



Working in the Middle East

The term the Middle East includes not only some of the countries of the Arab World – Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates (the UAE) and Yemen – but also Iran whose inhabitants are not Semitic but Indo-European and who speak Farsi/Persian, not Arabic.

Other neighbouring countries with Arab populations include Libya, the Sudan, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, the last three being known as the countries of the *Maghreb*. The western border of the Middle East is usually taken to be the border between Egypt and Libya.

It is most important not to put “The Arabs” together or to treat “The Middle East” as a single entity. There are many variations, often within the countries themselves: in Saudi Arabia for example, Western expatriate life in Jeddah is somewhat more relaxed than in Riyadh.

To be an Arab is not to come from a particular race or lineage. The Arab world includes Muslims, Christians and Jews. Any person who adopts the Arabic language is typically called an Arab. Arabic is the official and the only language of the Qur’an, the Islamic holy book.

So important is Islam in the Middle East that some study of the subject is essential for life there. Islam is a binding force, not just throughout the region, but beyond. Islam is more than a religion: it is a code of behaviour and a way of life as well.

“Islam” in Arabic means ‘submission’ or specifically submission to the Allah’s will and obedience to His law. Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion. God is “Allah”. Allah is immortal, omniscient, omnipresent and genderless. Muhammad is God’s Prophet. Muhammad is not to be worshipped but is to be respected and revered. Muhammad’s life and teachings provide the examples of how one is to live his life.

Followers of Islam are called Muslims. There are 1.3 billion Muslims worldwide. Muslims are not to be confused with Arabs. Muslims may be Arabs, Turks, Persians, Indians, Pakistanis, Malaysians, Indonesians, Europeans, Africans, Americans or other nationalities.

Devout Muslims pray five times a day - between 4.30 and 5.00am, around noon, some time between 2.00 and 4.00pm, at sunset and one hour after sunset (never later than 9.00pm). This schedule varies according to the time of year and the part of the country. At prayer times, everything stops so you may want to make plans around the prayer schedule.

During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, fasting takes place during the hours of daylight. Most people amend their waking and sleeping hours accordingly. It is considered bad manners to eat or drink or smoke in the sight of a fasting Muslim.

Be extremely careful taking photographs. The Koran prohibits the depiction of the human form by graven images. You should definitely not photograph women or religious processions.

Hierarchy and Status

Throughout the Arab world, authority is generally related to age and gender. Arabs tend to associate age with experience and wisdom. Head of the family or clan is normally the oldest male. When he dies or becomes incapacitated, his place will likely be taken by his oldest son or one of his brothers. When a son succeeds his father as family head, he thereby gains authority over his mother.

Male offspring are favoured, since a son is expected to care for his parents in their advanced age, whereas a daughter becomes part of the son-in-law’s family. Also, a son can bring a family honour, whereas a daughter could bring shame.

Arab women are typically subordinate to men in their societies. The extent varies by country. The most restrictive conditions exist on the Arabian Peninsula and the most relaxed conditions exist in the urban areas of Egypt, Syria and Lebanon.

Respect the privacy and protected role of women in Arab societies. Do not shake hands with an Arab woman unless she offers her hand first, or if you are a woman. Do not flatter, touch, hug or talk in private with women. It could even endanger their safety. Do not try and engage a woman in conversation unless you have been formally introduced.

Meeting and Greeting

An Arab appreciates admiring comments about his country, his city, his office or his taste in art. However, avoid admiring an individual possession to excess or he will feel obligated to give it to you.

Politics, religion and topics with sexual content or those that are detrimental to Islam or the royal family are best avoided in conversation.

Taboos

Arabs are restricted by Islamic conventions from eating pork, most carnivorous animals and unscaled fish. Alcohol is forbidden. Meat must be butchered in line with ritual (known as "hallal" permitted"). Lamb is the most common meat.

Personal hygiene is extremely important to Arabs for spiritual and practical reasons. Formal washing of face, hands and forearm required before daily prayers or fasting.

Body Language & Gestures

Body language takes on extra significance in Arab culture. Shake hands with the right hand only and at the beginning and end of any meetings. Shake hands longer, but less firmly than in the West. Left hand grasps elbow.

Remember to always use the right hand for passing objects, touching food or touching other people.

"Yes" may be indicated by swivelling the head from side to side and "no" by tilting the head backwards and clicking the tongue.

Do not stare at women or maintain eye contact. Do not ask an Arab questions about his wife or other female members of his family.

"Come Here" – right hand out, palm down, with fingers brought towards oneself, repeatedly in a clawing motion is the sign for calling someone to come.

"I'm thinking" – grasping the chin with the thumb side of the right fist is a sign of wisdom.

"Thank You" (in the name of Allah) – Placing the palm of the right hand on the chest, bowing the head a little and closing one's eyes.

A considerable number of Arabs touch more between the same sex. They hug each other and you can see them holding hands as they walk together.

Religious and Cultural Holidays

The holy date of the Muslims is FRIDAY. It is considered to be sacred and the Day of Judgment will take place on Friday. In the Friday sermon, the Imam (prayer leader) gives the sermon (Khutba) and leads prayer.

Gifts

Green is the symbolic colour of Islam. It is a popular colour used in art and architecture. Black, red and white are also very important and preferred.