

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ARABIC IN PROMOTING GLOBAL SECURITY

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Abstract

The significance of language for security, peace and stability of individuals, groups and nations is indisputable. Apart from being a communicative tool, language is and will remain vital to the safety of lives and property without which no meaningful development can be achieved. This paper therefore attempts to investigate how proficiency in Arabic language, among those saddled with the responsibility of securing lives and property, can contribute to tackling the spate of insecurity of lives and property around the globe. It also examines the role Arabic language proficiency can play in assisting security agents in carrying out their responsibilities. Descriptive research approach is applied in analyzing the role of Arabic in global security. The findings of the paper depict Arabic as a language in high demand, particularly in the Western world because of its significance to security and fighting insurgency in any part of the world. It calls on governments, organizations and individuals to encourage the teaching and learning of Arabic language, as its proficiency will, among other things, enhance security, peace and socio-economic development.

Keywords: Language; Arabic; Proficiency; Security; Terrorism

1.0 Introduction

Since the beginning of history, the world has witnessed, and it is still witnessing, the killing of millions of people – mostly innocent ones – as a result of wars, conflicts and terrorist activities around the world. Apart from the high death toll, several million others are being placed on permanent disability and a lot of properties are destroyed. These crimes against humanity, in their various facets, are posing great security challenges with severe consequences on economic growth and sustainable development.

What is more disturbing, particularly in this 21st century, is the upsurge of terrorism and terrorist groups across the globe; an act which is considered as a difficult issue to confront, alongside trafficking and organized crime (United Nations). Organizations, such as *Al-Qaeda*, *As-Shabaab*, *Boko Haram*, *Abu Sayyaaf*, Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) and other affiliates, are common groups allegedly operating under the cover of Islam and claiming to be fighting for the cause of the Almighty God. According to the

Council of Australian Governments in its 'Executive Summary', these groups are motivated by selective, violent and extreme interpretation of Islam that is alien to the understanding of the overwhelming majority of Muslims (Australian National Security). Their members often lure and sometimes force some young ones in the society to join their dreaded activities which include horrific and barbaric attacks on business centres, schools, churches, mosques, entertainment centres, government buildings and residential areas as well as some targeted individuals and groups. It is therefore obvious that governments, security agencies and other inhabitants of this global village are faced with unconventional security risks. The calamities of terrorism related activities emphasize the necessity for a stronger approach and greater synergy among various government agencies, organizations, and individuals in ensuring peace and security of nations of the world.

Terrorism, being a deliberate creation and exploitation of fear for bringing about political change or an immoral tactic used

by people for their political goals, is not a conventional war; and, therefore, fighting it requires an unconventional approach where intelligence gathering is crucial. In this case, language proficiency comes to the centre stage, making it a necessity for security operatives and the general public to learn and understand at least a foreign language at a functional level. This could go a long way in ensuring adequate security of lives and property.

The alleged association of Muslims and Arabic with terrorism is evident from the 2015 list of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's most wanted terrorists. According to the source, the list shows that out of the twenty-eight (28) alleged terrorists indicted by sitting Federal Grand Juries in the United States, twenty-six (26) are either Muslim Arabs or Muslims who speak Arabic, while the remaining two are neither Muslims nor Arabs (FBI). Similarly, the FBI, around that same period, displayed pictures and identities of other wanted individuals for questioning, to seek information on terrorism. All the seven persons suspected to have links with terrorist organizations are Muslim Arabs.

Furthermore, the speaking of Arabic language has been restricted in some quarters, with a view that the language is synonymous with terrorism. An instance reported by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), and aired on Monday 09, 2015 bears clear testimony to this; the report stated that the Australian government has directed that prisoners in Goulburn Supreme Jail in New South Wales be forced to speak only English, thereby banning Arabic. This action was however condemned by some experts as possibly counter-productive. In a related case, a U.S.'s student, Nicholas George was deliberately arrested in August 2009 by the Police at the airport in Philadelphia for carrying Arabic language flash cards put together for one of his classes at Pomona College in California. A brief conversation between the victim and a supervisor of the

Transport Security Administration (TSA) is quoted as follows:

Supervisor: Do you know who did 9/11?

Nicholas: Osama Bin Laden.

Supervisor: Do you know what language Osama Bin Laden spoke?

Nicholas: Arabic.

Supervisor: Do you know why these cards are suspicious? (Jardin, Xeni).

It is unfortunate that a lot of people today have this kind of notion- that anybody who speaks Arabic is either a terrorist or potential terrorist, and anybody carrying documents or books written in Arabic becomes a suspect. This erroneous impression is counter-productive as industrious and innocent people are put to captivity under the pretense of being suspected terrorists. It is undeniable that Arabs and Muslims are involved in some of the terrorist activities in the past years, yet, that might not be enough evidence to label every Muslim or anyone that identifies with Arabic as terrorist or aiding terrorism.

It should therefore be made clear that God Almighty Himself did not command the shedding of blood and killing of innocent people. The Qur'an is quite explicit in this regard; "And fight in the way Allah those who fight you, but transgress not the limits. Truly, Allah likes not the transgressors", (Qur'an 2:190) "Allah does not forbid you to deal justly and kindly with those who fought not against you on account of your religion nor drove you out of your homes. Verily Allah loves those who deal with equity". (Qur'an 60: 8) In consonance with the above Qur'anic quotations, Taylor expressed that the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) unequivocally declared the act terrorism is never sanctioned by Islam (7-9). This paper therefore attempts to highlight the significance of Arabic language in promoting the much needed global peace and security through the waging of war against terrorism and other criminalities. It also examines how various security operatives and even the common man on the

street, can apply the knowledge of Arabic language in truncating security threats or attacks at national and international levels.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Arabic Language in the Global Village

Arabic, as the most widely spread of the living Semitic languages, is a unifying bond among Arabs. It is the liturgical language of Muslims all over the world; which they revere as a divine gift and sacred part of their customs as it is inseparable from Islam. Today, Arabic is the official language of about twenty-three countries in North Africa and most countries in the Middle East, and one of the six working languages at the United Nations since 1973. The language is spoken by over three hundred million people around the world (Eberhand, et al). It has played a catalytic role in the expansion of knowledge as well as promotion and dissemination of Greek and Roman sciences and philosophies to Renaissance Europe (UNESCO). In recent years, Arabic has proved to be powerful and a major player in global economy; being ranked on the Power Language Index (PLI), and the fifth most widely spoken languages in the world (United Language Group).

Arabic is an important language when it comes to international business, particularly for companies trying to break into foreign markets, knowing the fact that the Middle East is becoming the economic hub of the world. Through Arabic, many employment opportunities in a number of different multinational companies are opened up in the areas of oil, energy, finance, travel etc. Some companies engage Arabic speakers specifically to contact local people and to obtain an edge over others in the course of running a business that might ordinarily or otherwise end up being missed by using only English or French interpretation. In the area of knowledge, Arabic is one of the oldest in the world, with a lot of antiquities that archeologists are still trying to uncover. The rich story telling culture makes Arabic unique among other languages; memorable

stories such as the Arabian Nights, Aladdin and Ali Baba are a few among others that were produced in Arabic. The language has also made significant contributions in the fields of Literature, Mathematics, Navigation, Architecture, Astronomy, Medicine etc.

Arabic language has contributed and still contributing in bridging the linguistic gap in many languages of the world. This is attained by enriching their lexicons, most especially languages of the Muslims in Africa, Europe, Asia, and Americas, through language borrowing. A large number of vocabulary in different fields of science and natural studies such as Mathematics, Chemistry, Physics, Military, Engineering, Business, and other areas of human endeavour have their origin in Arabic. The importance of Arabic in the international intelligence gathering community cannot be over-emphasized, particularly when trying to extract information from highly valued targets.

According to a survey conducted by the Modern Language Association (MLA) in 2009, on enrollment in languages other than English in U.S. colleges and universities, Arabic language studies in the country is nothing short of remarkable. Furman et al highlight that interest in studying Arabic has increased tremendously in the wake of the September 11, attacks of 2001 where American students enrollment in Arabic courses grew by 46.3% between 2006 and 2009; it had earlier increased by 126.5% from 2002 to 2006, making it the fastest growing area of foreign language study in the U.S. and the eighth most studied language (20). To buttress this further, the Gazette of 30th March reported that at the University of Iowa, Iowa city, for instance, enrollment into Arabic classes tripled from fall 2006 to fall 2009 from 34 students to 102 students (Heldt, par. 3). Although there was a decline in enrollment of languages other than English, including Arabic, between fall 2009 and fall 2013, based on the facts made available by Goldberg et al,

“the number of institutions reporting Arabic programmes rose in the same period from 565 to 588” (15). In the latest report of summer and fall 2016, even though the number of enrolment has dropped, it recorded over 3,554 students (48).

In the United Kingdom, based on the British Council report, Arabic has become more important to the future than any other language except Spanish (3). Elsewhere, the report stated that the growing role of Arabic in the modern world makes it essential, and more is done to ensure it is taught in the country’s schools and universities because of the perceived value (22).

Even as these countries make efforts in encouraging and improving the level of Arabic learning, some other nations of the world are not doing enough to improve the status of this and its learning. One of such countries is Nigeria, a nation whose northern part at one time in her history had Arabic as official language before colonization. Although Arabic is being studied in almost all conventional universities in Northern Nigeria and few ones in the South, the government is paying lip services to its study. Successful governments had at one time or the other, favoured French over Arabic. One of the major problems facing the study of Arabic is the misconception by some people that Arabic is only a language of religion (Islam).

This particular notion has and it is still having negative effect on the language and on those who study it. Around 2011, the Minister of Defense in Nigeria, Haliru Bello had stopped the enrollment of students for Arabic in the Nigerian Defense Academy, claiming that such action would bar Boko Haram elements into the academy (Ibrahim 193). This happened at a time when Arabic speakers were in high demand by the FBI, CIA and other agencies. The result of a survey administered by Brosh on motivation of American college students to

study Arabic shows that a lot of reasons are responsible for their enrollment into Arabic programme. These include: integrative orientation, economic and academic utility, national threat etc. In fact, one respondent explained: “I learn Arabic because I am a patriot. America needs Arabic speakers” (34).

2.2 Arabic Language Proficiency and Security

Language proficiency is an essential tool in promoting security of lives and property. The inability to understand the language of the enemy poses enormous danger to both security operatives and members of the public. Reports indicate that security forces at certain times fall prey of their enemies because they do not understand the language of the enemy. For instance, a report credited to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in August, 1992 shows that about ten officers from the Nigerian Armed Forces were killed in Somalia due to their ignorance of the language spoken by the enemies in the area of operation. It was said that even though the commander could hear the communication between the rebels, he could not understand and interpret the contents and thereby led his company into enemy’s fire (Ibrahim 191).

Arabic language is not different from other languages proficiency wise. Generally speaking, proficiency in a language has to do with the ability to function competently in one’s native or second language, involving a sense for appropriate linguistic behaviour in a variety of situations. According to Richards and Richard, language proficiency is the degree of skill with which a person can use a language whether native or second, such as how well he can read, write, speak and understand a language; they noted that this can be contrasted with language achievement within desirable language ability, as a result of learning in all the four skills of language; vis: listening, speaking, reading and writing (292).

Another approach highlights language proficiency at different levels of 'elementary, limited working, minimum professional, and full professional and native or bilingual (U.S. Department of State). The one that is of concern to this study is minimum professional proficiency in Arabic, which is required as it would be made clear later in the paper. This level of proficiency in terms of speaking is the ability to speak a language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to effectively participate in most formal and informal conversations in practical, social and professional topics. The minimum reading proficiency on the other hand is the ability to read standard newspaper items addressed to the general reader, routine correspondence, reports, and technical materials in the individual's special field (U.S. Department of State). In summary, Arabic language proficiency is the ability of an individual to use the language with sufficient skills in speaking, reading and writing that enables him to function competently as at when required.

The term 'security' is the activeness involved in attempting to protect a country or state and all that it controls against any form of attack or danger. This is critical to the stability and economic vitality of any nation particularly in this era of global complexity. According to Rothschild, security is from the Latin noun 'Securitas' which in its primary classical use referred to a condition of individuals of a particular sort. He added that the word denoted composure, tranquility of spirit, freedom from fear. He quoted 'Cicero' as viewing security as 'the absence of anxiety upon which the happy life depends (61).

Furthermore, security has been described as a "term that has different dimensions in psychology, public safety, defense, military matters and information access (Microsoft Encarta). In addition, Rothschild notes that though the principles or definitions of security have changed over time to an extended sense most especially since the

1990s, "it remains an objective of individuals, but one that can only be achieved in a collective or political process" (77). To actually achieve the desired security, Brecht and Rivers note that this "depends on effective actions in many areas such as diplomacy, international assistance, arms control, management of weapons of mass destruction, law enforcement, intelligence, surveillance, emergency preparedness, reconnaissance and other military operations" (2). This is an indication that security, as the state of freedom and protection can only be achieved through collaborative efforts.

3.0 Importance of Arabic Proficiency to Global Security

The importance of Arabic language in today's world cannot be overestimated. Apart from being a working language at the United Nations, Arabic is the fifth most spoken language in the world. As observed by Crystal, qtd. in Brosh; this alone is enough to warrant the importance of Arabic in an increasing globalized market place. And this is why governments of different countries, and at various levels are encouraging the study of Arabic language. For instance, the United States Government has been funding Arabic language programmes in higher institutions of learning in the U.S (29).

Since the security of this world is said to be a responsibility of all, even though the powers are vested on some groups of individuals – the military, the police, the customs, the immigrations officers, prisons services and other security agencies, it has become imperative that those specifically charged with the responsibility of securing people's lives and property to learn Arabic language and be proficient in it. This could as well place an officer - regardless of his affiliation – in a better position in the course of service as in the report of Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, United States Senate in the testimony by Major Gregory Mitchell, a 1995 fellow for the David L. Boren

Fellowship Program who said his knowledge of Arabic language positioned him as a unique military officer with successful military partnership with the Iraqi Army (33).

Other individuals in government and non-governmental organizations should also take giant steps in learning this language so as to complement the efforts of the security operatives. While discussing the relevance of Arabic particularly to Nigerian development, Mahmud A. Ayuba mentions security as one important aspect of national development in which Arabic has a great role to play (198). This of course applies to other nations of the world.

The role of Arabic proficiency in global security can therefore be elucidated in the following points:

i. **Intelligence Gathering:** Proficiency in Arabic language among security operatives is very critical in intelligence gathering and analysis which Paul R. Pillar sees as the least visible but, in some ways, the most important counterterrorist tool and is rightly thought of as the first line of defense against terrorism and other crimes (10-13). Dan Byman, while suggesting better approaches for the war on terror, considers intelligence as core to counterterrorism, though, it needs nuance when applied in practice (69-70). Security operatives with some level of Arabic proficiency are in better position to track down sensitive information either written or spoken in Arabic, particularly within the last two decades when most terror attacks are said to have been planned and executed by persons who speak Arabic either as L1, L2 or L3. Based on this assumption, the international intelligence community is attaching great importance to Arabic proficiency in trying to extract information from highly valued targets and individuals. It is clear, according to Lemmon, a former U.S. ambassador to Armenia

and former Dean of the School of Language Studies at the State Department's Foreign Service Institute, as quoted in "Education for Global Leadership" that shortage of expertise in Arabic language in particular and other Asian languages provides considerable evidence in the September 11 intelligence failure (8). He specifically highlighted the efficacy of Arabic proficiency in counterterrorism. He was quoted as saying: "Part of the reason for our difficulty is that we simply do not have enough competent speakers of Arabic with credible policy context and an ability to connect with the intended audience so they will at least listen to what we are trying to say and give us a hearing" (8). It was also reported that the U.S.'s intelligence community was at 30% readiness in languages critical to national security. Up till around August 2004, the Foreign Service had only eight Arabic speakers at high level of proficiency and twenty-seven at second level (9). Arabic language proficiency is equally relevant to other individuals, whose knowledge of the language could assist security operatives in getting more information about terrorist and their hideouts. Besides, some of the terrorists are our neighbors, friends, school mates, customers, apprentices, co-workers, co-travelers etc.

ii. **Translation and Interpretation:** The need for speakers of Arabic among security operatives to translate or interpret intercepted information from terrorists and other criminals is highly crucial. In the event of deficiency of personnel in Arabic proficiency, nations of the world would be faced with more security risks. According to a source, the September 11 Commission in the United States blamed the FBI on the World Trade Centre attacks for intelligence failure; claiming that the agency did not dedicate sufficient resources to the surveillance and translation needs of

counterterrorism agents. It stated that the FBI lacked sufficient translators proficient in Arabic and other key languages; and this of course, resulted in a significant backlog of un-translated intercepts. That same year the US army was said to have authorized for recruitment of 329 translators and interpreters for its five critical languages among which Arabic is ranked first. In the end, there was a shortfall of 44% as only 183 of the positions were filled (9).

iii. **Self-Protection:** The knowledge of Arabic among individuals, whether security officers or not, is very vital to individuals' safety which is most paramount. One can only think of providing protection to others when he is already protected. Security operatives, in particular, who might be posted to Arab countries to fight insurgency and criminality, or on peace keeping missions might be at risk of falling prey to the enemy if they, lack sufficient understanding of Arabic language. Other individuals outside the circle of those saddled with the responsibility of providing security can promptly take cover against any emerging risk from enemies who communicate in Arabic; provided they are able to decode the enemy's conversation.

iv. **Early Detection of movements:** The need for Arabic proficiency among security agencies like the Immigration Services, the Police and others manning the borders of nations is also crucial. This could lead to early detection of movements of terrorists and other criminal elements into a country. For instance, the Boko Haram terrorist group was recognized by ISIS, and there is an indication that the first set of fighters might have been trained outside Nigeria. The Punch Newspaper reported on Monday February 15, 2016 on its online platform that the then Somali leader, President Hassan Sheikh Mahmud said on Sunday

February 14, 2016, that Boko Haram fighters were trained in his country before they came to Nigeria to carry out their heinous acts (Ayodele Oluwagbemi, pars. 1 & 2). The declaration was made while he was addressing a security conference in Germany. This revelation opens a window of possibilities that at the time when such fighters were coming into Nigeria, they might be carrying along with them training instructions, mode operandi and other documents written in Arabic. Therefore, those charged with the responsibility of implementing and enforcing immigration laws of the country as well as the Custom Service could be able to adequately intercept and deny such terrorists from crossing after thorough examination and scrutiny of their documents.

4.0 Conclusion

The security threat posed by terrorism around the globe is so enormous that no part of this world is apparently safe. From the world super powers to the weaker nations, terrorism has become a difficult nut to crack as confirmed by the United Nations. The reason is not far-fetched, the approach by terrorists in their attacks is not like that of conventional war; they hijack planes, trains, and trucks, they apply suicide bombings, kidnappings, and other tactics such as, assassinations, armed assaults and taking human beings as hostages and shields. Combating this inhuman act requires a lot of approaches such as intelligence gathering, military action, diplomacy etc., as well as time to accomplish. These approaches, as result-oriented as they may be, requires proficiency in language - particularly foreign.

Meanwhile, the importance so far attached to Arabic is multi-faceted, and from the discussion so far, the relevance of the language to security of individuals and nations is very high, particularly in a world where security threats have become more complex; and without security no

meaningful development in any area of human endeavour can be achieved. For about twenty years now, the requirement for proficiency in Arabic language has increased particularly in countries that have been targets of insurgency.

The finding of this paper affirms that Arabic language proficiency is a factor for global security; with an argument that most of the atrocities perpetrated by terrorist groups are from Islamists in the name of trying to re-establish a global Islamic state. The paper therefore suggests that Arabic language proficiency at a minimum professional (functional) level can go a long way in counterterrorism. Both security operatives and other individuals being stakeholders in the security of their immediate and distant communities are required – according to this paper - to learn and understand Arabic for the purpose of intelligence, interpretation/translation of documents and information and for personal safety against terrorists' atrocities.

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