

Language in the UK Diaspora, or What Colour is a Zebra?

by HJ

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Do we need Arabic to work with Arab world Muslims in the UK? Well, you know the story. You get two people up really close to a zebra. One says 'It's black'; the other is sure it's white. You need to step back a bit to get a clearer picture. So trying to step back a bit from ministry in the UK, what do we see?

Populations

We meet at least four separate groups:

- **Immigrants.** They have been here from zero to forty years. Some were born here and have been through a complete British education. Others just stepped off a plane.
- **Students.** Mostly they are here for a three-year university course and have good levels of English. Some come for two to six months to learn English.
- **Asylum seekers.** Many did not expect to be in Britain. They have made few plans, and learned little language ahead of time. Many will only stay for under two

years before being required to return home.

- **Tourists.** London is a major destination for Arab world holiday makers.

In comparing these groups with 'typical' residents of their home country, we need to apply at least two extra analytical grids:

Cultural grid

Clearly, Arab world cultures are nowhere near homogenous. Of particular note for us are the differences caused by affluence and level of education. But whatever their starting culture, when Arab world Muslims arrive in the UK, they begin a process of cultural adaptation. Some integrate much more quickly than others. Some, often for religious or ethnic reasons, integrate very slowly. Often, these groups, when confronted by unhidden moral corruption in society, prefer to withdraw in order to protect themselves and their children. Even so, over time their society adapts to British culture. Their perception of the 'home' culture tends to fossilize, reflecting the way things were at home years ago. Under-

standing and adapting to their culture, even with no Arabic language, will greatly help in building relationships with them.

Language grid

Language adaptation does not always parallel cultural adaptation, but they trend in similar directions. Some have reasonable English when they arrive. Others have none. Some communities – notably the Yemenis, and to some degree, the Moroccans – have set up their own businesses and work within Arabic-speaking ghettos. Brides are brought from ‘home’, since you can’t be confident that a girl growing up in the morally loose West will be a virgin. The new brides have no English and sometimes are prevented from attending classes. Rather, they are kept at home to avoid being corrupted.

Added to these two grids, we have the very significant presence of the British church. Christians are meeting Arabs from day to day. Very few Christians with secular jobs can be expected to learn Arabic, but they are involved (if only it were more!) in outreach.

Language needs for workers

Therefore, given a diverse population from across the Arab world, as well as the varying levels of cultural adaptation and language proficiency, what level of Arabic do workers need in the UK?

Those Arabs who have just arrived, either as immigrants or asylum seekers, may have very little English. Yet this group is often the most receptive to the gospel. They are not ghettoised and are still open to new ideas. Their lives are facing change. Some have come from situations of real danger because of their opposition to an Islamic government, and this has led to a questioning of Islam. Such people need loving care, and here the UK church has done good work. But language is a real barrier and *Arabic speakers are vital*.

Very few Arabs who arrive in the UK as adults ever really get to the point of English being their heart language. Reading skills, especially, may be limited. While discussions can be held in English, there is less emotional pull towards a truth presented in it.

For children educated in Britain, however, the opposite is true. They may speak Arabic, but they do not read it well, if at all. Their parents’ ‘home’ country is not theirs – they identify themselves as British. *Children’s work not only **can** be done, it is **best** done in English.*

The hidden signals

Immigrant communities live under a degree of threat, and they feel alien. There is a specialist role for speakers of Arabic here. They are greeted as friends, the language signifying a shared identity. Westerners who speak Arabic validate that identity, and their language skill carries the

hidden message: 'We appreciate, value and are prepared to expend effort to serve you'. Where a distinctive dialect is spoken (for example, Moroccan), the bond is especially strong.

What level of Arabic?

There are three very distinct levels of language that count:

- An ability to greet, ask a few simple questions, and give a little information (level 0+ on the language grid). This gains workers an acceptance as those who have troubled to learn something of the culture. No significant conversations will take place in Arabic at this level. But a bond is there, especially if the worker has visited the home country of the Arab friend.
- An ability to hold spiritual conversations (level 3 on the language grid). Here, the proficiency is such that ministry can be conducted in Arabic. Workers who have

achieved such a level are unlikely to lose their Arabic even if opportunities to practise are in short supply for a period.

- Native speakers (level 5 on the grid). They are accepted as Arabs.

Moving from level 0+ to level 3 takes most workers at least two years – maybe quite a bit longer. Is it worth the effort to do this? In an ideal world, I believe a healthy team in the UK needs to have a mix of people. Although friendship is not always transferable, friends can often, with care, be passed on. A friendship begun in limited English can be continued by another worker in fluent Arabic. The ideal team would, therefore, mix some with level 0+ in Arabic, some with level 3 and some native speakers. So whether you are working with the white part or the black part of the zebra, you can have significant ministry. And if your skills do not match what is needed, you can pass your friend on to a worker of a different stripe.

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