

*Mustafa Switat\**

## **Arabic Community in Poland – Facts and Myths. Research Report**

**Abstract:** *Refugee/immigrant crisis in Europe is connected mostly with Arab or Muslim minorities. Negative perceiving of those groups in Poland is often based on stereotypes, myths and exaggerated facts. In this paper was made an attempt to confront the image of the Arab community living in Poland, which is functioning among Poles with the own image of the group, reconstructed on the basis of interviews and surveys conducted with representatives of the Arab community and Poles in the research field. Most frequently repeated myths about Arabs occurring among Polish respondents also was and the most popular stereotypes relating to the tested group. Myths and stereotypes have been confronted with the results of Author's own research, which undermine their legitimacy.*

**Keywords:** Arabs, Poland, Arabs in Poland, Arab community, Arab Diaspora, myths, facts

### **Introduction**

Although not affecting Poland directly, the European migrant crisis has deepened the Islamophobic and Anti-Arab atmosphere in Poland. It is so because the uncontrolled wave of immigrants and refugees predominantly comprises inhabitants of Muslim or Arab countries, and negative occurrences related to it are featured in the media. As a result, many myths and

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stereotypes of the Arab community, which mostly mirror those foreign experiences where the Arab Diaspora is numerous, circulate among the Poles. This article aims at introducing the most popular, as the research has demonstrated, of the aforementioned myths and stereotypes.<sup>1</sup>

## **1. Researching the Arab Diaspora in Poland**

This article is based on the results obtained during fieldwork conducted from May 2013 to March 2014. A hundred representatives of the Arab community in Poland and (to compare) a hundred Poles were examined using, i.a., the snowball sampling technique. The research was conducted in twelve Polish cities, in which branches of Polish-Arab organizations are located and most numerous Arab communities exist. In this text, I present a sample of opinions voiced by the study participants. The study was based on a triangulation method,<sup>2</sup> meaning the parallel usage of a couple of research techniques (individual in-depth interviewing, expert interviews and questionnaires).

The representatives of the Arab community were recruited according to their date of arrival in Poland. The Arabs who arrived most recently can be considered a 'new' Diaspora (50 respondents, marked ND in the text), whereas those who came before 1989 and stayed in Poland create an 'old' Diaspora (50 respondents, marked OD in the text). Three groups surfaced from amongst the Polish respondents: the favourable Poles (FP in the text), the unfavourable (UP in the text), and the undecided Poles (UDP in the text), that is those who replied 'hard to say' to the question 'are you favourably disposed to the Arab community in Poland?' The most, about two-third of the respondents, declared to be favourably disposed toward the Arabs, while there were a few of those who declared to be unfavourably disposed towards them.<sup>3</sup>

## **2. There are plenty of Arabs in Poland and they are expansive**

When answering a question about their first contact with someone of Arab descent, one Pole said: 'often, on the streets, there are a lot of them' (UP8). After just a preliminary data analysis it can be jokingly said that

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<sup>1</sup> The figures are presented for the purposes of this article and statistical inference was applied only with regards to the targeted sample. Therefore, the results of my research relate only to the examined representatives of both communities.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. Frankfort-Nachmias, D. Nachmias, *Research Methods in the Social Sciences (Metody badawcze w naukach społecznych)*, Poznań 2001, pp. 222–223.

<sup>3</sup> M. Switat – *The Arab Community in Poland. The Old and the New Diaspora (Społeczność arabska w Polsce. Stara i nowa diaspora)* (in print).

Arabs in Poland are like ghosts – nobody has seen them, but almost everybody is afraid of them. It is so because:

- 1) a relatively small number of Poles have direct contact with the Arabs (41%).
- 2) taking into account the fact that the Arab Diaspora in Poland amounts to approximately 10,000 persons,<sup>4</sup> there is one person of Arab descent per approx. 3,850 inhabitants. Also, Poland is 134<sup>th</sup> in the world when it comes to the absolute number of immigrants (-0.47 migrants/1,000 population<sup>5</sup>).
- 3) the official data on the number of foreigners in Poland lack detailed information regarding foreigners of the Arab descent (the data from the register of residents do not correspond with the data from the Office for Foreigners regarding valid residence cards).

Therefore, taking into account the numerousness of the Arab Diaspora in Germany, France or Great Britain (oscillating in hundreds of thousands), there is no expansion of the Arab community in Poland, especially since most of the respondents came to Poland in 1985–1989 (22 respondents). What is more, according to my research the ‘undecided’ Poles are not against any individuals of Arab descent, they are against large groups, which was confirmed by one of the respondents: ‘individually – when it comes to each person – yes, as a community – I am very afraid of them and I am afraid of the expansion’ (UDP11).

The Arab community in Poland is small, but it is highly mobile. The turnover of its members is particularly high within the ‘new’ Diaspora – some arrive to Poland and some leave Poland (only the representatives of the ‘new’ Diaspora, 54% of the respondents, hold residence permits for a specified period of time). At the same time, having a Polish citizenship or a long-term resident permit by other members of the Diaspora does not mean that the Arab respondents with such statuses will forever remain in Poland. Only about one-third of the interviewees declare that they do not plan on coming back to their country of origin due to, e.g. not having a place to go back to or not feeling a connection to their country.

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<sup>4</sup> M. Switat, *The organization of the old and the new Arab Diaspora in Poland (Organizacja starej i nowej diaspory arabskiej w Polsce)* in: *A changing world. Demographic, social and economic perspective (Zmieniający się świat. Perspektywa demograficzna, społeczna i gospodarcza)*, J. Osiński, M. Pachocka (eds.), Warsaw 2013, p. 160.

<sup>5</sup> Source: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2112rank.html?countryName=France&countryCode=fr&regionCode=eur&rank=51#fr> (last visited 15.03.2014).

The remaining respondents would like to come back to their country of origin (usually in their old age or when the situation of their country improves). Yet, it should be said that 11% of them are doctoral students or students who plan on coming back when they graduate.

### **3. Arabs in Poland benefit from the Polish social welfare system just like they do in the Western countries**

Polish respondents think that immigrants in Poland – including the Arabs – live at the expense of the host country by benefiting from the social welfare system, just like they do in the Western Europe. For instance, when answering the question ‘what is the attitude of the Polish state towards the Arabs,’ one Pole said that they get paid more than the Poles, ‘which is a scandal!’ (UP4). However, the real situation is the opposite – the Arabs in Poland do not use the help of the state (with the exception of the refugees who are subject to integration programs, but only 2 out of 100 of my respondents fell into that category) and 94% of the Arab respondents work or study in Poland. What is more, in accordance with the Polish law foreigners must confirm that they have health insurance and a stable and regular source of income, which allows them to cover their own costs of living, as well as those of their dependent family members. This applies to all types of residence permits in Poland: from a visa, through residence permits for a specified period of time, to a permission to settle or a long-term stay.<sup>6</sup>

### **4. Arabs (immigrants) ‘steal’ jobs from the Poles**

According to the ‘unfavourable’ Poles and the majority of the ‘undecided’ it would be better if there were no Arabs in Poland, because there are now ‘fewer jobs for the Poles’ (UDP13) as they ‘snatch jobs’ (UP8). In reality, the most numerous group of the respondents from the Arab Diaspora (42%) run their own companies (e.g. trade, construction, training, gastronomy) and hire Poles, thus actually creating job opportunities. Moreover, some of the representatives of the Arab community in Poland work as specialists, i.a. teachers, lecturers, scientists, doctors or engineers. Those representatives are appreciated by the Poles – 84% of Poles accept an Arab doctor and 68% accept an Arab boss (according to the Bogardus social distance scale).

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<sup>6</sup> Act of 12 December 2013 on foreigners (Ustawa o cudzoziemcach z dnia 12 grudnia 2013 r.), Dz.U., item 1650.

## 5. ‘When you buy a kebab, you settle an Arab’

When answering a question about the places where they meet people of Arab descent, one of the Polish respondents said: ‘I don’t meet them, I just see them, because I don’t go to [the kebab places] (“when you buy a kebab, you settle an Arab”)’ (UP3). It is one of the most complex myths. On the one hand, it denies the Arabs the right to live in Poland; on the other, it suggests that all the places in which kebab is sold in Poland are run by people of Arab descent and that every Arab living in Poland works there.

Such places have owners and workers of different nationalities, and some of them may be confused with members of the Arab community, e.g. the Turks, the Bengalis or Pakistanis. Also, many Poles open these types of dining facilities, capitalizing on the popularity of the oriental cuisine. In the centre of Warsaw, the most popular places are almost always crowded, which means that the Polish people enjoy the dishes served there (of the Polish respondents, 54% like the Arab cuisine and 25% associate it with a kebab). Only 5 respondents from the ‘new’ Arab Diaspora and 8 from the ‘old’ Arab Diaspora work or own a dining facility (13% of the respondents).

As it was mentioned above – representatives of the Arab community in Poland do not seek any social welfare from the Polish state. Just the opposite – they are enterprising, they create jobs. Those who criticize such dining establishments forget that many Poles work there and that the state budget benefits from their taxes.

This myth is also connected with a subjective feeling that this type of work is for uneducated, low-level people. Consequently, it suggests that Arabs are uneducated, low-skilled people. Meanwhile, almost 80% of the Arab Diaspora in Poland hold university degrees (at least). What is more, there were no respondents with a lower than secondary level of education. The representatives of the Arab community in Poland either already have (1/5 of the respondents) or soon will have doctoral degrees in one or two fields of study (engineering, political, economic, judicial), while some are professors. What is more, 85% of the respondents from the Arab Diaspora who live in Poland know English and the following languages (apart from Polish and Arabic), i.a. French, Russian, German. 47% of them speak Polish, Arabic and one more language. 48% know at least 2 (up to 6) additional languages.

As it has been mentioned, 79% of the members of the examined Arab community are university graduates. If an Arab works in a dining establishment, he/she is an educated person with a diploma, so probably it is

out of necessity, not by choice. This type of work is treated as temporary and transient. Sometimes working in food establishments is the only way to earn money. This is a problem within the new Arab Diaspora – the lack of fluency in Polish makes it hard to find a job in line with one's qualifications and education (12% of representatives of the 'new' Diaspora admit their knowledge of Polish is rudimentary). For many members of the 'new' Diaspora, working in food establishments constitutes a stigma and an almost inescapable vicious circle. They go into the food industry because they do not know Polish well enough. However, they do not have the time or the possibilities to learn Polish and integrate with the community when working there. Therefore, they are bound to work in such places for the remainder of their stay in Poland – when they look for jobs more in line with their education, they do so with food industry experience, which is not welcomed by potential employers.

## **6. Arabs in Poland do not integrate with the Polish people**

The Arab respondents think of integration as, i.a. 'common life, respecting others, respecting their individual rights and obligations, the law of the country, preserving their own identity while remaining open to that of the others' (ND8); 'firstly, an integrated recipient; secondly, a mutual respect for the two cultures, mine for the Polish culture and a Pole's for my own, and tolerance. As I understand it, it's integration on both sides. When somebody wants to integrate, a society must be willing to accept that person, which is why it's a two-way process, the door must be open' (ND27). Thus, as the research shows, the integration of a migrant community with a host community is dependent on both sides, but learning the language lies at its foundation. All of the Arab respondents know Polish: 82% at an at least satisfactory level. What is more, 90% are well-versed in Polish culture, history and famous Poles; 88% are interested in the future of Poland. Even though only 41% of the Polish respondents have personal contact with members of the Arab community in Poland, almost 90% of the Arab respondents declare that they have personal contact with Poles, e.g. family members, friends or colleagues.

Most Arab respondents claim that members of the Arab Diaspora (or other immigrants) have to adjust to the host society (Poland). What is more, similarly to the Polish respondents, they think that the best model of coexisting within a country is integration with partial maintenance of one's own culture (an equivalence of cultures). Some Arab respondents also claim that there are members of the Arab Diaspora who acquired elements of the Polish culture, 'tradition, customs, religious and cultural

celebrations, clothing, everything; they act like Poles and can only be distinguished in terms of their skin colour' (ND29). This acquisition is considered an automatic integration, 'due to living in Poland, there is no other way, we have to acquire some things, it's out of control, we have no influence over it, we acquire it automatically, it's an automatic integration' (ND40).

Moreover, the Arab respondents point out things they have learned from the Polish people. Not only the language, but i.a. orderliness, patience, punctuality, self-organization or perseverance as well. It confirms the process of acculturation, meaning the gradual acquisition of the main elements of the surrounding cultural environment by the immigrants (without fully abandoning the original cultural identity),<sup>7</sup> to which this community is subjected in Poland.

More than half of the Arab respondents feel that their level of integration is at least average. Their good level of integration is confirmed by one Polish respondent, 'there are people of Arab descent who know more about Polish culture and history than some Poles' (FP16), and 54% of the 'new' Diaspora representatives want to be more integrated with the Polish society. They want integration even though 42% of them claim that Poles are unfavourably disposed towards Arabs or that most of the Arab respondents think that Poles perceive them in negative and stereotypical ways, e.g. 'every Pole who does not know any Arabs or any Arab countries immediately becomes afraid upon hearing the word "Arab", because it is associated with barbarism, fun and love for women [...]' (ND17); 'they are judged as immigrants and their efforts to become integrated are not appreciated, all they know [...] is something about polygamy and terrorism' (ND27). Also, about one-quarter of Polish respondents claim that Poles perceive Arab immigrants in a negative way, that they are afraid of them, just like of any other immigrants, 'it seems to me that most Poles do not like immigrants, it is not only about the Arabs, mostly about people from different cultures' (FP48).

Identifying with Polishness and feeling a sense of identification with Poles are also indicative of the Arab respondents' high level of integration – 54% of the respondents of Arab descent who hold Polish citizenship claim they feel Polish despite their Arab descent, e.g. 'my children, wife and livelihood are in this country, so I feel Polish' (ND25).

However, the Arabs from the 'old' Diaspora point out that Poles find it hard to get used to the fact that people without Slavic surnames or who

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<sup>7</sup> H. Entzinger, R. Biezeveld, *Benchmarking in Immigrant Integration (Zasady integracji imigrantów)* in: *Cultural integration of immigrants. Challenges and dilemma (Integracja kulturalowa imigrantów. Wyzwania i dylematy)*, J. Balicki (ed.), Warsaw 2007, p. 29.

do not look Slavic may hold Polish citizenship. They are still pejoratively called 'that swarthy', 'that foreigner', and constantly asked 'where are you from?', 'where did you come from?' (ND49). Such an unconscious focus on someone's origin hinders integration – at least according to Tamotsu Shibutani and Kian M. Kwan, whose approach was based on Herbert Mead's interactionism. These two scholars found that the way a person is treated in a given society does not depend on who that person is, but on how that person is perceived. Individuals are subject to categorization and have certain traits and behaviours ascribed to them. As a result of this process, a social distance arises, not in the sense of a physical distance between groups, but rather a subjective state of nearness felt by the individuals. According to this concept, reducing the distance leads to structural assimilation.<sup>8</sup>

This theory is confirmed by, i.a., one comment made by a representative of the Arab community: 'an Arab integrates completely when he has a job here and is treated with respect, it's the best way [to integrate – M.S.]; kids integrate, but integration can't be restricted, when there's racism in schools or other places, it restricts integration, because when a person has a job and everything, then he subconsciously and naturally integrates, which is sometimes restricted, when somebody reminds you that you're not a Pole or something racist, which gives one a reason to wonder about integration' (OD19).

The aforementioned opinion corresponds with Amin Maalouf's thesis according to which the more immigrants feel that their original culture's tradition is respected in their new country, the less they feel hated, intimidated and discriminated against because of their different identity; the more they are open to the new country's cultural opportunities, the less they cling to their separateness.<sup>9</sup> The Polish respondents (17%) also claim that apart from typical, everyday problems, like the lack of work, money or health, the Arabs in Poland mostly face problems of discrimination and intolerance.

## 7. An Arab is a Muslim, a Muslim is an Arab

Many of the Polish respondents incorrectly believe that every Arab is a Muslim and that every Muslim is an Arab. Consequently, an image of an Arab is based on images of many different nationalities. When asked to name Arab countries, Polish respondents – apart from a couple correct answers – also mention Afghanistan, Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, and Tajikistan,

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<sup>8</sup> See T. Shibutani, K.M. Kwan, *Ethnic Stratification*, New York 1965.

<sup>9</sup> A. Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity (Zabójcze tożsamości)*, Warsaw 2002, p. 51.



that is Muslim countries, not Arab countries. It is also possible that they think Arabs inhabit the aforementioned countries. For instance, when answering the question ‘have you ever been to an Arab country?’, one person replied, ‘yes, I’ve been to Turkey’ (UP7). In my research majority of Arabs were Muslim, but there are also Christians, atheists, or Druzes, and their level of religiousness varies.

In Poland, Muslims are not only Arabs, but also citizens of Asian or European countries, as well as Poles (the Tatars and converts). According to different statistics, there are thirty to forty thousand Muslims in Poland, meaning that they constitute about 0.1% of the Polish population. Thus, Islamophobia<sup>10</sup> or Arabophobia and a negative attitude towards immigrants can be called ‘migrational hypochondria’ in Poland; an unfounded, exaggerated fear that has no basis in the actual social situation and that probably comes from observing Western countries with a large number of immigrants and Muslims (including the migrant crisis). Although small in numbers, this phenotypically dissimilar part of Polish population encounters attitudes of extreme animosity or obsessive hostility towards the so-called ‘others’ or ‘different’.<sup>11</sup>

The Arab respondents draw attention to other cases of negative social mechanisms related to their perceived ‘otherness’ and ‘differentness’; besides racism, these are: social distance, prejudice, discrimination, stigma, marginalization, exclusion, xenophobia, intolerance and stereotyping. 48% of them experienced racist behaviour in Poland, most of which (26%) amounted to physical assaults/beatings. The representatives were also subjected to hate speech; as one of the Polish respondents confirms when saying what he thinks of the Arab community in Poland, ‘[burn them] at the stake, kill them all or go to their own damn country’ (UP7). At the same time, the respondents give their own definitions of racism. Among them are opinions that racism is perceiving somebody on the basis of differences in skin colour, religion or language; assuming that an Arab is an inferior human being; despising people because of their origin, even though nobody can influence their place of birth.

Despite the aforementioned cases of animosity, the Arab respondents generally do not think of Poles as racist and marginalize the meaning of such incidents, e.g. ‘there are some racists, but most Poles are not racist;

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<sup>10</sup> See K. Górak-Sosnowska, *Deconstructing Islamophobia in Poland: Story of an Internet Group*, Warsaw 2014.

<sup>11</sup> M. Sobiecki, *Racism and antisemitism vs. cultural identity (Rasizm i antysemityzm a tożsamość kulturowa)* in: *Patriotism and nationalism. Toward which cultural identity? (Patriotyzm i nacjonalizm. Ku jakiej tożsamości kulturowej?)*, J. Nikitorowicz (ed.), Kraków 2013, p. 66.

when they get to know you, you show them what you think, they start to like you, they get close to you and they change their opinions' (OD1).

According to most of the participants, knowledge and education are keys to accepting the 'other' and to fighting the mechanisms triggering racist behaviour. One of the Polish participants confirms this by answering the question 'how Poland should help the Arab immigrants' in the following manner: 'a state should help, first of all, by treating Arab immigrants like any other citizen. [Immigrants] should have the same rights and obligations as Poles. Also, the stereotype of an Arab-terrorist should be challenged. After all, any foreign newcomer may be a terrorist, including those of European origin' (FP10).

## **8. Arabs are the most disliked nation in Poland**

Up to 2012, according to the polls almost annually published by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS), Arabs were the most disliked nation in Poland.<sup>12</sup> However, the polls had a methodological error – other names of 'nations' referred only to the nationalities of people inhabiting a given country, e.g. the Czechs or the French; Arabs did not fit the definition of a nation used in the poll as the name 'Arabs' refers to inhabitants of 22 countries. In 2012, apart from a nation called 'Arabs', the table of nations used in the poll also included Libyans and Egyptians, although Libyans and Egyptians are also Arabs. Interestingly, Libyans and Egyptians were liked more than 'Arabs' as a whole. Perhaps the Polish people associate the very word 'Arab' more negatively than 'Egyptian' or 'Libyan'? In this case, the word 'Arab' would become pejorative and stigmatizing; Polish respondents solely associate it with negative stereotypes.

It was not until 2013 that the poll excluded this general idea listing 'Egyptians' and 'Palestinians' instead. According to the results, Palestinians were liked less than Egyptians (ranking fourth from the bottom), after 'Gypsies', the Romani and the Turks. According to more than half of the Polish participants of my research, Arabs are not the most disliked nation in Poland; only 13% of the Polish participants disagree with that.

## **9. The Arab Diaspora in Poland: the reality**

The Polish respondents mention various sources of information on the Arab community and culture that have influenced their opinions: televi-

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<sup>12</sup> *Poles' attitudes toward other nations. A survey report (Stosunek Polaków do innych narodów. Komunikat z badań)*, Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS), Warsaw 2002–2012.

sion, the Internet, newspapers, books, personal contacts, work. When it comes to the favourably disposed towards the Arab community, personal contacts are at the basis of their opinions, while the Internet is of secondary importance. The opposite is true as far as the unfavourably disposed are concerned, with the Internet being of the primary importance. Thus, opinions are formed either on the basis of general information, or through the prism of personal experience.

It should be noted that some Polish respondents never personally met a person of Arab descent (4%) and they do not meet them in private (59%); never visited Arab countries (70%); incorrectly define Arab countries (apart from the correct ones, about 30 other countries were mentioned); do not know the Arab culture (19%); meet members of the Arab community in passing (on a street, in a store, in a restaurant); do not know any Polish-Arab marriages (38%). Despite all that, they still speak of this community extensively, which confirms Perry R. Hinton's view that stereotypes endure because of limited knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

Since most Polish respondents do not directly know the Arab community residing in their country, it can be said that their opinions of the community were formed on the basis of indirect or general information regarding the Arab community. No research has ever been conducted into the Arab Diaspora in Poland; its members are individuals scattered throughout the country. Those who have blended into the Polish community are mostly parts of Polish families, workplaces or businesses.

To sum up, it should be also added that myths, prejudices and stereotypes negatively influence the image of Arab community. However, it should be noted that the Polish state did not have any negative experiences with this community (some of the representatives have been residing in Poland for about 40 years) or with the Arab countries. From the beginning of their independence, the Poles helped build the infrastructure and economy in the Arab world.<sup>14</sup> In turn, Arab influences are visible in Polish culture, including science, art, literature and the Polish language.<sup>15</sup> Only to a small extent is it reflected in the image of the researched Arab community in Poland, which greatly differs from its actual image.

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<sup>13</sup> See P.R. Hinton, *Stereotypes, Cognition and Culture*, USA, Canada 2013.

<sup>14</sup> J. Piotrowski, *Poland's relations with Arab countries (Stosunki Polski z krajami arabskimi)*, Warsaw 1989, pp. 5–9.

<sup>15</sup> A. Skowron-Nalborczyk, *Orient in the eyes of Sarmatians (Orient w oczach Sarmatów)*, "Polityka. Pomocnik Historyczny. Historia Arabów. 14 wieków cywilizacji, której nie znamy" (*The history of Arabs. 14 ages of a civilization we do not know*), No. 11/2011, pp. 82–83.

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