

Middle East



The modern day Middle East includes the countries of the Arabia Peninsula, along with adjacent countries to the north of the peninsula that border or nearly border the Eastern Mediterranean referred to as the Levant.

Countries of the Arabian Peninsula include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia (KSA), United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Yemen. With the exception of Yemen, the countries of the Arabia Peninsula are also known as the Gulf countries, due to their border with the Arabian Gulf (but not referred to as the Persian Gulf as learnt by most Westerners). Countries of the Arabia Peninsula, again with the exception of the Yemen, also belong to the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council). The GCC has aspirations not dissimilar to the European Union in terms of common market and other economic policies.

The most important core cultural values that matter in the Middle East are: Family, Recognition of Status, Honour, Respect, Reputation, Hospitality, Courtesy, Generosity and Face.

Throughout the Arab world, the respect a person enjoys depends on his or her status, rank and age. Authority is related to age which is associated with experience and wisdom. The Head of the family or clan is normally the oldest male. When he dies or becomes incapacitated, his place will be taken by his oldest son or one of his brothers.

Showing status is important so people will take you seriously. Carefully select your hotel and transportation and use the services of a porter, for example, to avoid being viewed as a low-ranking employee.

Building lasting and trusting personal relationships is very important to most Arabs, who expect to establish strong bonds prior to closing any deals. This requires a long-term perspective and commitment and can be a slow process. Changing a key contact may require the relationship-building process to start again or bring negotiations to a halt. Admired personal traits include patience and sociability.

The working week is Sunday to Thursday throughout the GCC and Levant, with the exception of Lebanon. Family owned businesses are usually focused around a family unit with most key employees coming from the extended family. Nepotism is a way of life. Businesses run on strongly hierarchical lines with the majority of power being held at the top by the senior, older family members. You must take time to build relationships with everyone you meet. A seemingly junior employee may prove to be a favoured relative of a senior manager and therefore of potential help.

Management approach is instructional. Subordinates view it as the boss' role to take decisions and to convey those decisions down the chain for implementation. Consensus-style discussions may be held but the final decision is taken by the leader. It is important that any instructions you give are clear, unambiguous and complete. Decision-making can be slow. Decisions require several layers of approval and many people are consulted with in the organisation. Try to win the support of all senior managers.

Communication can be indirect. Arab's engage in flowery language, exaggerations and rhetoric and open disagreement and confrontation is rare. You will not usually hear a direct 'no'. When an Arab says 'yes', he means 'possibly'. 'We must think about it' usually means 'no'. Use a similar indirect approach when dealing with them so that they do not think you are too pushy or rude.

Meetings are changeable so it's best to schedule one per day and to be prepared that things may change. As all things emanate from the will of Allah, a degree of fatalism and acceptance are inherent in the Arabic character. Things will or will not happen according to the will of God and not because of the actions of man. The meeting will take place tomorrow at ten o'clock - God willing.

Your Arab colleagues will want to know whom they are meeting (titles, positions, responsibilities, etc.) in advance. Meetings may be cancelled or postponed with little notice as schedules are loose and flexible. Avoid being late yourself. After the introductions, offer your business card to everyone present. Cards should be in English on one side and in Arabic on the reverse. Show qualifications and your professional title. Present your card with your right hand with the Arabic side facing up.

Early meetings will include lots of small talk and personal questions. Frequent meeting interruptions are normal and do not signal a lack of interest. Don't be surprised if you are expected to sit in the meeting room on your own for a considerable period of time before your turn comes around again. Your presentation should be short and concise, allowing lots of time for questions and clarifications.

The use of correct titles and salutations can be a particularly sensitive matter. Special care should be taken in all formal written communication. As a general rule, it is wise to err on the side of formality.

Royal titles include King, Queen, Sheikh, Sultan, Crown Prince. Members of ruling families are addressed as His/Your Highness. Ministers and ambassadors have the standard international designation of 'Excellency'. The titles Doctor, Sheikh [chief], Mohandas [engineer] and Ustadh [professor] are used in both the literal and honorific senses. 'Sheikh' should always be used the same as a knighthood in English – applied only to the first name, never the surname.

Body language is important 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. When offering a gift, it is likely that the gift will not be opened in front of the giver.

It's important for people travelling to the Arabia Peninsula to understand the laws and obey them. For example in Saudi Arabia, there has been gender segregation in restaurants, although this restriction is changing in some locations. Hotel swimming pools/gyms remain segregated. Alcohol consumption is forbidden and prison sentences vary from a few weeks to several months, and can come with severe punishments.

During the month of Ramadan, visitors should avoid eating, drinking or smoking in public between dawn and sunset. It is generally forbidden to take photos of an airport, military installations and other sensitive buildings. Care should be taken not to photograph Muslim women without their consent. In Saudi Arabia, women are prohibited from driving, and generally public displays of affection are not allowed. Homosexual behaviour and adultery are illegal throughout the region.