MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

UNDERSTANDING THE ARAB WORLD

December 2011

WHO ARE THE ARABS?

The Arab World is a vast area which is home to diverse people, many of whom have experienced considerable change since the start of 2011. The way in which people behave and interact with you will therefore vary greatly across the region. This guide discusses aspects of Arab culture that you might experience in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, UAE and Yemen. Further reading on individual countries is recommended before you deploy.

Figure 1: The Arab World

Most Arabs are Sunni Muslims who speak Arabic. However, there are many different religions, ethnic and social groups in the Arab world, among them Christians, Jews, Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, Kurds, Turks and Berbers. Some of these groups have a difficult time in their countries, but many live happily as Arabs and as part of Arab society. While some Arab countries are very conservative and have strict rules about the role of women, others are more Westernised in their approach to issues like alcohol, religion and education. The familiar stereotype of the Bedouin Arab with his camel, tent, robes and blood feuds is only a small part of Arab identity and history. In fact, this traditional way of life has died out

in many parts of the Arab world, and is not significant today in areas like North Africa. Today's Arab population is mostly young, as seen during the 2011 Arab Spring, and many Arabs are very Westernised.

Arab empire

Before the arrival of Islam with the Prophet Muhammed in 570-632AD, nomadic Arabs lived in the Arabian peninsula (what is now Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman and other Gulf countries). By the early 7th century they had created one of the largest land empires in history stretching across the Levant (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan) and into North Africa and southern Spain. The Arab empire was fairly tolerant of non-Muslim groups such as Christians and Jews, who became a part of Arab society. The Arab empire was threatened by both the Ottoman Turks and the Mongols, and slowly declined until the Ottoman empire took over in the 16th century. From the 19th century until after the Second World War, Western powers including Britain and France ruled parts of the Middle East. Arabs are generally more critical of this Western imperialism than of the Ottoman rule before it.

Independence, nationalism and Islamism

When Arab countries were given independence after WWII, Arab nationalism flourished, influenced by European ideas like socialism and secularism. In the 1970s, Arab nationalism subsided and Islamism gained strength, but Arab identity remains strong today. In North Africa, being an Arab distinguishes you from your sub-Saharan African or European neighbours. In Iraq, it marks you out from your Iranian (Persian) and Kurdish neighbours; and in the Levant from the Jews, Armenians, Kurds and other groups in that region.

A unifying but diverse language

Arabic has 250 million speakers and connects the people of 18 countries, uniting many different ethnic groups, religious communities and nationalities. Arabic also acts as a symbol of pan-Arab nationalism, on the basis that people who speak the same

Figure 2: Libyan woman speaking on the radio

language belong to the same nation, as heard in the Arabic phrase, 'my language is my nation'! However, there are many forms of Arabic, and local dialects can be very different to classical Arabic. The five broad regional variations are North African, Egyptian/Sudanese, Levantine, Arabian Peninsula and Iraqi. Each region has many dialects particular to each country. For example, Yemeni Arabic differs from Kuwaiti Arabic, and Libyan Arabic differs from Moroccan Arabic. There are significant differences in grammar and vocabulary between North African, Gulf and Iraqi dialects. Although Arabic is a very difficult language for Europeans to learn, Arabs will be pleased if you try learning and speaking their language. However, do not be surprised if your Arabic, learned in one region, is not necessarily comprehensible to all in another region.

A religious language

For Muslims who comprise the majority of the Arab world, Arabic is the language of God, of his Prophet and of the Qur'an, the holy book. Many Muslims therefore reject the idea of translating the Qur'an into any other language. In the Hadith, the collected sayings of the Prophet, Arabic is described as the 'language of heaven'. For Muslim Arabs, Arabic therefore has a mystical or religious quality. Arabic inscriptions of words from the Qur'an should always be treated with great respect.

RELIGION

Islamic majority

Islam is the religion of 90% of the Arab world's 210 million people. Although many non-Muslim groups live in Arab countries, they have long been outsiders, unlikely to progress in their respective militaries, judiciaries or public services. The proportion of Muslims in different countries ranges from around 60% in Sudan to almost 100% in Oman and Qatar. As in Christianity, there are many interpretations of Islamic doctrine and practice. Like Christianity, Muslim traditions vary across the region and are often mixed with local superstitious or ancient pre-Islamic beliefs and practices. The core of Islam, as with most religions, is the provision of principles for living a moral life. Religion is present in business transactions, the resolving of disputes and everyday conversations.

Muslim beliefs

Muslims believe that there is only one god, Allah, and that the Prophet Muhammad (570-632AD) was his messenger on earth. Muslims believe Jesus was also a prophet, but, like Muhammad, he was mortal. Core Muslim principles include following the Islamic creed (or shahada), daily prayer (five times for Sunnis, three for Shi'a), fasting during the month of Ramadan, almsgiving (zakat) and undertaking a pilgrimage or Hajj to the holy city of Mecca at least once in a lifetime.

Figure 3: Friday prayer in north Africa

Sunni and Shi'a

Muslims follow a variety of Islamic sects, just as Christianity has Protestants and Catholics, and evangelicals in both groups. Sunnis are the majority in all Arab countries except Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain, where Shi'as are more numerous. Sunnis believe that Prophet Muhammed did not appoint a successor, and that the community should decide on their religious leadership by consensus. A significant minority of Muslims are Shi'a ('followers of Ali'), who believe that the Prophet Muhammad appointed his cousin and son-in-law Ali to be his successor. Sunnis believe that individuals have a direct relationship with Allah, whereas Shi'as value the interpretation of religious leaders. Shi'as are not all the same: sects have a difference of opinion over the number of Imams that followed Ali, and each holds a different Imam as their point of worship.

Within the two Islamic sects (Shi'a and Sunni), there is great variation of belief. This includes formal divisions between schools of Islamic thought (such as Maliki, Hanbali and Hanafi), but also particular strains of Islam, which determine how people conduct their religious practice. Two of the most controversial of these are Salafism and Wahhabism because of their links at times to militant Islam. These are known as revivalist strains, because they reject association with any one school.

Figure 4: Eating together during Ramadan after dusk

Salafism

Salafists believe that Muslims need to return to the principles from the time of the Prophet, and that the Golden Age of Islam can return only in an Islamic state guided by Shari'a law. Radical Salafis believe

that any government that does not abide by Shari'a must be fought and resisted. However, Salafism traditionally takes a non-political stance and focuses on maintaining stability and peace.

Wahhabism

The dominant Sunni sect in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Wahhabism is based on the beliefs of 18th century Muslim scholar Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab, whose descendants helped unify Saudi Arabia in 1932. Wahhabism represents a movement to purify Islam from heretical beliefs and actions. Strict Wahhabis believe that other Sunnis do not follow the concept of the unity of God, and therefore may be legitimately persecuted. Shi'as are considered heretical.

Sufism

Sufism is a mystical form of Islam, involving a direct spiritual relationship with Allah. It is usually heavily influenced by local cultural practices and beliefs. Orthodox Sunnis may frown on some Sufi practices, including using music and dancing during religious rituals, and Wahhabis and Salafis believe that Sufis are not following the true path of Islam.

Religious festival and holiday dates 2012 – 2013

Date	Festival	Comment
2012 20 Mar **2013** 20 Mar	Nowroz	New year (fixed to the Persian solar calendar rather than the Muslim lunar calendar).
2012 20 Jul - 18 Aug **2013** 9 Jul - 7 Aug	Ramadan	Month-long fast marked by prayer.
2012 14 Aug **2013** 3 Aug	Laylat al-Qadr	Celebration during the period of the Hajj. Means 'night of power'.
2012 19 Aug **2013** 8 Aug	Eid al-Fitr	Three day celebration at close of Ramadan marked by gift-giving and family visits.
2012 24 - 27 Oct **2013** 13 - 16 Oct	Hajj	Annual pilgrimage to Mecca, undertaken once in a lifetime if healthy and can afford trip.
2012 26 Oct **2013** 15 Oct	Eid al-Adha	Three day celebration following the Hajj commemorating sacrifice of Abraham's son (70 days after Eid al-Fitr).
2012 24 Nov **2013** 14 Nov	Ashura	Shi'a day of mourning for martyrdom of Husayn ibu Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad.

Muslim festivals and holidays

Religious Practice

Islam affects almost every aspect of life as a Muslim Arab. People use Islamic symbols to decorate their homes and cars, carry miniature Qur'ans with them, and go on pilgrimage to various holy shrines around the Arab world. Most Arabs follow a pattern of daily prayer, celebrate Islamic festivals and holidays, and adhere to the rules of Islam. Verses from the Qur'an are memorised. In most Arab countries, Islam also affects politics and law, influencing marriage, inheritance and divorce law, as well as many aspects of business and banking.

Figure 5: Men praying together

Shar'ia

Shari'a is the laws revealed by God and based on the philosophy laid out in the Qur'an and Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammed). It provides legal basis for all public rituals but also guides private life, such as how to wash and behave in relationships. Shar'ia is interpreted for the people by religious scholars (ulema). In Saudi Arabia and Sudan, shari'a is interpreted very strictly and encompasses all aspects of domestic and civil law. In other countries such as Tunisia where state laws have been affected by the introduction of Western law, it is applied more loosely.

Christians

There are 12-16 million Christians in the Arab world, representing 5-7% of the total population, particularly located in Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Sudan, Jordan and Iraq. The Coptic church is the most important Christian denomination in the Middle East, and suffers from discrimination in Egypt and elsewhere. A significant minority of Christians do not consider themselves Arabs.

ARABIC VALUES

Honour and shame

These are two of the most important principles influencing the way people interact with each other in Arab societies. They influence everything from a casual interaction between friends in a teashop or market to violent blood feuds between families. Upholding the honour of yourself and your family is a duty for everyone, men and women. Once honour has been lost, it is difficult to win back. Your reputation is your honour. Shame is what results when your honour is damaged: when people know or say you have done something dishonourable. (Unlike in 'guilt' cultures like our own, if someone does something that might be considered dishonourable, but no-one knows about it, you do not necessarily feel shame).

A blackened face

The need to avoid damage to your social status (a 'loss of face'), is therefore important. Arabs describe the face as being 'blackened' when honour is undermined, and 'whitened' when it is restored. Loss of face can occur in many social situations. It might happen when someone refuses someone else's hospitality, ignores their authority, behaves disrespectfully towards them in some way, or acts in sexually suggestive or explicit ways.

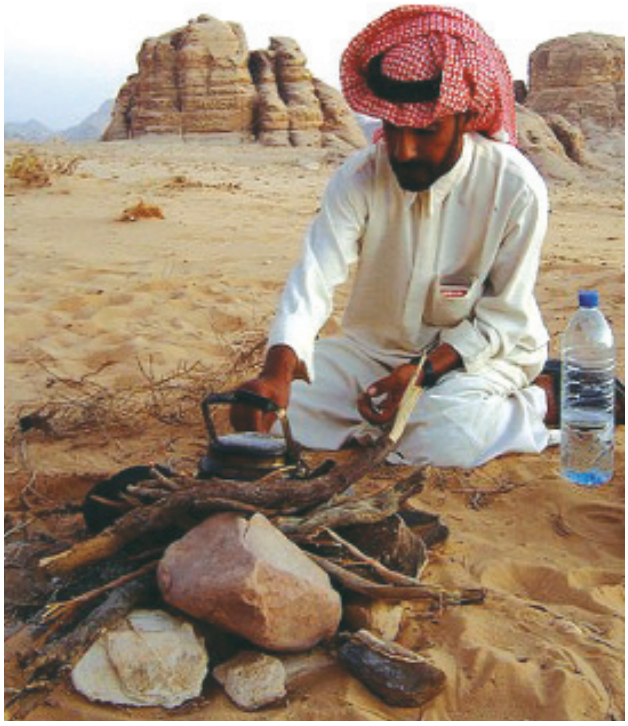

Figure 6: Bedouin in the desert

Blood

For Arabs, blood and what it symbolises are values of everyday life. Blood represents family and identity. Honour comes from the purity of your Arab blood, through both the mother and father. Certain Arab tribes, particularly those with Bedouin blood, are seen as more authentically Arab than others.

Age and influence

In Arab society, age is well respected. Status is directly linked to age, and children are taught to be obedient to their parents throughout their lives. When parents become elderly, their children expect to look after them; the idea of a nursing home is shocking to most Arabs. Ultimate responsibility in an Arab family rests on the senior male. An Arab man becomes more senior when his father dies, and the memory of fathers, grandfathers and ancestors are continually celebrated. Arab society is patrilineal: inheritance runs through men, and an Arab's second name is usually his or her father's name.

Figure 7: An Arab family

Virility and bravery

An Arab man is said to be honourable if he can prove that he is virile by having many children, especially sons. Sons continue the blood line. Traditionally, a man's honour also depends on his ability to prove his bravery and protect his family from enemies. Although most Arabs now live in cities and lead modern lives, these principles are still very important.

Employment

Certain jobs such as farming or craftsmen are seen as not traditionally 'Arab', and may be viewed as dishonourable. Some daily tasks, for example making dinner or looking after the children, also undermine a man's honour, as these domestic tasks are seen as being the job of women. It is also considered demeaning to do a job for which you are over-qualified.

Figure 8: Working in a shop

Hospitality

In Arab societies, hospitality must always be shown to guests to preserve one's honour. To refuse hospitality without a good reason will result in a loss of face for the host, as it implies that the host is not good enough for the guest. When offered hospitality, you should try to accept if possible. The amount of food served at

communal meals tends to be very generous, and the Western custom of serving food in individual portions is virtually unknown in the Arab world. When offered a second helping of food, tea or coffee, you should always accept.

FAMILIES AND TRIBES

Households and family are the centre of Arabs' worlds. Individuals feel strongest ties to and rely on family, clan and tribe, and people turn to their families in times of need. Arabs who consider themselves tribal may look down on those who are not, as they see them as people who do not know their origins and therefore have no purity or honour to defend. For Westerners, while our family may become less important for us once we have left home, for Arabs family and tribe remain key throughout their lives. However, although tribalism is important for social, economic and political life in some countries, such as Yemen and Saudi Arabia, in other countries religious or ethnic groups, occupation, geography or nationalism may be more important.

Families

Although they are becoming smaller, extended families remain important. Traditionally, a man, his wife, their unmarried sons and daughters, their married sons and wives, and any of the latter's unmarried children all live together in one household. However, as many people have moved to cities, extended families don't live in the same house as much as in the past, but several related families often live in the same neighbourhood or apartment block. People generally remain close to their extended family (cousins, aunts and uncles) for their whole lives, and loyalty to this group is usually placed before personal need.

Figure 9: Women at home

Tribalism

A tribe is a group of people who are related through being descended from a shared male ancestor. Tribes can vary in size from a few hundred individuals to thousands, and are usually named after an ancestor. Tribesmen are morally obliged to cooperate with those who share common ancestors. Tribes are 'segmentary': the different segments (families, clans) may compete against one another, but will join together when it is in their common interest, such as when competition arises from another tribe. This is shown in the proverb: 'My brother and I against my cousin, my cousin and I against the stranger.'

Tribal leadership

Although leadership is often inherited in one family, the head of a tribe is a man that the community feel is capable of serving the tribe's interests. He will stay in that role for as long as the community see fit. The tribal leader, or sheikh, should project an

image of strength and warriorhood. Tribal leaders may represent their tribe to higher authorities, consent to marriages or represent the state like a local politician.

Lineages, clans and confederations

Tribes are made up of many clans or sub-tribes, which in turn contain lineages, made up of a number of extended families. The importance of the clan varies across the Arab world. In addition, several tribes can form a confederation, which may be connected simply by geography or historical ties, rather than based on being related by blood. Confederations may contain both Sunni and Shi'a tribes. Tribes in Libya, for example, form three confederations, in the east, west and south of the country.

Figure 10: Bedouin man with sons

FAMILY LIFE

Male and female roles

Life for men and women in the Arab world is complex, and varies greatly between countries. Generally men and women occupy separate spheres, with men engaging in public and women being responsible for the private sphere. There are significant differences between male and female education and employment opportunities. In some countries only caring and domestic roles (such as nursing, teaching and midwifery) are filled by women. Women's illiteracy remains about 60% across the region, and laws on marriage, divorce and inheritance tend to favour men.

Veiling

Figure 11: Women wearing hijab

The honour of an Arab family is linked to the sexual honour of its women. Any action that breaks the strict rules about how men and women should behave can ruin family honour. A woman's honour is at risk from attention from unrelated men, which is why women veil in the presence of people outside their immediate family. In particular, a woman's hair is seen as a point of glory in her beauty and must be covered up (men are also required to cover their arms and legs). While veiling is universal in the more conservative countries like Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the UAE, in other countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Syria it is a question of personal choice and many women do not cover their hair in public. In Tunisia, veiling in public is outlawed. However, overall, the custom is becoming more common across the region. The fact that veiling allows women to engage in public life suggests that this can be viewed as part of a feminist drive. Types of veils include the hijab, covering the hair, neck and shoulders; the nikab which covers the face below the upper cheeks and bridge of nose; and the burqa, a complete body covering with slit for eyes and nose.

Household influence

Women hold a powerful position within and between households. At home, older women may be listened to just as much as men. Women have particular influence within the family over the marriages of their children or grandchildren, and many women will control the family finances. The bond between mothers and their children is a central relationship in Arab families, formed as they are raised, and maintained into adulthood.

Marriage

Arabs tend to prefer that marriages are arranged by the family, as they feel that marriage is so important that it cannot be left to a couple acting on their emotions. As men and women tend to be largely segregated after puberty it is harder for them to meet a prospective partner. Although love marriages have become more

common, there is usually some family involvement. As the average age of marriage has risen it has become more common for individuals to have a few fiancées before marriage. However, pre-marital chastity for girls remains very important.

Figure 12: Men dancing with swords at wedding

Keeping it in the family

In order to keep wealth within the family and ease any tensions over split loyalties, Arabs traditionally prefer a man to marry the daughter of his father's brother. This is called cross-cousin marriage and remains common in rural areas. When a woman marries she is expected to minimise her ties to her father's family and transfer her loyalty to her husband's family. A young woman is subordinate to her husband's mother and sisters, and will be under pressure to produce a son.

Polygamy, divorce and homosexuality

Under Muslim law, men are allowed up to four wives, as long as he can provide equally for all of them. In reality this practice – polygamy – is rare and practiced only by some wealthy Gulf sheikhs or nomadic Bedouins. Polygamy is outlawed in Tunisia and discouraged in Morocco.

Muslim law discourages divorce but it is not illegal in the Arab world. It is more difficult for women to divorce their husbands than vice versa, and it is extremely difficult for them to do so in Saudi Arabia. A woman faces a difficult future if she is divorced by her husband.

Homosexuality is illegal in most Arab countries.

PATTERN OF DAILY LIFE

Eating

Arabs consider the left hand unclean because it is used for cleaning, so food, drink and gifts are given and accepted with the right hand. The left hand may be hidden in clothing during meals. Pork is strictly forbidden for all Muslims, and some other animals, such as dogs, are considered dirty. Arabs do keep pets such as cats, fish and birds.

Figure 13: Sitting on the floor using right hand to eat

Drinking

Alcohol is forbidden by Islamic law, but attitudes towards it vary throughout the region. For example, while in Saudi Arabia alcohol is illegal to all, in Yemen alcohol is only illegal to Yemeni citizens, and in Lebanon alcohol is legal but consumed mainly by the large Christian population, and not by the Muslims. It is crucial to adhere to laws on alcohol when in an Arab country, outlined in the following Table.

Table 2: Legal position on alcohol in Arab countries

Country	Legal position on alcohol	Comments
Saudi Arabia	Illegal to all.	Anyone found in possession of alcohol can be severely punished, regardless of religion or nationality.
Kuwait, Libya, Qatar	Illegal to all.	Severe punishments for Kuwaitis; less severe for foreigners. Available in some hotels in Doha.
Yemen	Illegal for Yemeni citizens; illegal to buy for Yemeni citizens.	Available to foreigners in a handful of hotels in San'a and Aden.
UAE	Illegal for UAE citizens; illegal to buy for UAE citizens; illegal to drink alcohol in public; illegal to all in Sharjah.	Only available in hotel bars and selected restaurants, with the exception of Sharjah.
Bahrain, Oman	Legal, but consumption by Muslims discouraged; illegal for Muslims to drink alcohol during Ramadan.	Foreigners must obtain a license to drink alcohol at home in Oman.
Iraq	Legal, but consumption by Muslims discouraged; illegal for Muslims to drink alcohol during Ramadan.	Previously available in large Baghdad hotels and from a few shops, many alcohol sellers have been forced to cease trading by militant Islamic groups.

Syria	Legal, but consumption discouraged; illegal to drink alcohol in public during daylight hours during Ramadan.	Available in some bars and restaurants in Syrian cities.
Algeria	Legal. Algerian parliament banned alcohol imports in 2003-4, under Islamist party influence. Current government has pledged to overturn this.	Alcohol available in hotel bars and more expensive restaurants.
Egypt	Legal, but consumption discouraged. Minimum legal drinking age of 21.	Available in certain bars and hotels in major cities and resorts.
Tunisia	Legal. Minimum legal drinking age of 21.	Available in certain bars, restaurants and hotels.
Jordan	Legal. Minimum legal drinking age of 21. Illegal for Muslims to consume alcohol during Ramadan.	Available in most restaurants and many bars.
Lebanon	Legal, but consumption by Muslims discouraged. Alcohol drunk largely by Christians (35-40% of population).	Widely available in hotels, restaurants, bars and from some larger supermarkets.
Morocco	Legal. Minimum legal drinking age of 21. Illegal for Muslims to buy alcohol during Ramadan.	Widely available in shops and supermarkets as well as restaurants, bars and hotels.

Figure 14: Smoking water pipes (hookah)

Smoking

Many Arabs smoke, although women rarely smoke in public. When smoking at a public gathering, it is polite to pass cigarettes around to everyone present. It is sometimes considered rude to smoke around older men, and in some countries there are restrictions on smoking in certain places, such as taxis and shops.

Concepts of Time

Arabs can have a different attitude to time-keeping to Westerners. Pre-arranged meetings may not start at the exact time planned and will rarely have designated times by which they must be completed. Although some countries have adopted Western business styles,

Arabs do not expect to give or receive an apology if they are kept waiting for a meeting, or if they keep others waiting. You should be prepared to be more flexible with your time schedule than you would normally be at home.

INTERACTING WITH ARABS

Personal Space

Arabs have a very different sense of personal space to Europeans. Between Arabs of the same sex, personal space does not really exist as we know it. Arab culture stresses the need to 'share the breath' of one's companion, and there is no word in Arabic for privacy. To a Westerner, this lack of personal space in conversations may seem invasive or too intimate. It is also common for Arabs of the same sex to touch each other on the arm while chatting or to hold hands while walking.

Figure 15: Shopping in the market

Public behaviour

How you behave in public is extremely important in the Arab world. Public displays of intimacy between men and women, even if they are married, are seen as highly inappropriate in virtually all Arab countries. Even holding hands is offensive. These rules apply to Westerners as well as locals. Avoid public displays of affection. In conversation with Arabs, there are certain themes that should be avoided. Men should always avoid questioning Arab men about women in their family. Political discussion may be uncomfortable in some countries, and discussing religious beliefs is also best avoided. You should not make comments about other peoples' appearances. To break eye contact when holding a conversation with an individual of the same sex is disrespectful. However, for a man to make eye contact with a woman is offensive in all social contexts, and should be avoided at all costs.

Behaviour during meetings

The host initiates and directs the discussion at a meeting. At the start you should remain standing until invited by the host to sit down, and should also stand when a woman or senior man enters or leaves a room. Women leave the room first, and men should offer their seat to women if there are no other places to sit. Sit upright and make sure that your hands are not in your pockets. Crossing legs is also inappropriate, and it is insulting to display the soles of shoes or feet to other people. Always remember to remove your shoes when entering a holy place.

Gestures to avoid

Western gestures to avoid in Arab countries include the thumbs up sign, and the OK sign. Forming a circle with the index finger and thumb of one hand signifies the evil eye. Do not point with one finger as this can also cause offence. Hand-shaking is the usual form of greeting, and tends to be more intimate and prolonged than in

the West. It may be accompanied by kissing and embracing on both cheeks, although Arabs will be more restrained with Westerners than with each other. Do not refuse a hand-shake. It is also disrespectful for a man to offer his hand to a woman unless she extends it first, and women should never be kissed. Finally, do not take photographs of someone without asking their permission first. It is unacceptable to photograph women or people at prayer.

ARAB ATTITUDES TO THE WEST

It is difficult to generalise about Arab attitudes to the West. However, there are several themes which are relevant to all countries in the Arab world.

Figure 16: Young Arabs protest

A clash of civilisations

Figure 17: Apartment block

Many Arabs blame Western nations, particularly Britain and France, for creating artificial states in the region whose borders have caused tension ever since. The political problems faced by many Arab countries over the past 50 years are often viewed as a direct result of earlier Western colonial policies. In addition, to many in the religious establishment, Western culture is perceived as a threat to traditional Islam, and there are concerns about the attraction of some Western values to young Arab people. Westerners are often perceived as culturally arrogant, unjustifiably regarding their culture as superior to that of Arabs. The recent history of the Arab world, including the Iraq war, has been extremely painful for many. However, 2011's Arab Spring has arguably provided many Arabs with a new sense of empowerment.

Israel and Palestine

The foundation of Israel in 1947 led to a sense of grievance that colours the outlooks of many Arabs. Israel's hard-line policies towards the Palestinians is a key political issue for many people in the Arab world. The United States' support for Israel (and to a lesser extent the UK's support) represents evidence of the West's double standards for many Arabs.

The War on Terror

Western foreign policy following 11 September 2001, including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, has led to suspicions that the US and its allies are pursuing a hidden agenda under the guise of the 'global war on terror'. There is a feeling in some Arab communities that the war on terror is, in fact, a war against Muslims in general.

A changing world

Figure 18: Western culture meets Arab life

Over the last few decades, Arab populations have increasingly been exposed to Western cultural values. However, this has not meant that Arab culture has disappeared. While many Arabs want to study and work in the West, conservative elements view the West as a threat to traditional Islamic values. In addition, the population of the Arab world is now extremely young, and many young men are unemployed. The events of the Arab Spring in 2011 are examples of some of these dynamics playing out, and show that the principles that underpin how Arab society works are open to change.

KEY COUNTRIES IN THE ARAB WORLD

Bahrain

The oil-rich island of Bahrain has a population of 7-8 million. The population is mainly urban, living in and around the capital city, Manama. Bahrain is a close-knit society in which people know each other's backgrounds in detail. Although Arabic is the official language, Farsi, Urdu and English are also spoken. Tribal structures are no longer significant, and the main division is religious. Tensions exist between the Sunni ruling elite and the Shi'a majority, who comprise 70% of the population and have historically suffered as second class citizens. The Sunni Al-Khalifah family rules the country, controlling the military, security forces, politics and media. Bahraini Shi'a have stronger religious links with Iraq than with the Ayatollahs in Iran. Bahrain has a reputation for religious moderation in comparison with other Gulf states, and Saudis travel to Bahrain to enjoy liberal leisure activities. The country is relatively progressive in its treatment of women. Bahrain has a large expatriate community, from Europe and the USA, India, Pakistan and other parts of Asia. These communities are tolerated by Bahrainis, but are not well-integrated. Saudi Arabia provides support to Bahrain's monarchy, deploying its military to Bahrain during the 2011 protests to help control the uprising.

Egypt

This is the most populous country in the Arab world with a population of 77 million, and 90% of them are Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims. The majority live in cities, and along the Nile Valley floodplain. There is also a Nubian community, and Bedouin in the Sinai and the Eastern and Western Deserts. As in many other countries, in Egypt the Bedouin's nomadic lifestyle presents a cultural conflict with the more urban population, and the Bedouin were persecuted under President Mubarak. Following the fall of President Mubarak, conflicts between the government and the Bedouin, and between Coptic Christians and hard-line Muslims, have intensified. Women in Egypt have greater

freedoms than in other Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, although significant segregation still exists, particularly outside the larger cities. Women's rights improved under Mubarak, but female literacy is still significantly below male levels. Egyptians can enjoy a relatively good standard of living, and corruption levels are unremarkable. Like many Arab countries, in 2011 the Egyptian political status quo was severely disturbed as popular protests led to the overthrow of President Mubarak and the installation of a military-led interim government. Progress to a democratically elected civilian government is likely to be slow and marked by further street-led protests.

Iraq

Arab Sunni Muslims constitute an estimated 17-20% of the population and are concentrated in the central belt of Iraq. There are also Sunni enclaves in southern Iraq. Arab Shi'a Muslims make up approximately 60-65% of the population. The majority live in southern Iraq and Baghdad. Many Shi'a were brutally repressed under the Ba'ath regime. Kurds are concentrated in northern Iraq, and constitute an estimated 18-20% of the population; there is also a significant Kurdish population in Baghdad. The majority of Kurds are Sunni. While many of them desire political and cultural autonomy, the majority consider themselves Iraqi as well as Kurdish. There are significant tensions between Arab and Kurdish communities, most notably in the cities of Mosul and Kirkuk. There is also a small Turkoman community, concentrated in urban areas in northern Iraq. The Christian communities in Iraq have traditionally enjoyed religious freedom and have maintained a harmonious relationship with other groups. Tribalism remains a fundamental aspect of Iraqi society. A reported 75% of the population identifies themselves with a specific tribe. Tribes tend to be more important in rural and poorer urban areas. Saddam manipulated the tribal structure, using tribal networks to distribute patronage and employed sheikhs loyal to the regime to oppress disloyal tribes around them.

Figure 19: Communicating with Iraqi men

Jordan

There are three main groups in Jordan: the elite East Bankers who have lived east of the Jordan River since before 1948; the Bedouin Arabs, and the poorer Palestinians who make up two-thirds of the population. There is also a group of Palestinians living in semi-permanent refugee camps originating primarily from the 1948 and 1967 wars with Israel. Sheikhs have family and political leadership but tribalism does not seem to be significant. Most Jordanians are Sunni. Jordan has been a monarchy since 1951. King Abdullah II has extensive powers and is the head of state, the chief executive and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Although Jordan is not a full democracy, aspects of the political system are more liberal than other countries in the region: everyone can vote, and women are more economically independent and better educated than elsewhere.

Figure 20: Shopping in the Gulf

Kuwait

Only 40% of the population of 3.6 million is Kuwaiti and are therefore a minority in their own country. This has led to a fear of a loss of dominance, and extreme practices regarding the assertion of nationality and the rights of Kuwaiti individuals. The government rarely grants citizenship to foreigners, and government jobs are denied to non-Kuwaitis. A variety of other groups reside in the country, including those from Arab nations such as Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. In addition to these populations, approximately 9% of the population is Indian and 4% Iranian. About 85% of the population identify themselves as Muslim, and the majority are Sunni. Kuwait also has communities of Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs. These groups are not allowed to build places of worship but may practice privately without government interference. The most distinctive characteristic of

Kuwaiti culture is Dewaniya, which is a major feature of a man's social life. The term refers to a reception hall and the gathering of men held in it. These gatherings are at the heart of social, political and business life, and are where alliances are formed.

Lebanon

The Lebanese population, just over four million people, is overwhelmingly Arab. Lebanon's most significant minority group is Palestinian, again primarily refugees from wars with Israel. While many Palestinians face discrimination, 60,000 have obtained Lebanese citizenship. Lebanon has a large Christian population (34-43%), with Maronites the largest Christian group. Muslims make up just under 60%. Tensions in Lebanon tend to be between religious rather than ethnic groups. The Shi'a are the largest Muslim group in Lebanon, and hostility between religious groups has affected the country since independence from the French in 1943. Christians are generally the wealthiest and best educated; Shi'a are the poorest and least well educated. Alcohol is legal in Lebanon and is widely available in hotels, restaurants, bars and some supermarkets. However, consumption by Muslims is discouraged and largely takes place in Christian communities. Many women do not cover their hair in Lebanon.

Libya

Most Libyans are a mix of Arab and Berber ancestors. Libya historically evolved as three separate provinces: Cyrenaica in the east, Tripolitania in the west and Fezzan in the south. The particular divide between east and west was seen again in the 2011 conflict. There is considerable racism towards non-Libyan Arab and sub-Saharan African workers, who were a significant community before the 2011 crisis. Due to massive population growth, Libya's population of six million is very young: the median age is 25. There are no significant religious divisions as 97% of the Libyan population follows the Maliki school of Sunni Islam, and Libyans are conservative in relations

between men and women. Qadhafi's authority relied heavily on tribal links and kinship ties. There are approximately 140 tribes in Libya, of which about 30 are significant today. However, urbanisation has weakened tribalism; urban areas are tribally mixed, and intermarriage between tribes is common. Nearly 90% of the population is urban.

Figure 21: Anti-Qadhafi protestors in Libya

Oman

The Sultanate of Oman has a population of 2.3-3 million of whom the majority are Omani Arabs, with a significant expatriate community. Omani society is organised around the extended family or tribe which inhabits a particular valley or settlement. Oman has two tribal confederations, the al-Ghafiriyah and the al-Hinawiyah. Omanis comprise 20% mainstream Sunnis, 75% Ibadis (more moderate than mainstream Sunnis) and a small percentage of Shi'a Muslims.

Qatar

The al-Thani family has ruled Qatar as an absolute monarchy since the 19th century. Formerly a British protectorate known mainly for pearl fishing, it became independent in 1971, and is one of the region's wealthiest states due to oil and gas revenues. Only 20% of the population is Qatari. The workforce comprises expatriates from other Arab countries (20% of the total population), the Indian subcontinent and other nations. Qatar explicitly uses Shari'a law as the basis of its government, and the majority of citizens follow the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam. Alcohol is legal with a permit, but it is not permitted to drink in public.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's population is approximately 26 million, and includes eight million foreign nationals. Many come from South Asia, but there are significant numbers of Egyptians, Yemenis and Indonesians in the country. The population is 85-90% Sunni and 10-15% Shi'a. Tensions between these factions are more acute than in most Muslim countries and the Shi'a suffer discrimination, particularly in employment. Saudi Arabia is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world. The majority of the population was nomadic as recently as the 1960s, although now about 95% are settled. Most Saudis consider themselves to be part of a tribe, although this is more important in some parts of the country than others. Most Saudis still rely on their tribe in arranging marriages and finding employment. Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam and home to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina where the Prophet Mohammed lived. Saudi Arabia is therefore a symbolic focus for the Muslim world: all Muslims are required to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. The country is ruled by the al-Saud royal family, and maintenance of a conservative Wahhabist state has remained the key element in the legitimacy of the royal family. After openness to the West in the 1960s and 1970s, Saudi society became more socially and politically conservative, with a greater role for

religion in the education system, and more restrictions on personal freedoms, especially for women, who are not allowed to drive. More than 10% of the male population is unemployed.

Figure 22: Mecca in Saudi Arabia

Syria

Arabic speakers make up around 85% of the 22 million Syrians, although French influence is still evident and English is widely spoken. Most Syrians live in the capital Damascus, the northern city of Aleppo, the Euphrates valley or along the coastal plain. The majority are Arab Sunnis, but other ethnic and religious groups exist including Palestinians, Kurds, Druze and various Christian sects. Christians in Syria have enjoyed more rights than those elsewhere in the region. Sunnis and Kurds have historically been repressed by the ruling Asad family, who are from the minority Alawi sect. Alawism is a form of Islam loosely related to Shiism. Syria has been ruled by the Asad family since the 1960s, and the Alawi dominate higher levels of the military and government. Bashar al-Asad has ruled Syria since 2000 and, following in the bloody footsteps of his father, has brutally crushed Syrian protesters in 2011, killing thousands.

Figure 23: Syrian street seller

United Arab Emirates

A federation of seven emirates (Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al-Quwain) with a single national president. Abu Dhabi is the capital. The UAE's population is majority expatriate: less than 20% of the population are UAE nationals. The expatriates consist of non-Emirati Arabs and Iranians (23%), Indians (50%) and people from elsewhere in Asia, Africa and Europe. Of the citizenry, 85% are Sunni Muslim and 15% are Shi'a. There are approximately 31 churches in the country and one Hindu temple.

Figure 24: UAE Atlantis Hotel

Yemen

The approximately 24 million Yemenis are 52% Sunni and 46% Shi'a, with Sunnis found in the south and southeast, and Shi'a in the north and northwest. Yemen suffers from extreme poverty, with 68% of the population living in rural areas. There is a sizeable refugee population from Somalia, Iraq and Ethiopia. The population is tribal, although this is not uniform and is more significant in the north. Yemeni tribes have lived in the same place for centuries and have historically wielded significant power. The south and west are less tribal, due to the effects of colonialism and the de-tribalising Marxist policies of the 1970s. Politics has involved a balance between tribal allegiances and the central government. Until recently, President Saleh maintained power by winning patronage of sheikhs, religious figures, technocrats and businessmen. Opposition movements have included the northern Huthis, who have opposed what they see as Sunni control of the Yemeni government. The Southern Movement is built on grievances that have existed since unification and the civil war. Finally, Al-Qa'ida in Yemen is known as AQAP (AQ in the Arabian Peninsula) and is composed of a mixture of Yemeni fighters and the sons and grandsons of former Afghan mujahideen and Saudis who fled Saudi Arabia. AQAP deeply opposes Western involvement in Yemen.

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