

# “Arabizi”: A Contemporary Style of Arabic Slang

Mohammad Ali Yaghan

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## Introduction

“Arabizi” is a slang term (slang: vernacular, popular informal speech) describing a system of writing Arabic using English characters. This term comes from two words “arabi” (Arabic) and “engliszi” (English). The actual word would be “3rabizi” if represented in its own system, but due to the possible unfamiliarity of the reader with the system, it would be hard to pronounce the word. Thus “Arabizi” and not “3rabizi” will be used throughout this paper. Arabizi is a text messaging system used over the Net and cellular phones.

## The Arabic Script

The basic characteristics of Arabic script pose the typographical problem of “a huge character set,” which led to the call to adopt Latin instead of Arabic characters.<sup>1</sup> There are twenty-eight letters in Arabic (Table 1). The combination of “Lam ʾ” and “Alif l” usually is thought of as a distinct letter “l” making the total number twenty-nine. The “hamza” is a mark added to other letters, and considered as a variation of the “alif l” but could be considered, practically, a separate letter as well. These letters include the consonants and the long vowels. Short vowels are represented as vocalization marks placed on top or below a character. Figure 1 shows samples of these marks and their English readings. The vocalization marks are, however, used only in certain texts (such as in educational texts) or whenever needed to prevent confusion. The writing system is cursive, and thus the shapes of the letters vary contextually according to their location in the word, and to the letters before and after them. Some letters would have more than eight glyphs in some writing styles (creating a huge number of ligatures). The total number

1 For a thorough discussion on Arabic script and type in general, see: S. Huda, *AbiFarès, Arabic Typography* (London: Saqi Books, London 2001), 85–16.

Figure 1  
Short vowels in Arabic as vocalization marks.



Table 1

Basic Arabic Letters and their shapes according to their position in the word.

(This is the very basic level for simplest typefaces; many would have more shapes according to the letter before and after which are added as ligatures.)

| Single | Initial | Medial | Final | Single                     | Initial | Medial | Final  |
|--------|---------|--------|-------|----------------------------|---------|--------|--------|
| ا      | ا       |        | ا     | ك                          | ك       | ك      | ك      |
| ب      | ب       | ب      | ب     | ل                          | ل       | ل      | ل      |
| ت      | ت       | ت      | ت     | م                          | م       | م      | م      |
| ث      | ث       | ث      | ث     | ن                          | ن       | ن      | ن      |
| ح      | ح       | ح      | ح     | ه                          | ه       | ه      | ه      |
| خ      | خ       | خ      | خ     | و                          | و       |        | و      |
| د      | د       | د      | د     | ي                          | ي       | ي      | ي      |
| ذ      | ذ       |        | ذ     | <b>Lam-Alif</b>            |         |        |        |
| ر      | ر       | ر      | ر     | ال                         | لا      |        | لا     |
| ز      | ز       |        | ز     | <b>The hamza</b>           |         |        |        |
| س      | س       | س      | س     | ء                          | أ       |        | أ      |
| ش      | ش       | ش      | ش     |                            | إ       |        | إ      |
| ص      | ص       | ص      | ص     |                            | ؤ       |        | ؤ      |
| ض      | ض       | ض      | ض     |                            | ئ       | ئ      | ئ      |
| ط      | ط       | ط      | ط     | <b>Spical type of Alif</b> |         |        |        |
| ظ      | ظ       | ظ      | ظ     | آ                          |         |        | آ      |
| ع      | ع       | ع      | ع     | <b>Vocalization marks</b>  |         |        |        |
| غ      | غ       | غ      | غ     | <b>Short vowels</b>        |         |        |        |
| ف      | ف       | ف      | ف     | -                          | a       | ˘      | Stress |
| ق      | ق       | ق      | ق     | -                          | i       | ◦      | Silent |
|        |         |        |       | ˘                          | u       |        |        |

of glyphs in traditional printing exceeds four hundred in many typefaces. If other languages such as Farsi and Urdu that use Arabic letters are to be accounted for, then the total number of glyphs at the most basic level (i.e., without ligatures) would exceed three hundred. This constituted a typographical problem, with regard to typesetting and font diversity, that was a common characteristic of traditional Arabic pre-computer type. Accordingly, there were many calls to divert to the Latin characters.

### Writing Arabic Using Latin Characters

Over the last two centuries, there have been many proposals to replace the Arabic letters with Latin ones. The first recorded one was by Wilhelm Spitta in 1880 in his book *Vulgardialectes von Aegypten Grammatik des Arabischen* [The Rules of Slang Arabic in Egypt] in which he suggested using Latin characters to write the Egyptian Arabic slang, with the overall aim to adopt the slang language instead of classical Arabic.<sup>2</sup> Spitta was followed by K. Vollers in 1890 and Seldon Willmore in 1901, both of whom strongly supported his proposal.

There were many other supporters for this proposal during the following forty years. Among them was Abdul Aziz Fahmi (Arabizi: 3abd 2l3aziz Fahmi), who proposed a full practical scheme in response to a competition organized by the Academy of the Arabic Language in Cairo in 1943. The competition's aim was "easing Arabic writing and grammar." His proposal was presented in Arabic (while the earlier suggestions were in other languages), and was intended for both slang and classical Arabic. Thus it generated much discussion and, as a result, the proposal for using English characters for Arabic was associated with him. He proposed a combination of Arabic and English characters, and included short vowels within (usually short vowels are added as diacritic marks to the Arabic glyphs). Other supporters of Fahmi's proposal, including Sa'id 'Aqil (Arabizi: Sa3id 3aqil) and Anis Freha (Arabizi: 2nis Fre7a), developed their own proposals.<sup>3</sup> They found additional support in Turkey, where Kamal Ataturk ordered the adoption of English characters to write Turkish instead of the Arabic characters in 1928.<sup>4</sup>

At the time, the proposal to write Arabic with Latin letters was fought and severely criticized by Arab nationalists and Muslim enthusiasts, who considered it as a direct attack on the Arabic identity. They also saw it as a threat to the Holy Quran, which is written in classical Arabic using a writing system that has lasted for more than fourteen centuries.

Currently, however, due to the advancement of the Internet and the global use of the English language (and without any imperialistic implications) the use of Latin letters to write Arabic over the Internet and on text-messaging cellular phones is becoming increasingly common and natural.

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2 Emil Ya3qub, *Al-5a6 al-3arabi* (Arabic Calligraphy [in Arabic]) (Lebanon: Gross Press, 1986), 81; and *Ta3rib al-3ulum al-6ibbiya* (The Arabization of the Medical Sciences [in Arabic]), published by the Arabization of Health Sciences Network "AHSN": [www.emro.who.int/ahsn/arabicpublications-DrKhayat-97-Section1-1.htm](http://www.emro.who.int/ahsn/arabicpublications-DrKhayat-97-Section1-1.htm) (accessed January 31, 2007).

3 Emil Ya3qub, 86–9.

4 For details on the reforms regarding the Turkish writing system, as well as the vocabulary of the language see: Burak Sensal, "Ataturk's Reforms": [www.allaboutturkey.com/reform.htm](http://www.allaboutturkey.com/reform.htm) (accessed January 31, 2007).

In the following sections, I will present this phenomenon, as well as its rules and current state in society (rising from complete refusal to a silent acceptance during the past one-hundred years). Finally, I will present some typefaces designed for Arabizi.

## **The Arabizi Phenomenon**

### *The Arabizi Rules*

The following rules were developed and modified in discussions with second-year graphic design students in the College of Art and Architecture at the University of Petra.

- 1 In general, the Arabizi system is contextual.
- 2 The traditional Arabic vocalization marks are substituted by vowels. The “fatha” by a; the “kasra” by i or e; and the “damma” by u, ou, or o.
- 3 The use of the vowels is optional in Arabizi, and they could be omitted. Three factors determine this omission: the reader’s background; the contextual clarity of the word; and the allowable number of characters per message.
- 4 As with slang Arabic, which borrows English words and phrases (for example “please,” “OK,” “nice meeting you,” “thanks,” etc.), Arabizi uses English within the text. Common World Wide Web and cellular phone message abbreviations are used (“plz” for “please,” “thnx” for “thanks,” etc.).
- 5 The use of capital letters indicates yelling, excitement, emotions, or calls for special attention (as with most messaging systems).
- 6 There are many ways of representing the same situation and conveying the same meaning.
- 7 Besides the English abbreviations, there are many abbreviations regarding some word endings in Arabic. For example @ is used for the affix added for certain types of plurality in Arabic (...aat طات); and 8 as an affix to indicate the first-person past tense of certain verbs in slang Arabic (...eet ييٲٲ).
- 8 The Arabizi system differs for every Arabic country, depending on the local dialect.
- 9 The Arabic language uses a special mark when stressing a consonant instead of doubling it (Figure 1). In Arabizi, it is written twice unless it was a compound letter. Then it is left to the context to be understood.
- 10 Some combinations of English letters are used to draw the actual shape of an Arabic word. For example, the combination oLI I for the Arabic ٥للل.

Table 2

The Arabic characters and their Arabizi counterparts.

| Arabizi possibilities |    |         |    | Arabic | Arabizi possibilities |   |         |      |
|-----------------------|----|---------|----|--------|-----------------------|---|---------|------|
| numerals              |    | letters |    |        | numerals              |   | letters |      |
| ٥                     | 2  |         |    | ش      |                       |   | sh      | ch   |
| ٢                     | 2  |         | a  | ص      | 9                     |   |         |      |
| ٤                     | 2e | e       | i  | ض      | 9'                    |   | d       |      |
| ٢'                    | 2  |         | o  | ط      | 6                     |   | t       |      |
| ا                     |    |         | a  | ظ      | 6'                    |   | th      |      |
| آ                     | 2a |         | aa | ع      | 3                     |   |         |      |
| ب                     |    |         | b  | غ      | 3'                    |   |         |      |
| ت                     |    |         | t  | ف      |                       |   | f       |      |
| ث                     |    | th      | s  | قا     | 8                     | 2 | k       | q    |
| ج                     |    | j       | g  | ك      |                       |   | k       |      |
| ح                     | 7  |         | h  | ل      |                       |   | l       |      |
| خ                     | 7' | 5       |    | م      |                       |   | m       |      |
| د                     |    |         | d  | ن      |                       |   | n       |      |
| ذ                     |    | th      | z  | ه      |                       |   | h       |      |
| ر                     |    |         | r  | و      |                       |   | w       | o ou |
| ز                     |    |         | z  | ي      |                       |   | y       | i e  |
| س                     |    | s       | c  |        |                       |   |         |      |

## The Letter Set

The Arabizi character set is the same character set for any English typeface. What is meant by the “letter set” is: the English counterparts of the Arabic letters in the Arabizi system. These are tabulated in Table 2. The rest of the marks in the usual character set are used in the same way as in English.

Studying the table one can deduce the following:

- 1 The Arabic consonants that have their counterparts in English are given their counterpart shapes.
- 2 Some consonants need compound letters.
- 3 The consonants that do not have an English counterpart are represented by numerals. This representation is based mostly on the similarity of the shape of the Arabic original consonant to the numeral. In this context, an apostrophe is added to the numeral simulating the dot added to some Arabic letters in order to differentiate them from those that share that same body. For example, the letters ح and ج are represented by 7 and 7'. The only exception to the similarity of the shape is the letter ح when 5 is used to represent it. The first letter of the pronunciation of 5 in Arabic is the letter ح, thus it was chosen.
- 4 There still is some ambiguity regarding ث ذ (and ظ if it is written in letters), where all share the “th” compound letter; and د ط where they both share “d” (if ط was written in letters). In slang Arabic, these letters quite often share the same sound.
- 5 There is more than one alternative for most of the letters. The use of these alternatives is contextual in many cases, but is a matter of choice in many others.
- 6 The Arabizi system does not need any special characters compared to other systems of translating Arabic into English, such as that of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, which needs dots below many letters.<sup>5</sup>

## Arabizi's Current Role in Society

Arabizi is used by most Arabic-speaking people, and its acceptance is growing, but there still are many adversaries who totally refute the concept. First, I will explore the reasons why young people use Arabizi and the growing domains of its use. I also will present the view against it.

### *Reasons Why Young People Use Arabizi*

During intensive group interviews with students, one of the major questions was “Why do you use Arabizi?” There were many answers; all confirmed the widespread use of Arabizi. For some, it was the historical precedence of English over Arabic in Internet and cellular phones. At times, the Arabic language was not supported by the widespread technology, thus Arabizi was the only possible way

5 *The Encyclopedia of Islam, New Edition*, Vol. 1, H.A.R. Gibb, et al., eds. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960, reprint 1967), XIII.

to chat over the Net or to send messages over cellular phones, and thus it was adopted. This is still valid, because some cellular phones have no Arabic language capabilities.

Some students felt that classical Arabic letters (glyphs) should be used for classical Arabic and not for slang. They felt more relaxed using the Arabizi system for day-to-day topics and songs in slang Arabic. Others emphasized that they felt that Arabizi can express things that cannot be expressed otherwise. Slang Arabic letters are pronounced differently, depending on the social status of the speaker and on the group, sex, and origin. (For example, the letter “Qaf” ق is pronounced “Ga,” “Qa,” “Ka,” and “A,” depending on the person.) These sounds could be expressed in Arabizi, but not in classical Arabic. In addition, Arabizi supports uppercase and lowercase letters. Thus, shouting, calmness, and some other emotions can be expressed using this system, but not in classical Arabic. Jokes, however, cannot be expressed in this system, because they lose their “spirit,” as many of the students stated.

Another major reason for using Arabizi is economics. The number of characters allowed in a written English message is much greater than that in an Arabic one (for example, on my own phone, the maximum allowed numbers are seven hundred and sixty characters for a message in English, and three hundred and thirty characters for one in Arabic). Moreover, many English words and phrases are used within Arabic slang. So in writing messages, one would have to switch between the two languages in the same message. Thus, learning and using one set of “English” keys that can be applied to the two languages is more convenient, and less confusing.

In addition to all of the above reasons, using the Arabizi system is considered to be “cool” and free of errors. It is not taught at any level, and is acquired by practice. Because of the flexibility of its rules, it supports a person’s intuition, and there are no typos in this sense.

#### *Why Writing Arabic with English Is More Acceptable Now<sup>6</sup>*

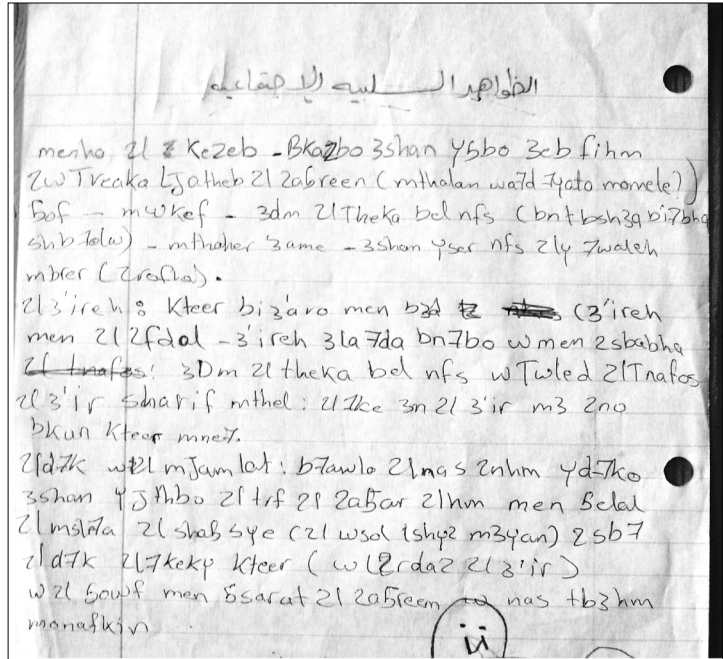
In middle of the last century, Arabic nationalism was widespread throughout the Arab world, together with the declaration of independence from the European colonizing powers—mainly France and England. The Latin alphabet represented the colonial powers which were resisted by the younger generation. Currently, nationalism is resurgent and is supported by many governments. The Internet and the concept of “a small knowledge village,” with English as its principal tool; along with the domination of “Western culture”; makes the younger generation less hostile to Latin characters.

Other hostile reactions were triggered because the earlier suggestion to use Latin characters aimed at totally altering the Arabic writing system, which represented a departure from all historical and cultural ties to the past. In many cases, this was looked upon as

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6 For a historical discussion of the call for adopting Latin letters for writing Arabic and the reactions it provoked, and still is provoking in many, refer to: Emil Ya3qub, “Ta3rib al-3ulum al-6ibbiya”; and Mohammad al-9awi, “Fi Kitabat al-3arabiyya Bil7arf allatini” (“On Writing Arabic in Latin Letters” [in Arabic]): [www.almarefah.com/print.php?id=611](http://www.almarefah.com/print.php?id=611) (accessed January 31, 2007).

Figure 2  
Handwritten Arabizi in place of the Arabic writing system, is it a future evolution?



cultural treason, and an alliance with the enemy. The Arabizi system, however, does not suggest that. It is an alternative that is mainly used for slang, rather than classical Arabic.

At the personal level, using Latin characters did not bring any direct benefit (economic, for example), and it wasn't a necessity at any technical level. On the other hand, sending a message in Arabizi is less costly than in Arabic, and, in some cases, it is necessary due to the unavailability of Arabic language support in the technology. A final point to note here is that Arabizi spread without a formal proposal, in a silent way, as a must-use practicality. Even those who refute the use of Latin characters in Arabic had to use Arabizi in the Internet addresses where they published their articles.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Arabizi in Other Fields*

The use of Arabizi is growing to cover more fields than those related to cellular phones and the Internet. It is used by young people to express themselves through writing on the walls, illegally in most cases, in the current graffiti art (if these writings could be categorized as such). Sometimes Arabizi also is incorporated in movie posters and music CD covers, mostly in the titles.

One interesting development in its growth is that it is being used in handwriting. I was really astonished to see that two of my first-year design students submitted a draft-story of a pop-up book design project handwritten using Arabizi (Figure 2). They "like writing this way," and they scattered phrases and paragraphs all over their university notebooks written in this manner. Moreover,

7 "Ta3rib al-3ulum al-6ibbiya" and Mohammad al-9awi.



an Arabizi typeface design project for second-year students also was received with much enthusiasm. All this indicates a direction that might continue to evolve.

### **Arguments against Arabizi**

Not everyone likes the use of English in writing Arabic. The reasons for refuting the use of Latin characters in Arabic over the last century mentioned earlier are still applicable for many.<sup>8</sup> Romanticizing about the visual beauty of Arabic calligraphy creates another barrier, so I want to suggest the possibility that Arabizi could have an Arabic look.

### **Arabizi Typefaces**

As stated earlier, “Arabizi” is a slang term that describes a system of writing Arabic with English characters. Sometimes, it is even extended to include using the English verbs and conjugating them according to the Arabic grammatical rules.

Nevertheless, there are no studies of this phenomenon and, as a result, its visual part—the typeface—has never been highlighted. Because the Arabizi writing system is used by people without the constraints of clear systematic rules, users adopt any available typeface. Neither the typeface nor the shapes of the characters are thought of as factors in this system. My intent in this paper, in addition to properly characterizing the Arabizi system, is to make typeface design an integral part of the Arabizi system.

Accordingly, a pilot project was conducted in two stages. The first was to define the Arabizi system in general. The second was to design a typeface (English letters) that best conveys the Arabic characteristics of the Arabizi system, and to make the type design an issue within the system. The project was assigned to second-year graphic design students at the University of Petra in Jordan. The explorations done by the students focused on how an English letter could have an Arabic look; how an Arabic identity could be implemented to create a new English language typeface; and what makes something “Arabic” in the first place.

Designs that addressed these questions used four approaches. The first was to take an existing, traditional Arabic calligraphic style and imitate its design in a new Arabizi typeface. The second was to adopt the free-style strokes of the reed pen (the traditional tool for Arabic calligraphy). The third was to design the type around an Islamic architectural form (muqarnas). The fourth approach was completely different. It tried to represent the current “Arabic” attitude in Arabizi, rather than a traditional, historical typeface. The following sections include sample designs for each of these categories. All of the designs are still at the concept level, and none have been turned into actual fonts. They are presented here to illustrate how Arabizi can have its own, visual appearance in the minds of its users.

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8 Ibid.

الرزيم مالِك يوم الكِبْر

Figure 3

Sample of an Arabic "Kufi" writing style  
(by the author).

Typeface: Mai Designer: Mai Jarrar

A B C D E F G H I I K L M N O  
P Q R S T U V W X Y Z a b c d e f  
g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z 0 1 2 3  
4 5 6 7 8 9 ( ) . , ; ! ' °  
أ ل ز ا ي ا ه م ا ل ع ر ا  
ب ل ز ا ر ن ف ل ت ا ت ا ت ه ر

Figure 4

Typeface with a "Kufi" spirit.

Figure 5

The grid-writings repeated around the drum of the dome over the mausoleum of Gur-i Amir, Samarqand (by the author).

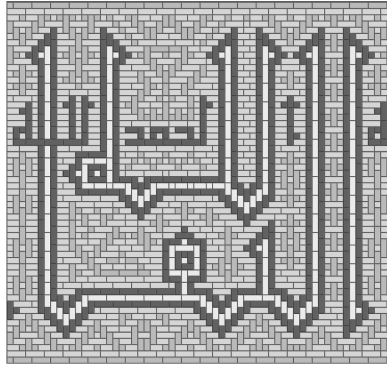


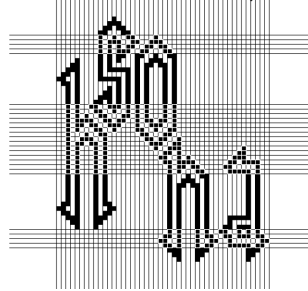
Figure 6

A typeface based on the grid-writing on famous Islamic buildings.

Typeface: Hsona Designed by: Ihsan Abu-Hani

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z  
a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 ? ! [ ] : ; \* . , ' " ' ' ' .

FKRN: tqom Fkrt 2L56 3L1 25z 6rkt kofi m3wari wst5dambh  
Fi t9mim 56 lktabt 3rabi bil2nglizi.



### Typefaces Imitating Traditional Calligraphic Styles

Some typeface designs based the shapes of their letters on traditional Arabic geometrical writing styles. The first one was inspired by the "Kufi" style (a wide range of geometrical decorative styles), in which the shapes and the endings of the strokes copied those of a Kufi (Figures 3 and 4). Another typeface was inspired by the Arabic grid-writing on the facades of famous historical buildings such as the drums of the domes over the sanctuary of Masjid-I jami' of Timur, Samarqand, and over the mausoleum of Gur-I Amir, Samraqand (Figures 5 and 6).

### Typefaces Utilizing Strokes of the Reed Pen

The most famous Arabic calligraphy is written with a reed pen, which is cut and prepared in a certain method.<sup>9</sup> The calligrapher would inscribe the curves of the letters in a free style, but according to a set of rules. Many of the student typeface designs imitated these strokes, and the students built their typefaces accordingly (Figure 7).

9 3umar Fa7il: *lqa3 al-5a6 al-3arabi* (*The Arabic Calligraphy Rhythm* [in Arabic]), Cairo: Dar al-6ala23, 1997), 20–21; and S. Huda, AbiFarès, 94.

Figure 7

Typefaces adopting the free-style strokes of the traditional tool for writing Arabic calligraphy (the reed pen).

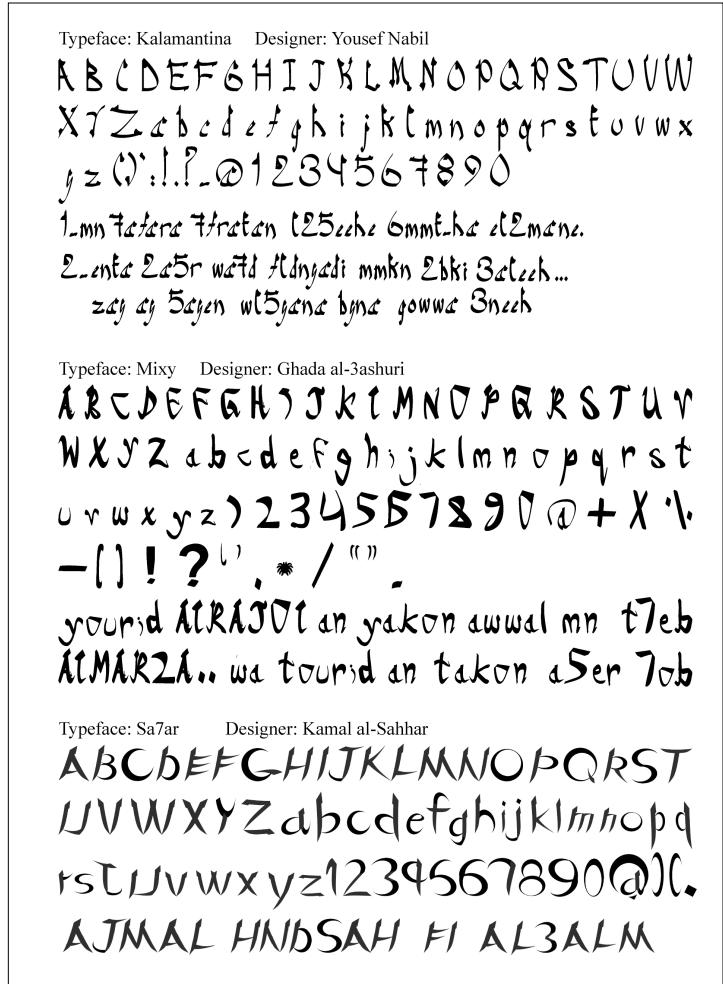
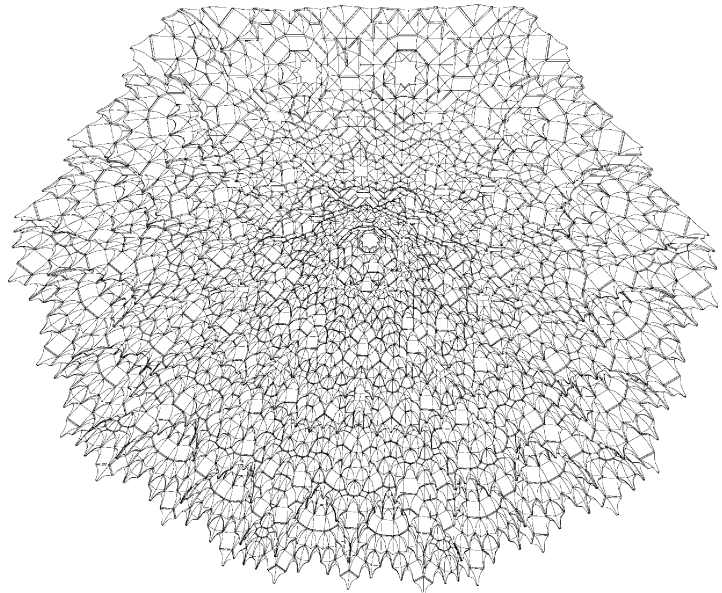


Figure 8

The muqarnas of the "Hall of Two Sisters" in the Alhambra.



A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O  
 P Q R S T U V W X Y Z a b c d  
 e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v  
 w x y z 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 = . , ?  
 ! " # \$ % & ' ( ) \* + - : ; < > [ \ ] ^ \_ ` { | } ~ ^ #

Ƨobbak wajaɗ baɗɗo maɗi, Ƨobbak  
 Ƨeɓem herban, maƧraƧ ma kenna  
 neƧƧereƧ sar iljamer berɗan.

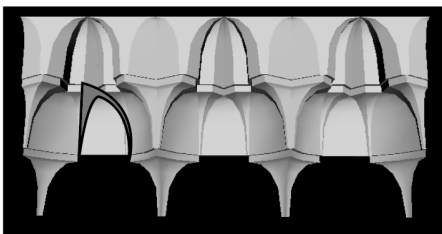


Figure 9

A typeface designed around muqarnas by deriving a two-dimensional stroke and using its variations.

### Typefaces Inspired by an Islamic Architectural Element

Muqarnas is an Islamic architectural element, defined as a three-dimensional form whose visual function is to provide the gradual transition between two levels, two sizes, and/or two shapes. The famous “hall of two sisters” in the Alhambra is an example of a complex muqarnas form (Figure 8).<sup>10</sup> One typeface took a rather simple, two-dimensional approach to capturing the muqarnas style. A stroke was defined according to a basic unit in muqarnas, and it was used, along with its variations, to build the whole typeface (Figure 9).

10 For more information on muqarnas, refer to: Mohammad Ali Yaghan: “Muqarnas.” <http://muqarnas.muqarnas.org/index.html> (accessed January 31, 2007).

Typeface: 3arabitti Designer: 3abdalla 5ashman

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q  
R S T U V W X Y Z a b c d e f g h i j k l  
m n o p q r s t u v w x y z 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8  
9 0 . @ , : ; ! ? ( ) \* # / \_ " % < > - & + = °  
Ana bakrahak L2nak 6L3t wa7d  
Kazzab kol kaLamak Kan zare6



Figure 10

A typeface designed in the spirit of the Arabizi-graphite wall-writings.

### Typefaces Reflecting Current “Arabic” Identity

The designer of this typeface took a different approach in an attempt to define the current “Arabic” rather than the historical, traditional identity. According to the designer, “The current Arabic culture is based on borrowing from the West. But what is borrowed is distorted and ill-represented in poor quality.” The designer found in the graffiti wall-writings in Arabizi a source for his type (Figure 10).

### Conclusion

The spread Arabizi requires more attention, and the typeface design promoted in this paper is only one aspect. Other needed tools that can save users a lot of time and effort, and enhance their experience, are creating a specialized Arabizi dictionary for cellular phones and computers, and providing an automatic letter-selection for typing text messages on cellular phones. (This originally was suggested by my colleague, the architect Rejan Ashour, who helped me teach the course.) Since Arabizi is chosen and developed by society rather than suggested by an elite group of researchers, I suggest its adoption as the official system of translating Arabic characters into English.