Non-Technical Summary

This research engages with public and scholarly debates on citizenship and integration that have emerged in many Western immigrant-receiving societies in recent years. Academics, politicians, and social commentators often suggest that contemporary migrants, rather than ‘assimilating’ to the host society, remain closely tied to countries of origin and only partly integrate into host societies, if at all. But such accounts seldom ask immigrants themselves how they understand ‘integration’ and citizenship in host societies. Thus, this research asks, Does citizenship matter to immigrants and their children? Do contemporary immigrants think of themselves as citizens, and if so, of what? What are the geographies of citizenship and belonging that emerge in a globalizing world?

The research has focused on activists in Arab-origin communities (both Muslim and Christian) in Britain and the United States. British Arabs and Arab Americans are relatively prosperous groups, and they appear to have a high uptake of citizenship. Yet the ‘war on terrorism’, US-British military action in Iraq, and the rise of anti-Islamic sentiment impinge on public perceptions of Arabs and on Arab immigrants’ sense of belonging in their respective countries. Comparing the UK and the US has allowed us to examine how activists from relatively similar backgrounds have formulated ideas about citizenship in view of different public philosophies of membership and integration.

The research involved conducting over 100 semi-structured interviews with activists in four US cities (Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, DC, and Detroit) and in four UK cities (London, Birmingham, Sheffield and Liverpool). The analysis of these interviews thus far highlights the following points:

1. Interviewees tend to see themselves as members of multiple communities, and our interviewees’ political consciousness, social networks, and identities clearly are not coterminous with the ‘host society’. In almost all cases, Arab identities (and in some cases, Muslim identities) have a strong hold on people’s sense of community. Political events in the Arab world—especially the continued conflict between Palestinians and Israel and the 2003 US/British invasion of Iraq—impinge on activists’ political consciousness and in their sense of belonging to their adopted countries.

2. The concept of ‘citizenship’ is therefore complex. For these individuals, the ideal of ‘active citizenship’ is not directed exclusively, or even primarily, toward the nation-state in which they are resident. Activists maintain varying degrees of connection with and affinity to the Arab world, and a great deal of the activism in the community—participation in charities, cultural/arts organizations, political groups, and so on—reflects a desire among our interviewees to directly or indirectly address issues relating to the Arab world.

3. But it is also important to recognize the continued relevance of formal citizenship for many of our interviewees. While a few of our interviewees regard their formal membership instrumentally as a ‘work permit’ or travel document, most of them greatly value the rights and security offered by their US/UK citizenship. This is especially true of the many British Arabs and Arab Americans who have fled civil war, political repression, or statelessness. Interviewees frequently speak of their sense of duty and responsibility toward their adopted countries, their need to follow rules and regulations of the society and, perhaps
most importantly, to ‘give back’ to the society which has given them haven and opportunity.

4. It becomes important, as well, to consider more carefully the relationships between Arab-oriented activities/identities and ‘integration’. Many of our interviewees argue strongly that community members need to integrate—that is, to become actively involved and more visible in communities, to know their neighbourhoods, cities, and countries, and to not live as ‘foreigners’. They also suggest that this integration hinges on wider acceptance of Arabs and Arabness (as well as Muslims and Islam), which can only be achieved by changing public attitudes toward the Arab world. So activists’ focus on Arab world reflects not simply a desire to be engaged with their countries of origin, but also to improve the position of their communities in the US/UK, and to incorporate them into key narratives of nationhood. Many of our Arab American interviewees, for instance, compared their experience with the broader history of initial hostility toward and eventual assimilation of immigrants.

5. In this regard, the interviews highlight the limitations of current interpretations of immigrants as essentially ‘foreign’ and oriented toward homelands. Material and emotional connections between immigrants/minorities and their places of origin, to begin, are very uneven among our interviewees. Not all are able or willing to maintain close links with the Arab world; many prefer instead to focus their energies on more localized communities and networks. And while activists may see the Arab world as a ‘community of concern’, they often see these issues as being ‘solved’ through activities directed at more local, and often non-Arab, audiences.

It is hoped that this research will contribute to recent political and academic discussions and debates about citizenship and immigrant integration. At a normative level, the views and practices of our interviewees encourage us to reconsider what immigrant integration should signify and how it should take place. British Arabs and Arab Americans embrace the idea that to be a ‘good citizen’ is to be not only one who follows the law, but one who is active in one’s city, locality, and country. Many of them are, in various ways, attempting to instil these ‘virtues’ in their communities. But this, they argue, cannot come at the expense of pride in one’s heritage or concern for events taking place elsewhere. Our interviewees’ viewpoints can contribute a great deal to efforts by political philosophers to re-imagine nationhood and to reconcile more fluid and deterritorialized identities and affinities with commitment to local places.

Study findings will be made available through academic publications and through a project website, which will be launched in September 2006. The website, www.arabcommunities.org, will contain quotes from our interviewees on citizenship and integration, access to reports and publications, teaching materials, and links to relevant websites.