

IDENTIFYING AS ARAB IN CANADA

A CENTURY OF IMMIGRATION HISTORY

HOUDA ASAL

TRANSLATED BY
MARY FOSTER

FERNWOOD PUBLISHING
HALIFAX & WINNIPEG

Copyright © 2020 Houda Asal

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

Originally published in French by University of Montreal Press under the title *Se dire arabe au Canada*

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Editing: Valerie Mansour
Translator: Mary Foster
Cover design: Jess Koroscil
Printed and bound in Canada

Published by Fernwood Publishing
32 Oceanvista Lane, Black Point, Nova Scotia, B0J 1B0
and 748 Broadway Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3G 0X3
www.fernwoodpublishing.ca

Fernwood Publishing Company Limited gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Canada, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Tourism under the Manitoba Publishers Marketing Assistance Program and the Province of Manitoba, through the Book Publishing Tax Credit, for our publishing program. We are pleased to work in partnership with the Province of Nova Scotia to develop and promote our creative industries for the benefit of all Nova Scotians.



Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Identifying as Arab in Canada: a century of immigration history / by Houda Asal; translated by Mary Foster.

Other titles: *Se dire arabe au Canada*. English

Names: Asal, Houda, 1979- author.

Description: Translation of: *Se dire arabe au Canada*. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20200198351 | Canadiana (ebook) 20200198424 | ISBN 9781773632452 (softcover) | ISBN 9781773632469 (EPUB) | ISBN 9781773632476 (Kindle)

Subjects: LCSH: Arabs—Canada—History. | LCSH: Arabs—Canada—Social conditions. | CSH: Arab Canadians—History. | CSH: Arab Canadians—Social conditions.

Classification: LCC FC106.A65 A8213 2020 | DDC 971/.004927—dc23

CONTENTS

Acronyms	viii
Introduction	1
The Arab Minority in Public Space: “To Exist Is to Exist Politically”	2
Methodology: Sources of Socio-Historical Research.....	4
One Hundred Years of Immigration, Four Historical Periods	6
Time of the Pioneers (1882–1930)	7
Period of Establishment (1930–1950).....	7
Years of Transition (1950–1967).....	8
Political Assertion (1967–1975).....	8
PART 1 TIME OF THE PIONEERS (1882-1930).....	11
1 Leaving the Ottoman Empire for the Americas.....	12
Arab Immigration to North America	12
Who Are the “Arabs” in Canada?.....	13
Between Identity Construction, Attribution and Resistance.....	15
The Context in the Mashreq and Canadian Immigration Policies.....	17
Categories of Immigrants in Canada Before 1930.....	22
2 Pioneers and Adventurers.....	28
Economic and Social Integration: The Pedlar.....	28
Presence Across the Country	30
Name Changes and the Beginnings of Collective Identity.....	34
Churches, at the Heart of the Community.....	37
Organizations and Newspapers	43
PART 2 PERIOD OF ESTABLISHMENT (1930-1950)	49
3 The Arab World as Seen from Canada	50
“Grafting the Cedar of Lebanon into the Maple Tree of Canada”	50
Looking Towards the Mashreq.....	60
Enter Palestine (1945–1948).....	65

4	The Struggle Against Anti-Asiatic Migration Laws	78
	The Campaign to Remove Syrians from the “Asiatic” Category	78
	Other Resistance to the Discriminatory Laws	86
	A Global Struggle Against Discrimination?	92
	PART 3 YEARS OF TRANSITION (1950-1967)	99
5	Complex Restructuring of the Community	100
	Continuity and New Arab Immigration	101
	Churches and the New Arab Immigration	106
	Little Mosque on the Prairie	108
	Organizational Fragmentation	110
6	Fragmented Political Mobilizations	120
	Arab Political Associations	120
	Issues Raised by Arab Protest for the Canadian State	127
	PART 4 POLITICAL ASSERTION (1967-1975)	137
7	Coordinating Struggles	138
	Arab Organizing in a New Context	138
	Convergence of Struggles Around CAF	149
	The Quebec Context	154
	To Exist Politically: Mediatize, Mobilize, and Create Alliances	159
8	Organizing Under Suspicion	172
	Murky Business and Police Surveillance	172
	Support for the PLO and Terrorist Allegations	182
	Boycott: From the PLO to Israel	188
	Conclusion	201
	Historical Continuities	201
	Visibility	205
	The Difficulty of Maintaining United Arab Mobilizations	207
	From Anti-Arab Racism to Islamophobia	209
	Bibliography	212
	Appendix 1 Biographical Notes	220
	Appendix 2 Primary Sources	224
	Appendix 3 Extract from the McDonald Commission Report	228

*To my grandfather, Amerika's orphan
To my aunt, who encouraged me to look across the sea
To my mother, who inspired me to do
this research and so much else
To all Arab migrants and their children, to
whom I wanted to give back a voice
To Turtle Island, the Palestine of Indigenous Peoples,
offering me hospitality again and again, and where
encounters took place which changed my life.*

ACRONYMS

Pre-1950

CAFL	Canadian Arab Friendship League, 1944. Montreal (Muhammad Massoud).
CFSL	Canadian Federation of Syrian Lebanese Societies, 1948. National (Joseph Helal, Elias Karam).
CWI	Canadian Welfare Institute of Ottawa, around 1940. Ottawa (Elias Karam).
CYLC	Canadian Young Lebanese Club, 1933.
LLA	Lebanese Liberal Association, 1935.
LSCA	Lebanese Syrian Canadian Association, changed name to Syrian Canadian Association in 1968.
SCA	Syrian Canadian Association, 1933. Montreal.

Post-1950

AIC	Arab Information Centre, 1958. Ottawa.
APA	Arab Palestine Association, 1966. Toronto (Khaled Mouammar).
AQP	Association Québec Palestine, 1972. Montreal (Rezeq Faraj, Michel Chartrand).
CAF	Canadian Arab Federation (Fédération canado-arabe FCA), 1967. National. Splinter, CAF branch in London, 1970–1974. Became national again in 1974.
CAFS	Canadian-Arab Friendship Society, 1962. Toronto (James Peters, Habeeb Salloum).
CFME	Canadian Friends of the Middle East, 1960. London, Ontario (Issa Fahel).
CQP	Comité Québec Palestine (Université Laval), 1969, Québec (Marie-Claude Tadros Giguère).
FACS	Federation of Arab Canadian Societies, 1970–1974. Splinter, based in Toronto, but with national reach.
WLCU	World Lebanese Cultural Union (Union libanaise culturelle mondiale), 1963. Initiative of the Lebanese government.

INTRODUCTION

I am a tribe which has always been nomadic in a desert the size of the world. Our countries are oases we leave when the spring dries up, our houses are tents dressed in stone, our nationalities a matter of dates and boats.

— Amin Malouf, *Origines*, 2004

Everyone from the Mashreq, the historical region of Syria or Mount Lebanon,¹ has a migration story to tell: a parent in North America, South America, Australia. A great number of emigrants left this region for other parts of the world at the end of the 19th century, generation after generation. This chain has never really been broken to this day. The Arab population of Canada is born of this history, these superimposed strata of immigration, generations who encountered each other and sometimes united to preserve their heritage, support each other or defend themselves against discrimination. In Canada, this history is little known. Covering the beginning of migration from the Arab world at the end of the 19th century to the end of the 1970s, this study attempts to recover the voices of those who chose to make themselves heard, to organize and create a public, collective existence.

While “Arabs” now attract considerable attention — from media, the state and sociological studies — there is little historiography on the different migratory trends from the region, the institutions the migrants and their offspring built, their expressions of identity and their political organizations. Moreover, there is very little known about the discrimination they faced and their capacity for mobilization over the past century. When they arrived in Canada, how were these migrants welcomed, perceived and treated? What did they choose to call themselves, how to organize and make themselves heard? These questions, summarized by the title *Identifying as Arab in Canada*, are all the more important because they continue to arise today: in Canada, who is designated *Arab* and who identifies as *Arab*?

The Arab Minority in Public Space: "To Exist Is to Exist Politically"

On their arrival in Canada at the turn of the century, like many other migrants, people from the Mashreq were assigned to categories that relegated them to a subordinate position. At that time, and over the following decades, Canada established a racial hierarchy to classify groups: Indigenous Peoples were the first victims of the colonization of the land; Black people (including some who had been forced into slavery), Asians and Southern and Eastern Europeans were subject to discriminatory immigration policies — more or less restrictive, depending on the period. These discriminations reflected racial hierarchies that shaped the way each group was treated and perceived, giving rise to different forms of protest according to the period and the group targeted. These categories, deployed by the Canadian state to select, classify and count migrants — all-encompassing and discriminatory — were often in contradiction with the way that migrants perceived themselves. Moreover, even within the categories, some groups found themselves in sub-classifications they rejected, such as the "Asiatic race," viewed as particularly "unwanted," in the case of migrants from the Mashreq. In 1967, selection criteria for migration based on ethnic origins ended, but other forms of discrimination and attributions maintained the Arab population in the status of racialized minority.²

At a time when minorities who have been discriminated against and harmed by Canadian policies are demanding reparations and apologies,³ it is interesting to document the history of minorities in an "intermediate position," an expression that describes the place occupied by Canadian Arabs. Compared to the dominant Anglo-Saxon, white majority and to other larger minorities targeted by even greater stigmatization, the Arab majority found itself "in-between." This position explains in part why the group has drawn relatively little attention from researchers, who have generally been more interested in populations of greater importance to the Canadian state, such as Chinese, Indians, Ukrainians, Italians and Jews. Work on racism (e.g., Guillaumin, 1972), and more recently on the construction of the majority category of "white" (whiteness studies), is essential to understanding the conditions of the production of racialized minorities vis-à-vis the white majority, whose boundaries have evolved over time. These racial categorizations have a performative impact on the historical construction of social groups, and are even more complex

in colonial nations which now claim to be multicultural, such as Canada (Iacovetta, 1997; Hage, 1998; Bannerji, 2000; Smith, 2006; Das Gupta et al., 2007; Thobani, 2007). This study shows how, at different moments in history, Arab organizations were able to refuse certain attributions and mobilize. Placed in an “intermediate position,” the Arab minority at times tried to circumvent racial categorizations (trying to “become white,” approach the majority category) and at times resisted these categories more directly, denouncing the racism targeting them. In each of these configurations, collective action by organizations created by the Arab group arose from a desire for public existence, for obtaining their rights or defending their interests, revealing “the process by which a group goes from being a passive collection of individuals to an active participant in public life” (Tilly, 1978: 69). The history of political action by Arab associations adds nuance to the idea that this population has always quietly accepted its lot, especially since the memory of past struggles remains relatively absent from the discourse of the contemporary Arab community, which often seems unaware of its own history.

This study analyzes how the internal dynamics of the Arab minority (collective organizing and political mobilizations) are interwoven with external attributions (state categorizations, laws, international politics) to influence the representations of Arabs in Canada and determine how the group set strategies of action. There is a significant body of literature in the sociology of social movements about collective action. Beyond the exercise of power, political participation can unfold in the relationship organizations maintain with the state, through action within civil society, and the role they decide to play in it. My perspective is particularly influenced by the work of Abdelmalek Sayad on the “political existence” of immigrants and their descendants (in France): “how to exist in a socio-political order called the nation — even the minor, accidental, inessential, stunted, narrow, mutilated existence granted to immigrants — without existing *politically*?” he asks. Struggles for immigrant rights and equality are political: “defending of immigrants, improving their conditions, their promotion on all levels can no longer be ensured today unless they themselves, and especially their children, engage in political action” (Sayad, 2006: 12–21).

This socio-history of Arab populations in Canada is part of a project of restoring the voices of forgotten actors; the “people without history,” in Eric Wolf’s words. Wolf’s thesis centres on agency and how non-European

peoples, or groups whose contributions have long been ignored, participated in the societal evolutions of their times (Wolf, 1982). Taking a similar approach, Denise Helly's work on the history of the Chinese in Cuba and in Canada combines detailed historical research with an anthropological perspective to understand the role these minorities played in transforming their legal status, and the ways they negotiated their place and economic and political participation in their country of establishment (Helly, 1987). Numerous studies are underway in Canada on the history of immigrant groups from the inside, giving voice to peoples without history and showing that agency is not the sole preserve of the powerful, but that subordinate and disadvantaged groups make choices, fight or accommodate the dominant ideology and exercise power, however limited. This study adopts an approach that analyzes the role of the agent, and their decision making, organizing and collective capacity (agency), while taking into account the historical context in which they evolve. The immigrant is neither entirely constrained as a passive actor in a global system, nor a rational actor completely free to choose. To escape this binary, Nancy Green suggests we "hold together the perspective of social actors without losing sight of the international and national dimensions which frame individual and family choice," which she describes as "post-structural structuralism" (Green, 2002: 102–104).

Methodology: Sources of Socio-Historical Research

The National Archives of Canada in Ottawa allowed me to consult a set of unpublished sources on the Arab group, including written exchanges and minutes of meetings between Arab organizations and Canadian officials (ministerial archives, mainly external affairs and immigration offices). This correspondence documents mobilizations by the Arab group in Canada and its relationship to the Canadian state. It also allows an analysis of the government's reactions to the Arab group's requests. The identification of collective or individual political campaigns, investigations of Arab activists and organizations, requests for press reviews and the volume of letters on specific issues all shed light on the internal dynamics of the ministries and the discourse of state officials.

While most of these documents were previously unpublished and deserve special attention, they remain piecemeal. We were unable to access certain boxes, still deemed "sensitive" or relating to individuals

(Privacy Act). For the period of the French mandates in Lebanon and Syria (1920–1945), we consulted the archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Nantes, which contain documents from French consulates and embassies in Canada. These provided information about the relations between Syrian and Lebanese immigrants overseas and the mandate powers. This study shows the place the Arab population held in Canada, which was quite different from that of Arab minorities in the United States, in whom the French mandate took more interest.

The journals and news bulletins published by the Arab group are another extremely rich source of information about their organizations and discourses. The Canadian Arab minority's history of collective organizing and its press have hardly been studied, either in the period preceding the 1980s (Baha Abu-Laban devotes a chapter to it in his pioneering *An Olive Branch on the Family Tree: The Arabs in Canada*) or the following period (Aboud, 1992; Antonius et al., 2009). From our perspective, the Arab minority's press is an object of study in its own right; journals constitute a structured form of collective organization, just like associations.

The press not only mirrors the identity discourses of the era, it produces identities; it becomes a place of memory, a unifying force or tool of communication and sometimes participates in political mobilizations. Many of the associations had no fixed meeting place or moved often and did not preserve their documentation, making it difficult to locate their archives. Most archives of associations consulted were provided by former members who had preserved them. Minutes from meetings, posters for public events, founding charters and internal correspondence were among the sources that helped explain the organizational dynamics and social life of the Arab group. Church archives also proved useful, although rather limited because some priests apparently took them when they left the church (to return to Lebanon, for example). The archives of some churches had never been organized and were inaccessible.

Significant figures in the Arab community scene, whose names appear over and over in newspapers, organizational records and correspondence, contributed their private records to the national archives or published their correspondence (noteworthy in itself). In addition to private archives, we drew on oral history, carrying out a series of interviews with members of organizations, priests, other witnesses and descendants of important figures.⁴ Participation in the contemporary Arab organizing scene in Montreal also gave me access to information and memories of this time,

and allowed me to meet people involved before the 1980s. Memory itself provided new avenues for reflection. The interviews showed that one of the challenges of community movements, like that of Canadian Arabs, is managing the relationship to their own history and the transmission of memory of past mobilizations. The historian's distance from the archival material she is handling intersects with the methodology of the sociologist directly interviewing witnesses, living actors of the research. Members of organizations fighting for social justice we met in Canada seemed to share interest in the questions raised and "discoveries" made by this study. They knew little of this history and wanted to incorporate it in their current struggles against migration restrictions, discrimination, police surveillance, racial profiling, Palestine and Islamophobia. Historical memory of struggles can help determine the continuity of collective action, its effectiveness at times, and transmission from one generation to another. The Arab organizing scene seems to have faced certain barriers, which partly explains its current fragmentation and relative weakness. Recalling past struggles and placing mobilizations in their historical context, can attenuate the feelings of self-denigration that sometimes surface.

One Hundred Years of Immigration, Four Historical Periods

The question of temporality makes it possible to show the importance of a long-term study across continuities and ruptures in organizational dynamics. It can also be approached as a factor in these processes. Analyzing the history of European social movements from the 19th to the 20th century, Charles Tilly's classic work (1978) emphasizes temporality, taking into account the evolution of relationships between social groups and the state, of repertoires of collective action and political opportunities. It shows that mobilization depends on a complex network of social facts that must be understood within a given historical and political context. In addition to placing movements in their historical contexts, Sidney Tarrow (1989) develops the notion of cycles of protest to describe the evolution of social movements, analyzing the changes in actors and the nature of protest over time. Rupp and Taylor (1987) extend this reflection to the continuity of collective action in their study of the American feminist movement. They highlight the significance of cycles of mobilization within a specific movement, explaining how, after peak activity leading to the victory of women's voting rights in 1920, the

feminist movement seemed to die out, while in reality it contracted (or hibernated), maintaining “abeyance structures” that allowed it to emerge with new dynamism at the end of the 1960s (Taylor, 1989). Whether it is a matter of the emergence of a movement or a peak in mobilization, our research clearly shows that “a movement can only be understood in light of the outcome of the movements preceding it” (Fillieule, 2009: 31–32). This idea of the fluctuation in the nature and scale of mobilizations on a specific issue speaks to one of our initial questions: how are expressions of identity and collective action of the Arab minority in Canada constructed over the long term?

Four periods, corresponding to the four parts of this book, have been defined and delineated according to the history of Arab immigration to Canada and its public visibility.

Time of the Pioneers (1882–1930)

The time of the pioneers is the first period of Arab immigration, from the end of the 19th century through the 1920s. The first migrants came from the Ottoman Empire: specifically, from Greater Syria (Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and southern Turkey). These pioneers were often peasants, with little education, no capital and mostly Christian, who left their towns or villages to improve their economic condition. In America, they often worked as pedlars or shopkeepers. In 1919, the Ottoman Empire was dismantled and the League of Nations designated European mandates to manage the new states. France was in charge of Lebanon and Syria, Great Britain of Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq. In this period, it was more difficult to immigrate to Canada because, starting in 1908, the country introduced restrictive immigration rules particularly affecting migrants from Asia, including the Mashreq.

Period of Establishment (1930–1950)

The year 1930 approximately marks the beginning of collective organizing, allowing the Arab population in Canada to gain a certain visibility. A greater number of sources, the presence of journals, the beginnings of politicization and the diversification of the profile of the population justifies this time-period category. A restrictive migration policy had halted the arrival of new migrants from the Arab world, and the Arab minority, now composed of descendants of the first generation of pioneers, put down its

roots. The socio-economic homogeneity of the time of the pioneers had disappeared: the period of establishment is marked by a diversification of profiles. Some migrants had become wealthy and their children were integrated into Canadian society, working in all kinds of jobs.

Years of Transition (1950–1967)

This period was marked by the independence struggles of the Arab world, the emergence of an ideological and political movement around a pan-Arab identity, the creation of the League of Arab States in 1945, and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, which was to have an impact on the entire region. At the same time, in Canada, this period was marked by economic growth and significant political change. A relative relaxation of Canadian legislative restrictions on Asian migrants, combined with the profound political changes taking place in the Arab world, brought about a new wave of migration from the region, notably from Egypt. These years are defined as a period of transition because of the progressive restructuring of the organizational scene accompanying the renewal of the Arab population in Canada and our observation of the difficulty of maintaining ties between old and new generations of Arab migrants and their descendants.

Political Assertion (1967–1975)

The year 1967 marked a turning point, both in the Arab world and Canada. It was also a turning point for part of the Canadian Arab minority that was mobilizing to achieve greater visibility by becoming more active and more intentional in the construction of its own collective identity and the place it aspired to hold in Canadian society. The defeat of Arab forces in the Six-Day War against Israel and the occupation of new Palestinian territories were a tragedy and shock, marking the weakening of Egypt and the Arab nationalist movement. At the same time, in 1967, Canada finally abandoned its system of selection based on origins and increasingly allowed entry to people from all parts of the world. Estimated at about 50,000 in 1970, the Arab population consisted of both older generations established in Canada and new migrants from the broader Arab region, including Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq and the Gulf countries. The latter were educated, sometimes bilingual, worked in diverse areas and had stronger ties to the Arab world (communication being easier). The

Arab population in Canada remained primarily Christian, although the proportion of Muslims rose.

Two main reasons contributed to the decision to end this study in the mid-1970s. First, the introduction of multiculturalism in 1971 changed the nature of the relationship of the state and minorities in Canada. Grants to the steadily increasing number of ethnic organizations represented a shift. Second, the beginning of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975 led to much more significant migration from the Arab world, changing the composition of this minority in Canada. With the war in Lebanon and the prolonged conflict in Palestine, new parameters defined collective solidarities and exacerbated certain divisions within the Canadian Arab group. The changes overwhelming the Arab migrants' region of origin played an important role in constructing collective identities. Moreover, in the 1990s, immigration from the Maghreb changed the face of the "Arab" population in Canada, if it could still be called this. As shown by this entire book, this minority's unity and identity depend on the period of immigration, on the strength of the bonds the descendants of migrants maintained with their countries of origin and the influence of newcomers who lived through the independence struggles and Arab nationalism. More generally, the vast majority of Arab migrants living in Canada today arrived after the 1980s and are divided between people from the Mashreq and from the Maghreb (Lebanese fleeing war, refugees from other Arab countries, increasing numbers of immigrants from the Maghreb, particularly in Quebec) and between Christians and Muslims (Melkites, Orthodox, Maronites, Copts, Druze, Sunni and Shi'a). This diversification explains the evolution of other identity referents, notably minority (Berber, for example) and religious (particularly Muslim), in opposition to or superimposed on the Arab identity.

Notes

1. *Mashreq*: literally "the rising" (where the sun rises) in contrast to the *Magreb* which means "the setting." Here *Mashreq* is used to mean the entire Arab region surrounding Syria (Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan), the Iraqi region and Egypt (though its inclusion in the *Mashreq* is sometimes disputed). Greater Syria: Bilad el-Cham in Arab, the region including the current Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, mandate Palestine and southern Turkey. It is a term used by historians to speak about this region in the past in order to avoid anachronisms. Mount Lebanon: the mountain in the centre of contemporary Lebanon, where the majority of emigrants at the end of 19th century originated.

10 IDENTIFYING AS ARAB IN CANADA

2. “Racialized minority” refers to a group caught in processes determined by racial relations in a society. This definition refers to the founding works of the sociology of racism which analyzes the process of racialization; describing how racism produces “races,” individuals being discriminated against on the basis of signs constructed as markers of belonging to a group believed to be racially different and/or inferior by nature or culture (Guillaumin, 1972).
3. This is true of Japanese, Chinese, Ukrainian, Jews and Indigenous Peoples. See Ross Lambertson, *Repression and Resistance: Canadian Human Rights Activists, 1930–1960*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2005, p. 4–9.
4. The first names of the individuals interviewed have been changed to maintain their anonymity, but sometimes the same people are cited under their real names in the archives and journals consulted for this book.