as desirable, yet they and their descendants have continued to maintain links with the ancestral heritage.

Whether or not an Arab Canadian knows Arabic, links with the ancestral heritage can be, and have been, maintained through such things as Arabic food, music, dances, mass media exposure, visits to the Old Country (or homeland), and correspondence with friends and relatives left behind.

Arab cultural identity in Canada is not likely to be reduced to a uniform configuration among Arab Canadians, and we will probably always encounter patterned variations in its strength. Because of the relative youthfulness of the immigrant generation, coupled with its numerical dominance, Arab ethnicity will continue to be vigorously manifested, especially with continued immigration from the Arab world. Also, the federal government's policy of multiculturalism and relatively tolerant public attitude towards ethnic differences, if continued, will enhance the development and preservation of ethnic identity without diminishing loyalty to Canada as the chosen land. Pluralism is one of Canada's foundational values. It is based on the recognition that our diversity is a source of strength and that every individual and community has an equal voice and can, and should, use that voice to participate as a full member of the Canadian society.

For Arab Canadians, living in Canada has meant the adoption of many Canadian norms and values. To be sure, they have also retained, in varying degrees, their ethnic identity and elements of the cultural heritage; but the demands of the new socio-cultural system have necessitated the development of new orientations and modes of behaviour. As a consequence, they now have in common the experience of having abandoned, or even rejected some of the ways of the Old Country, in the process of embracing the ways of the new land. This process appears to intensify with each succeeding generation and with economic advancement.

At the same time, there are also pressures towards the maintenance of ethnic identity, reflected in part in a moderate degree of institutional development within the Arab Canadian community. The ethnic institutions developed include churches, mosques, secular associations, newspapers, radio and TV programs. In addition, the Arab-Canadian family has played a role in maintaining aspects of the ancestral heritage. In all other spheres, Arab Canadians have been, and still are, integrated with the institutions of the larger society.

The Future

We have already pointed out the major reasons why Arab immigrants to Canada: wars, population displacement, political instability, religious persecution (real or imagined), economic deprivation, and the existence of attractive conditions in Canada. Unfortunately, there is little reason to believe that the political and social conditions in the Arab world is likely to improve in the foreseeable future.

Economically, the Arab world is in dire straits. The widening gulf between rich and poor is festering a growing frustration among millions of the Arab masses. Many of them can easily become convinced that Arab wealth, in the form of oil, is being squandered by the few in collusion with a decadent West. Increases in population size coupled with improvements in education have produced a large class of qualified and energetic young people who have very limited employment prospects in the Arab countries. Furthermore, the initial optimism

that characterized the earlier phase of the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks, there is now the realization that peace is not likely to break out soon.

The festering Arab-Israeli conflict with its destabilizing effects on the whole region, combined with the dangerous situation in the Gulf (i.e., the conflict with Iraq), and the mounting social and political problems throughout the Arab world, will no doubt put pressure on Canada to admit more, rather than less, immigrants from Arab countries.

In conclusion one may be justified to say that the Canadian Arab community (1) is growing in numbers and influence; (2) is diverse but culturally unified; (3) has an integrationist mode of acculturation; and (4) is a misunderstood community.

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