

A Guide for Cultural Awareness in the Middle East

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What is culture? Culture is a framework of beliefs, values, and practices shared by a group of people. Although culture can be based on ethnicity, race, and national origin, it can also be based on other factors, including religion, occupation, economic status, gender, and age.

Many Middle Eastern communities use body language, body distance, hand signals, eye contact, and facial expressions to interact with each other. The distance in which a Middle Easterner stands with another while engaging in conversation is quite extreme compared to Americans. Middle Easterners stand very close, usually about four inches apart; it is considered an insult to stand too far away from someone, as it is viewed as a form of rejection. Arab males are considered a touching society. Handshakes may be prolonged, elbows may be grasped, and two men may even hold hands while walking on the street (sign of friendship and respect). On the other hand, men should not touch an Arabic woman unless she extends her hand first.

Touching is common during conversation as well. It is a means of showing warmth and friendliness. Typically, people touch each other's shoulders and arms during conversation. Some Asians may not be comfortable with hugs, pats on the back or strong emotional displays, since they are accustomed to a reserved style. It is also typical to kiss people "hello" in public. That includes men kissing other men (one kiss per cheek). However, public displays of romantic affection are absolutely forbidden. In no way can a couple kiss, hug, or hold hands in public; this is considered very rude since affection is only allowed in private settings.

Unlike other cultures, pointing is not considered rude for the Middle Eastern. The Middle Eastern society gesticulates with fingers to communicate. Pointing with fingers is very common to get someone's attention. Americans raise the index finger and make a curling motion to summon another person; outside of America, this gesture is used only for beckoning animals in Australia and Indonesia. There are certain "hand behaviors" used in restaurants. To get a waiter's attention, the snapping of fingers is used and considered appropriate. Unlike the "come here" gesture that the Americans use (closed fist with back and forth motion of first finger), people in the Middle East use the entire hand. These hand gestures would be considered demeaning when used outside a restaurant. We must realize that there is yet another hand gesture that is still more demeaning than the previous one mentioned. That is, putting the middle finger down when holding your hand up, which is equivalent to the American gesture of giving someone "the finger."

Eye contact is commonly used in greetings. Long, direct eye contact among men is important. In fact, staring is not necessarily considered rude or impolite. However, the eyes are almost always lowered during conversation. It is considered very rude to look into the eyes of the elders at any time, especially looking directly into the eyes of a grandparent. Staring is a common gesture used to look at strangers; however, eye contact is still forbidden.

When gesticulating, it is very important to use the right hand only. The use of the right hand versus the left hand pertains to religious beliefs. The right hand is supposed to represent good,

while the left hand is associated with evil. Other gestures that are considered offensive include sticking out the tongue which implies rudeness and represents untidiness. Laughing loudly is rude, improper, and impolite; whistling to get someone's attention is forbidden. The Middle Eastern believes that you call on the devil when you whistle for another person.

Sitting requires certain etiquette as well, whether it is at the table or on a sofa. It is improper to cross the legs in the presence of an elder. Sitting slouched with the legs spread open is considered extremely rude, even for men. When standing and conversing, avoid leaning against a wall or standing with your hands in your pockets; both are considered disrespectful. Avoid showing the sole of the shoe, or inadvertently pointing it at someone. The shoe soles are the lowest and dirtiest part of the body, and, therefore, it is rude to point them at someone. It is deemed insulting.

Some general customs one might observe in the Arab region include:

- Arab men are often seen fingering loops of beads that resemble a Catholic rosary. But for Arabs, many of whom are Muslim, these are tension relievers called "worry beads" and have little or no religious significance.
- Persons should not be photographed without their permission.
- Gesturing "no" is often done by tilting the head backward and either raising the eyebrows, jutting out the chin, or making a clicking sound with the tongue.

Refer to the best-selling books, *Do's and Taboos Around the World: A Guide to International Behavior and Gestures*, and *Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*, both by Roger E. Axtell, for more information on cultural awareness.