



Arab Media Watch
for objective British coverage of Arab issues

Study: The Term 'Arab' in the British Press

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Introduction

The term 'Arab' occurs in the mainstream British press in a number of ways. Although many refer to simple statements of fact, there are a large number of uses that, when analysed, reveal trends which in turn reflect on the papers using them, and more broadly, give insights into how Arabs are perceived in the British press.

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

Negative Portrayals

Business

The term 'Arab' is mentioned a total of 85 times in connection with business. Perhaps predictably, the Financial Times accounts for the lion's share of those - 35.

The potential of the Arab world in the business sector is well known, and is reflected in the business pages. However, this belies a certain ambivalence towards business in the region; the Guardian notes that there is some reservation among "Congressional figures" in the US over economic inroads into America by Arab nations "perceived to be unreliable allies."

Nonetheless, the business pages in general note a new generation of Gulf Arabs and investors that are coming to the fore. The Times, for example, describes a "a resurgent Arab world."

However, contrasting this is a more belligerent feel provided by the Daily Star and Daily Mail. The former uses the headline "Arab battle hits London" when reporting the possible takeover of the London Stock Exchange by Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. This hint of suspicion is more clearly evinced by the latter in a headline about the possible takeover of British Land, a property investment company: "Arabs have eyes on British Land."

Travel

The term 'Arab' occurs 40 times in the travel sections of the newspapers monitored. Frequently, the context is of being conquerors, although as one of many throughout history.

Many cities or places - including Cyprus, Kerala, Malaysia, Crete, Sicily, Ibo, Gozo, Mallorca and Zanzibar - are described as having been at one point or other occupied or invaded by Arabs (and Chinese, Portuguese, British, Romans, Indians, Byzantines, Venetians, Turks, Malays, Greeks, 'Moorish occupants' and Nazis).

The Daily Telegraph writes of "Arab raiders" attacking the coast of Cyprus "from the seventh to the 10th centuries." By contrast, descriptions of places in the Arab world are fewer.

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.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes about wealthy Arabs persist. Apparently, their habits include frequenting luxurious hotels, treating Knightsbridge as a home from home, gambling in London's casinos (to "escape the desert heat"), spending huge sums on property and super yachts, and driving Bentleys.

Politics

In describing politics, the designation "Arab states" in referring to countries of the Middle East is most common, though often it is used with various qualifiers, including "pro-western", "key", "conservative" and "moderate." Notably, the Financial Times and Independent, when using the phrase "moderate Arab states," place "moderate" in inverted commas.

It is rare that greater distinctions other than "moderate" or otherwise are made, so little information about the country in question is conveyed; the reader can only surmise that it is not considered relevant. Contradiction and confusion can occur due to both this and editorial bias.

For example, the Daily Telegraph describes Saudi Arabia as "conservative" in a negative context ("Saudis are no brothers in arms," 1 August), yet the Sunday Telegraph describes the country as "moderate" when its help is needed to shore up the Annapolis peace talks. The distinctions made within the region, then, are chiefly characterised by how their stance is perceived in the West and in relation to Western political agendas.

Iraq

Some of the most frequent terms to occur in the reporting of Iraq are the labels 'Sunni' and 'Shia' often affixed to 'Arab', which are used for convenience as signifiers, to signpost meaning. This can be seen in the following dense sentence in the Guardian:

"Representatives of Moqtada al-Sadr, Adnan al-Dulaimi, the leader of the largest Sunni Arab political group, and Humam Hammoudi, the Shia chairman of the Iraqi parliament's foreign affairs committee, are reported to have attended the seminar."

However, this broad trend does not serve to clarify the situation being reported, but instead complicates the issue.

The chief observation stemming from the use of the term 'Arab' in reporting Iraq is that it is employed considerably more as a qualifier for the designation 'Sunni.' Things that are described or designated as "Sunni Arab" include an "insurgent group", "political coalition", "order", "political alliance", "bloc", "extremists", "tribes", "hinterland" and "militants." Sunni Arabs are referred to 19 times.

The overall effect of this is that an ideology, a distinct set of organised politics, and a geographical area in which they operate, are erroneously implied under the blanket sectarian and religious label of Sunni.

By contrast, Shia Arabs are referred to just five times. With the majority of references being to simply 'Shia,' there is the danger that Shia Arabs are portrayed as intrinsically different to Sunni Arabs, obscuring the fact that they are ethnically the same. This is an antagonistic trend, given the general tendency in the mainstream media to rely on sectarian labels that suggest division where none necessarily or historically exists.

Sudan

The Darfur conflict is evidently still a major story in the British press, and one in which the term 'Arab' features regularly - a total of 78 times: in the Guardian (25), Times (12), Independent (13), Telegraph (10), Financial Times (5), Sun (4), Observer (3), Sunday Telegraph (3), Express (1), Independent on Sunday (1) and Daily Mail (1).

There is no agreement or consistency about the origin or nature of the Darfur conflict. It is described in a number of ways:

"The civil war has its roots in clashes between the government, its armed Arab militia the Janjaweed and Darfuri rebel groups, who accuse Khartoum of ignoring the region economically and politically." (Sunday Telegraph)

"It is an environmental war, a fight over the twin resources of land and water." (Observer)

"The conflict is essentially the Arabs against the Africans. It's all tied up in various battles over things like oil and gold." (Sun)

"The conflict...pits Sudan's Arab elite against Darfur's non Arab ethnic groups." (Times)

"The conflict began in February 2003 when ethnic African tribes rebelled against what they consider decades of neglect and discrimination by the Arab-dominated government." (Independent)

"The Darfur conflict broke out after relations between African Fur farming communities and the mostly Arab or Arabised nomadic tribes who grazed their herds deteriorated with creeping desertification." (FT)

From this small selection, it can be seen that ethnicity is taken to be the most dominant factor. However, religion does occur occasionally as well:

"The conflict, pitting Arab Muslims backed by the Sudanese government against black African Muslims..." (Guardian)

"The Muslim Arab government and allied Janjaweed militia are fighting rebel, largely Christian, Africans." (Sun)

That the Sun - a mainstream daily newspaper with the highest circulation figures in Britain - still publishes such a gross inaccuracy some four and a half years after the fighting began (when it has always been clear that this is an intra-Muslim conflict) is quite remarkable.

Two main ideas recur through the reporting of the Darfur conflict - the "Arab-dominated government" (Times, Independent, Guardian) and "Arab militia" (Times, Independent, Guardian, Express, Mail, Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Observer, Independent on Sunday).

The government is described, variously, as "dominated" by Arabs or "comprised of ethnic Arabs," whereas the idea of "Arab militia" frequently crops up under various formulations: "Arab militia", "Arab Janjaweed militia", "Arab militia on horseback", "pro-government Arab Janjaweed militias" and "camel-riding Arab Janjawid militia."

However, if ethnicity is a dominant connotation in the conceptualisation of the conflict, then Arabs as an ethnicity suffer from the terms in which it is portrayed. This is a persistent feature of the reporting of Darfur which has adapted little despite five years of changing conflict.

The Arabs of Darfur are African, and to conceive of them otherwise is nonsensical. Rather, it is more accurate to conceive of them as ethnically indistinguishable, but politically distinct - 'Arab' is a subset of 'African.' The nature of this changing conflict has been better expressed elsewhere:

"What began as a rebellion by three non-Arab tribes against perceived marginalisation by the Arab-dominated Khartoum government has escalated into a complex multi-layered conflict...There are Arabs fighting alongside the rebels and Africans siding with the government. Arab tribes are fighting other Arab tribes - some are even fighting themselves."

"If it was ever as simple to describe the conflict as a 'genocide' of black Africans by an Arab government - and few analysts in Sudan believe it was - it certainly is not now."

"It is less about ethnic cleansing and more about power."

Steve Bloomfield, Africa correspondent, Independent, 30 April 2007

"...the conflict belies the popular myth that the country is divided along ethnic lines, between an Arab Muslim north and a Christian or animist, black south. In Darfur, where the vast majority of people are Muslims and Arabic-speaking, the distinction between 'Arab' and 'African' is more cultural than racial."

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

The conclusion is that the term 'Arab' continues to be used for convenience at the expense of clarity in conveying the facts of the story, with 'African' being used as an all-too-obvious opposition. The attraction of the media to these binary opposites is clear: the story can be portrayed with easy-to-recognise bad guys and victims.

However, it is inconceivable that 'Arab' and 'African' can be used as blanket terms to convey the changing complexities of five years of conflict. The complex interaction of a variety of influences - such as limited natural resources, diverse and fluid social groupings, political orchestration and a poor international response - have all served to render the conflict more intractable.

The reality now involves a large number of fractured opposition groups - not even those most closely involved can name or number them - who have taken up arms and are vying for a measure of political power in a generally lawless region of Sudan. Greater effort needs to be made in delineating the many groups that interact and form the powerful dynamics of the Darfur conflict.

On one occasion, politics crossed over into sport in an over-simplified and misleading way. In reporting the bright future of a basketball player who emigrated to Britain from Sudan, the Sun (6 October) described the player's departure thus: "...he did not think his Christian family were safe in a country increasingly dominated by Islamic fundamentalists. Many of his fellow Dinka people had been murdered by Arabs."

The political pages are still struggling with the complexities of the conflicts in Sudan, so perhaps it is unsurprising that the sports pages are likewise some distance off.

Comment

The term 'Arab' occurs with reasonable regularity in the comments pages of newspapers. Following are a few of the more outstanding examples which can serve as a sample to indicate the less objective things that are published about Arabs.

Daily Mail

Examples during the monitoring period include a description of the arrest of a terror suspect on the Afghanistan / Pakistan border "in the company of a gang of Arabs" (Richard Littlejohn), and "wherever you go, from Egypt to Ethiopia, the Gulf Arabs are bitterly resented" (Michael Burleigh), or:

"It seems you can compare George Bush to Hitler or call Israel a fascist state, but dare to suggest that Yasser Arafat was corrupt or that Arab states bear responsibility for the condition of Palestinians and you'll be cast out of campus as an intellectual pariah" (Ruth Dudley Edwards).

Sunday Times

The Sunday Times' only use of the term 'Arab' that is worthy of mention is from Rod Liddle: "...there will still be Arab websites insisting that Diana was about to convert to Islam, wear a copious veil and blow herself up in front of some startled corgis."

Times

There were few mentions of the term 'Arab' in the Times, with one notable - and non-sequitur - instance in the sports pages, in which Gabrielle Marcotti describes the sale of a football player from one club to another: "It was the transfer market equivalent of when Indiana Jones, confronted by the menacing, scimitar-wielding Arab, pulled out his pistol and wasted him with one bullet."

Observer

The Observer published this sweeping example from Andrew Roberts during the monitoring period:

"In several Arab countries that are presently dictatorships, a full, free and fair democratic election would probably bring pro-al-Qaeda governments into power, and thus the inevitability of sharia law, then dictatorship and then war."

Daily Express

Not a huge demonstration within the Express comment pages of the papers' position on the Arab world, although Frederick Forsyth makes it fairly clear:

"Is it not odd that those mass-murdering swine on trial for their lives in Baghdad all appear in traditional Arab fig of robes and keffiyeh? When they were in power, they were never seen without their army uniforms. So why the change? It is to appear to the Arab world as just another harmless little old desert Arab being persecuted by us nasty honkies."

The columnist Hickey notes a certain political agenda in the Foreign Office, suggesting that "traditionally pro-Arab mandarins have repeatedly vetoed official royal visits to Israel, citing security concerns."

Daily Star

The Arab world is not a regular subject in the Star, and the few references made are within a British context. However, the two mentions (both from Dominik Diamond) of the term 'Arab' during the monitoring period are stereotypical and sweeping in nature. Firstly, on the selection of Big Brother contestants: "There are the obvious, readymade conflict choices: An Arab, a Jew and a Buddhist."

Secondly, on the NHS: "There must be some NHS staff who aren't Arab terrorists, surely?" However, after an AMW Action Alert and letters of complaint to Diamond, he published an apology in his next column.

Film

The category of film contains references to those shown in the cinema or on TV. Generally, Arabs are not well portrayed.

For example, the film *Munich* - relating the dramatised story of the pursuit by Mossad agents of PLO militants who killed Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in 1972 - is a story which pits Israelis against Palestinians, but the Guardian's preview in the 'Pick of the Day' section refers more generally to the pursuit of "Arab foes" and "Arab killers."

However, whereas the preview writer recognises a moral debate contained in the film, this is not the norm; an article in the Guardian on recent Hollywood films about US involvement in the Middle East acknowledges they have been "thin" - Rules of Engagement "mainly involved shooting Arabs."

The Observer makes the connection between the current depiction of Arabs in film and the state of affairs as seen by George Orwell in a 1939 essay: "Arab, Afghan etc: Sinister, treacherous."

The latest Hollywood blockbuster, *The Kingdom*, lauded in some Western circles for a more sympathetic portrayal of Arabs, was dismissed in Middle Eastern circles.

The Observer reports that it was banned in Bahrain and Kuwait, where censors believe it is "unsympathetic in its portrayal of Arabs." The Independent on Sunday writes that the film pits Americans against "the superstitious, red-tape-tangled Arabs," and the Times notes that it has "a rising body count of nameless, faceless Arab guerrillas."

However, this repeatedly unsympathetic portrayal is a point picked up on. The Daily Telegraph writes in a review of *Rendition*, a film set largely in Arab countries about the extraordinary rendition and torture of suspects in the 'war on terror':

"...it's disconcerting to see the Americans represented as concerned quasi-liberals, morally-anguished do-gooders, while the Arabs aren't given anywhere near the same degree of back story, complexity or propulsive heroism."

Acknowledgement of an Arab film industry occurs just once during the monitoring period, but nonetheless provides a valuable insight to the region away from the prism of Western film.

The Times published a feature on Israeli director Eran Kolirin, who is quoted as saying that watching Arab movies in the 1980s "was the only time when Arab culture and Arab language were infused into our houses without any political context, just as a story, just hearing the sound of the language."

Positive Portrayals

Although there are still many negative and confused instances in which the term 'Arab' is used in the British mainstream media, there are areas in which positive portrayals can be found - namely in culture, travel, and the use of real names.

Culture

An analysis under the broad heading of 'culture' provides some interesting insights. The term 'Arab' occurs 37 times, with a couple of categories worthy of comment.

Theatre

Most insights in this category can be drawn from reviews of the well-received *Damascus* by David Grieg, a play about an English-language textbook writer attempting to sell his textbook to the Syrian authorities. The Times reviews it favourably, concluding that those who should see it include: "Any Briton hoping to understand Arab feelings just a bit better."

The reviewer in the Daily Telegraph agrees, complimenting the sensitivity and talent of the playwright and commenting on "secularist Arab disdain for Britain's tolerance of fundamentalist practice." The reviewer in the Daily Mail sees significance in the play regarding Britain's relationship with the Arab world: "We are bewitched but we have lost any connection with its codes of respect and its social disciplines."

Fashion

The Financial Times reports that an international fashion week is due to be held in Abu Dhabi with the aim of "showcasing the talents of the next wave of Arab designers to international retail buyers and the media."

Real names

There are instances in which the term 'Arab' occurs as part of a real name.

United Arab Emirates

By far the most frequent example is the UAE, which occurs 123 times, 29 of these in the tabloids. These mentions appear most frequently on the business pages, where negative connotations occasionally appear. However, the positive context of the UAE and business is related to foreigners: the country is generally reported as a good place to invest in property, or for ex-pats to work.

Burj al-Arab

The Burj al-Arab hotel in Dubai is mentioned 24 times during the monitoring period, of which seven occur in the Guardian, and seven in the tabloids. It is commonly portrayed as an example of glamour and ostentatious comfort. The contexts in which it is most commonly mentioned are wealth, travel, architecture or sport.

Travel

Cities or places in the Arab world are written about infrequently. Those written about during the monitoring period using the term 'Arab' are Tunis, Petra, Wadi Rum, Damascus, Cairo and Sharm el-Sheikh. The descriptions are generally positive, and visits are advised. The Times says Damascus is "friendly, and in the admirable Arab tradition, visitors are made welcome."