

# IF YOU LEARN NOTHING ELSE ABOUT ARAB CULTURE



*Arab Culture Condensed  
to 15 Slides*

**For Official Use Only**

# Basic Arab Values

- A person's dignity, honor, and reputation are of paramount importance (honor and shame are often viewed as collective, i.e., pertaining to the entire group or family). If you shame an Arab you have shamed his entire extended family, clan, tribe, etc.
- It is important to always act in a manner that will make a good impression on others.
- Loyalty to family takes precedence over personal needs.
- Social class and family background are the major determinants of one's personal status. The next most important is individual character and achievement.
- Arabs value conversation and long discussions.

# Basic Arab Self-Perceptions

- Everyone believes in God, acknowledges His power, and has some religious affiliation.
- Humans cannot control events – things depend on God and fate.
- Piety is one of the most admirable characteristics in a person.
- In Islam there is no separation between church and state (some Arabs may not agree with this).
- Established religious beliefs and practices are important and liberal interpretations which threaten them are rejected.

# Reciprocity

- If an Arab helps you he will expect you to reciprocate
- Never openly refuse a friend's request.
- Arabs will extend many invitations – while it is acceptable not to maintain them at the same pace, it is considered rude not to reciprocate.

# Basic Rules of Etiquette

## 1 of 3

- Good manners constitute the most salient factor in evaluating a person's character (remember this point during official meetings).
- Failure to shake hands when greeting someone or when saying goodbye is considered rude. Between a man and a woman, it is the woman's choice whether or not to shake hands.
- Do not slouch or cross legs on top of a table. Sitting in a manner that shows the soles of one's shoes to another person is an insult
- When standing or talking with someone, do not lean against a wall or keep hands in pockets.

# Basic Rules of Etiquette-

## 2 of 3

- Men stand when a woman enters the room; everyone stands when a new guest enters the room at a social gathering, or when a high-ranking or elderly person enters or leaves. Men allow women to precede them through doorways and offer their seats if no others are available.
- When saying goodbye to a guest, a gracious host accompanies them to the outer gate or to their car.
- If a guest admires something small and portable, an Arab may insist that it be taken as a gift. Do not express admiration for something expensive. Gifts shouldn't be opened in the presence of the donor.
- Never use the left hand.

# Basic Rules of Etiquette-

## 3 of 3

- Arabs will almost always insist on paying when out to dinner – it is appropriate to let them pay, but should be reciprocated later.
- People should not be photographed without their permission.
- One who lights a cigarette in a group must be prepared to offer one to everyone.
- Staring at one of the same sex is not considered rude.
- Most Arabs do not like to touch or be in the presence of household animals, especially dogs.
- Arabs get very personal, very quickly. Do not; however, ask about female members of the family. Do not flirt with Arab women.
- Do not stand or walk in front of a praying Muslim.

# Hospitality

## 1 of 2

- Generosity to guests is essential for a good reputation.
- A drink will quickly be offered. Accept and hold the cup with right hand. Not to accept the drink is consider ill mannered.
- If a guest arrives while others are eating, they will offer to share, but an unexpected guest should feel free to decline.
- *Ahlan wa Sahlan* or *Marhaba* means “welcome” and will be stated when a guest arrives and usually several times throughout the visit.



# Hospitality

## 2 of 2

- Guests often are given a seat of honor and will be asked frequently if they are comfortable.
- Even under inconvenient or unexpected circumstances, a guest would never be refused entrance. Exception being if a woman was at home alone and the guest was a man. In this situation, the guest should refuse to enter, regardless of how soon the male member of the household is expected to be home.
- Many Arab homes have a separate room for receiving guests, called a salon.

# Meals

1 of 2

- Dinner should be planned for a late hour. After the evening prayer.
- Invitations are almost always verbal and frequently spontaneous.
- Guests should arrive early for conversation before the meal.
- Arabs will present abundant amounts of food to display generosity and esteem for the guests.
- Water may not be served until after the meal. Some people consider it unhealthy to eat and drink at the same time.

# Meals

## 2 of 2

- The guest is expected to show admiration and gratitude for the food. Eat sparingly on the day you are invited because out of politeness you will overeat! *Alhamdu lillah* means “Thanks be to God” – say this when you have had enough to eat.
- When leaving the table, it is customary to say *sufra dayma* – “*may your table always be thus*”.
- When guests express an intention to leave, the host will always encourage them to stay – consider this ritualistic – you will not offend by leaving.

# Official Meetings

## 1 of 2

- A good personal relationship = a successful meeting.
- At the beginning of meetings, time is set aside for light conversation. Inquire about illness and other personal matters (weddings, vacation plans). Wait for them to start talking business. Arabs don't like to be hurried or pressured into an agreement.
- Arabs mistrust people who do not appear to be sincere or who fail to demonstrate an interest in them personally.
- Do not mistake good manners for an indication of your success.
- A noncommittal reaction is not negative or positive – be patient.
- Inshallah means “*If God Wills*”; in other words, they may express good intention, but they are leaving a way out.

# Official Meetings

## 2 of 2

- Often intermediaries are used to represent another. In situations of conflict, it is particularly important to use an intermediary for whom the person you are in conflict with holds in high regard.
- Most Arabs are habitually late. Therefore, a person who arrives late and has kept you waiting may not even realize that you have been inconvenienced. Deadlines are often not met – expect delays and be patient
- A positive response is merely a declaration of intention and an expression of goodwill.
- Arabs often disregard “no smoking” signs and will often disregard you if you ask them to refrain from smoking.

# Conversation

- Quickly determine social status. Then treat them with the respect due for their status.
- Never omit greetings of “*Good morning/afternoon, how are you?*” etc.
- “*Do this for my sake*” attached to a request for a favor implies indebtedness.
- Importance is placed on direct praise for strong character or a job well done. Criticism is taken very personally, so it is important to phrase it carefully. Do not give criticism in front of others. Begin with the good points and be sure to include your high regard for them as an individual.
- Do not discuss politics or religion. Stick to safe topics, such as the Arabic language, literature, poetry etc.

# Gestures

## 1 of 2

- *Moving the head slightly back and raising eyebrows = **no***
- *Moving the head back and chin up = **no***
- *Moving chin back slightly and making a clicking sound = **no***
- *After shaking hands, placing the right hand to the heart or chest = **respect or sincerity***
- *Holding right hand out, palm downward, and opening and closing = **come here***
- *Right hand out, palm downward, and move as if brushing something away = **go away***

# Gestures

## 2 of 2

- *Right hand out, palm upward, closing hand half-way and holding it = **give it to me***
- *Right hand out, palm downward, moving it up and down slowly = **quiet down***
- *Right hand out, palm upward, touching thumb and fingertips together and moving hand up and down = **calm down; be patient***
- *Holding right forefinger up and moving it from left to right quickly several times = **never***
- *Right hand out, palm downward, then quickly twisting the hand to be palm upward = **What? Why?***



# ADDITIONAL LEARNING RESOURCES

- Cultural Awareness Training

University of Military Intelligence: the Army Proponent for Cultural Awareness Training

***<http://www.universityofmilitaryintelligence.us/main.asp>***

- Language Training Resources

Various language Training Aides/Handbooks

***<http://oef.monterey.army.mil>***

Arabic Online Training:

***<http://www.lingnet.org/language/default.asp>***