

### The region

When referring to “The Middle East”, the term means different things to different people. At its most general level it refers to countries stretching from Turkey in the west to Iran in the East and all in between. However, the region is by no means a homogenous block.

Although the majority of the inhabitants of the region are Muslim Arabs, one also has to consider that the Turks, Iranians and Kurds all have distinctive cultures and languages. Furthermore among Arabs themselves there are variations in terms of religion, language, history, tribal affiliations and culture. One must also not forget that Israel now forms part of the Middle East too, even if just physically.

For the sake of simplicity this guide to the region will look at Arab culture and the religion of Islam at a general level. Many of the basic principles will also apply to Turks, Kurds and Iranians but they should always be approached as autonomous peoples.



Men drinking tea, An Nafat, Iraq

### Islam: the basics

Islam is without doubt the underpinning influence on life in the Middle East. The religion governs life from cradle to grave and a simple appreciation of Islam is critical to understanding the people.

#### Basics

- Muslims believe in one God, who is referred to in Arabic as “Allah”.
- The last Prophet to be sent to mankind was Muhammad, who was born in Mecca in 570. Muslims accept all other Prophets including Adam, Moses, Abraham and Jesus as their Prophets.
- Muslims pray 5 times a day (at sunrise, early afternoon, late afternoon, sunset and at night). This is done at a mosque or individually.
- Friday is the holiest day of the week and Muslims attend the mosque in the early afternoon for prayers.
- In Ramadan all Muslims should fast from sunrise to sunset. This means no food or water should pass the lips.
- The roles of men and women are seen as different although equal. Men traditionally work, while women take care of the household. Outside of the family mixing between genders is uncommon (more so in traditional societies such as Gulf states).

### Dos and don'ts

- If asking questions about Islam never do so in a mocking or cynical manner. The Prophet Muhammad is adored, so bringing his character or deeds into question is a serious no-no.
- If given a copy of the Quran as a present accept it with your right hand. Never let it touch the floor and ensure you treat it with respect.
- If you come across somebody praying do not attempt to speak with them and do not walk in front of them.
- During Ramadan do not eat or drink openly. The last ten days of Ramadan are the most intense so do not expect to get any business done during that time.
- Always dress modestly. Men should be covered from knees upwards and women from the ankles upwards. The two sexes generally do not mix. Men should wait for women to shake hands and vice versa. If a hand is not extended then a simple bow to acknowledge them is standard.
- If giving presents remember Muslims do not drink alcohol, or eat pork or any meat that is not “halal”. Muslim men are also not allowed to wear gold or silk.
- In business Muslims are not allowed to spend, use or invest their money in activities that involve interest, gambling or alcohol.

### The importance of relationships

- To say a good relationship is the be all and end all of success in the Middle East is no exaggeration.
- Arabs do not separate professional and personal life; therefore doing business revolves around personal relationships, family ties, trust and honour. It is important to spend time building a relationship through non-business activities to prove you can protect their interests, reputation and honour in a business relationship.
- Once bonds are formed you become privy to a system known as ‘wasta’. Roughly translated, this means using people of influence for favours in return for favours. Although it may seem biased or unethical, it is something that should be exploited when doing business in the Middle East.



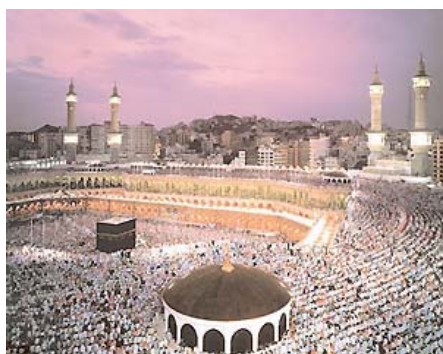
## Language

**Talking the talk:** Using a few words in the local language always wins respect and helps create a good first impression. Below are some basic phrases that may come in useful. If you want to learn more, why not download our **FREE Talk the Talk™ podcast** with essential words and phrases in Arabic? Go to [www.rlnpodcast.com](http://www.rlnpodcast.com).

English	Pronunciation in Arabic	
Hello	mar-haba	
Good Morning	saba hul-khayr	
Good Evening	masa hul-khayr	
Goodbye	ma-a salama	
How are you?	keyf halukum?	
Fine, thanks	Bi khayr, shukran	
Welcome	ahlan wa sahan	
Yes	ay-wa	
No	la	
Please	min fadlik	
Thank you	shukran	

## The spoken word

- Middle Eastern culture places more value on someone's word than on anything in writing. This is a region where a man's word is his honour and to break it would have serious consequences.
- A contract is viewed as a memorandum of understanding rather than a fixed, binding agreement. Be sure to promise only things you can deliver. Failure to do so will result in loss of honour.



Worshippers at Mecca, Saudi Arabia

## Meeting and greeting

- The traditional Islamic greeting you will hear is 'Asalamu alaykum' (peace be with you). As a non-Muslim you would not be expected to use it, but if you did you would receive the reply 'wa alaykum salam' (and peace be with you).
- When doing business in the Middle East, handshakes are always used and can last a long time. Islamic etiquette recommends that one waits for the other to withdraw their hand first before doing the same.
- Always use the right hand. Do not be surprised if your hand is held while you are led somewhere. Holding hands among men is common and does not carry the same connotations as it does in the West.
- Arabs are fairly informal with names when doing business and generally address people by their first names. John Smith will be addressed as Mr. John. Arab titles of note are: *Sheikh* (an old man, scholar, leader), *Sayyid* (descendant of the Prophet Muhammad) and *Hajji* (one who has performed the pilgrimage).

## Business negotiations

- Initial meetings should be about relationship building. One should engage in conversation and try to get to know the 'person' you are doing business with. Always wait for your counterpart to change the subject matter to business.
- Meetings can be chaotic. Always be prepared to exercise patience. Phone calls are taken during meetings and people may enter the meeting room unannounced and proceed to discuss their own agendas.
- Meetings are circular in nature. They do not follow a linear pattern and are not structured upon agendas or targets. Issues are raised as and when.
- Punctuality is expected of foreigners. Although the Arabs place a high emphasis on punctuality they rarely practice it themselves.
- If negotiating, remember the Arabs were a trading people and are excellent negotiators. Haggling takes place everywhere, whether at the shop or in the board room.
- Decisions are made slowly. Bureaucratic formalities tend to add to delays. Do not use high-pressure tactics as they will be counter productive.

## Further resources

Link2exports – information portal for those exporting to the Middle East. <http://www.link2exports.co.uk/>  
The Middle East Association - UK organisation for promoting trade and relations with the Middle East, North Africa, Turkey and Iran. <http://www.the-mea.co.uk/>  
UK Trade & Investment - support for those wanting to do business in/with the Middle East. <https://www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk/>

Zawya – website with up to date business news, reports and analysis on the Middle East. <http://www.zawya.com/>

MEED – premium magazine with latest business and financial news. <http://www.meed.com/>

Please note: While every effort is made to ensure accuracy, the Regional Language Network does not take responsibility for the content of this briefing. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the Regional Language Network or of CILT, the National Centre for Languages.

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