

Middle East Culture & Business Etiquette

The Middle East has immense opportunities for foreign investment and continued economic growth. For those wishing to become involved in this lucrative market, the key to success is first understanding Middle East culture and business etiquette.

Several Middle East countries have become much more modern, as many traditional attitudes and business practices are evolving towards a more Westernized approach. Nevertheless, it is still important to be aware and respectful of some of the differences that might exist.

Middle East Culture – Key Concepts and Values

Islam – Religion has played an important and influential role in shaping the society and culture of the Middle East. Islam is the official and majority religion and pervades almost every aspect of life. Laws, education, food, clothes, daily routines and even conversations are all strongly influenced by Islam. The Islamic faith places great emphasis on behaviors such as generosity, respect and modesty which most Middle Easterners' will display. Understanding Islam and the influence it has on everyday life and Middle East business culture is the first step to conducting successful business in the Middle East.

Family – Family and tribal connections form the basis of Middle East social structure. The family and tribe are highly influential and play a role in shaping a person's values and behavior. It serves to support its members both financially and emotionally and as such, the family comes before anything else and its honor is protected.

Loyalty – Loyalty between family and tribe members carries over into business where it is not uncommon for companies to be run by and employ several members of one family or tribe.

Hospitality – Hospitality is an essential part of Middle East culture and applies to both social and professional contexts. Guests will be received with enormous generosity. In the home this usually comes in the form of a feast of traditional Middle Eastern food, especially during the holidays, while in a business context, meetings are almost always accompanied by traditional Arab coffee and pastries. The emphasis placed on hospitality is closely connected to the importance of relationships. Foreigners should show their gratitude and dedicate time to cultivating relationships with their Middle East counterparts.

Working relationships in the Middle East

- People in the Middle East prefer to do business in person. Relationships and mutual trust are paramount for any successful business interaction and can only be developed through face-to-face meetings. It is important to spend time with your Middle East business counterparts and ensure future meetings take place to continue cultivating the relationship.
- It is important to have connections to someone in the Middle East who can introduce you before attempting to do business there on your own. Middle East people prefer to do business with those they know, so having someone to introduce you will be of immense benefit to your business relationship.
- Take the time to get to know your business counterparts on a personal level so that you can develop a friendship with that person and therefore be in a better position of priority for business dealings.

Business Practices

- The customary greeting is “As-salam alaikum,” (peace be upon you) to which the reply is “Wa alaikum as-salam,” (and upon you be peace). When entering a meeting, general introductions will begin with a handshake. You should greet each of your Middle East counterparts individually. In line with Muslim customs, avoid shaking hands with a woman unless they extend their hand first.
- Initial business meetings are often a way to become acquainted with your prospective counterparts. They are generally long in duration and discussions are conducted at a leisurely pace over tea and coffee. Time should be allocated for such business meetings, as they are an essential part of Middle East business culture.
- Business cards are common, but not essential to the Middle East business culture. If you do intend to use business cards whilst in the Middle East, ensure that the information is printed in both English and Arabic.

Middle East Business Etiquette

- Business occurs more slowly in the Middle East than in many Western cultures. Patience and flexibility are therefore, key when doing business in the Middle East.
- Accept an invitation to a meal or social event. Relationships are an integral part of doing business in the Middle East. Spending time with your Middle East counterparts is the best way to build trust and mutual understanding.
- Address your Middle East counterparts with the appropriate titles followed by his or her first name. If unsure, it is best to get the names and correct form of address of those you will be doing business with before-hand.
- Don’t expect a one-on-one meeting to only include yourself and the other person. Often there will be other people present in the office or meeting room waiting their turn to meet with that person. When you arrive, it is polite to greet the person, take a seat and accept any coffee served until it is your turn.
- Don’t ask about a person’s wife or daughters. It is polite to enquire about a person’s family or health, but never ask specifically about any female members. Family life which involves female members is kept extremely private.

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