

# BUSINESS ETIQUETTE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

One of the main reasons British and other western businesses can be hesitant to enter markets in the Middle East is uncertainty around how to successfully work with a very different business culture. To help international traders navigate around these perceived barriers, here are our top tips for business etiquette with the most important UK markets in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council).

**Member states:** Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

## OVERALL

Remember that though the GCC countries are culturally similar, there will be some differences in attitudes.

Generally across the GCC, if your contacts are in large cities they will have a closer understanding of western culture and business practices than those in more remote areas.



## COUNTRY SPECIFIC ADVICE

### Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is the strictest of all Muslim countries; Islamic Law (Shari'ah) is enforced. Women are not allowed to drive instead they use a chauffeured car (e.g. supplied by the hotel). Spaces such as restaurants and hotel swimming pools/gyms are segregated by gender. Do not take photos of Muslim women, airports and military installations and other sensitive building. No religious practices other than Islam are allowed and alcohol consumption is forbidden; prison sentences can include flogging. Avoid public displays of affection. Homosexual behaviour and adultery are illegal and carry the death penalty.

Saudi businessmen often wear traditional attire while for foreign businessmen, suits are standard. Saudi and foreign women must wear the abaya in public; also carry a headscarf in case the religious police asks you to cover your head.

### UAE

Expatriates make up 80 per cent of the UAE population – a diverse society which is considered the region's most liberal. Many male Emiratis (UAE nationals) wear a kandura (ankle length white shirt) and most Emirati women wear the abaya (a full-length black cloak) – this is not compulsory for foreigners.

### Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar

Though less westernised than the UAE, these countries have significant exposure to international business people. Adhere to general guidelines such as avoiding alcohol consumption or eating in public during Ramadan and dress conservatively.

## HOW ISLAM AFFECTS BUSINESS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Islam, the dominant religion of the Middle East, is a cornerstone of the region's culture and informs daily life. To do business in the region it is essential to have a fundamental understanding of the religion. Though foreigners are advised to be respectful towards Islam no matter where in the Middle East they are doing business, how strongly they will have to adhere to local customs varies from country to country – for example, while the UAE is recognised as one of the most liberal countries in the region with a laissez faire attitude towards other religions, even foreign visitors to Saudi Arabia must adhere to Muslim laws and their dietary and sartorial prescriptions.



### KEY ELEMENTS TO REMEMBER ARE:

- Observant Muslims pray five times a day. You will hear the calls for prayer between dawn and sunrise; shortly after mid-day; mid-afternoon; right after sunset; and an hour and a half after sunset. Avoid scheduling meetings during prayer times.
- Friday is the holy day – the working week will generally be Sunday to Thursday.
- There are two major (and often conflicting) denominations in Islam: Sunni and Shia. Sunni Islam is prevalent in the GCC countries.
- The Koran, the Muslim holy book, forbids the consumption of alcohol, pork products and (according to some interpretations) shellfish. It is advised not to consume these products in front of Muslims, e.g. your local business contacts.
- During Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, religious Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. It is generally considered impolite to eat in front of fasting Muslims during daylight hours. Business hours may vary during this time, and it may be advisable not to do business during this time (or at least not to establish initial contacts).
- Ramadan dates:  
2014: 29 June - 27 July.  
2015: 18 June - 16 July.
- Muslims celebrate two major religious festivals. Eid al-Fitr follows Ramadan and Eid al-Adha follows the annual pilgrimage. It is best to avoid doing business on or near these days.
- Men and women alike are instructed to dress modestly by the Koran. Dress codes vary by country in the Gulf region – note that in Saudi Arabia, even foreign women must be completely covered with the abaya (full length black cloak).
- Try to avoid making eye contact with the opposite sex.
- Always use the right hand for functions such as shaking hands, handing over items such as business cards and eating – the left hand is considered unclean.
- Insulting Islam and/or the prophets is a serious offense.

## BUSINESS TIPS

### Arranging a meeting

- Face-to-face meetings are preferred as emails and phone calls are considered impersonal.
- The best time for meetings is usually early in the day.

### Before the meeting

- Arabic is the official language in all GCC countries (sometimes in addition to other languages). Ensure you have one side of your business card printed in Arabic and the other in English.
- English is widely spoken throughout the GCC area as a business language – especially in large cities. Arabic may be preferred when dealing with public sector organisations and will likely be used for documentation.
- If you are not certain of the level of English spoken by your counterparts, hire a recognised interpreter. This individual should be able to advise you on linguistic and cultural matters. UKTI can help identify interpreters in your target markets.
- Also make sure that all brochures and presentation materials are full-colour and well produced. Consider providing both English and Arabic copies – even if your meeting counterpart speaks English, the materials may be reviewed by other people in the company who are less comfortable with English.
- If you are relying on electronic equipment to present (e.g. a PowerPoint presentation), ensure that a projector will be available.
- Ensure you are familiar with the local legal requirements for doing businesses – consult the UKTI/GOV.UK 'Exporting Country Guides' [www.gov.uk/government/collections/exporting-country-guides#middle-east](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/exporting-country-guides#middle-east) for detailed information.
- Gifting is not considered strictly necessary when doing business with GCC countries, but it is generally appreciated. Avoid gifts that relate to items forbidden by the Koran (e.g. alcohol, cigars) or are sensitive to the Middle East security situation.

## ESSENTIAL PHRASES

If your counterparts' English is of a high standard and/or you are using an interpreter, you are not expected to speak Arabic. However, knowing and using some basic phrases can work wonders in winning your local contacts' goodwill.

**Customary greeting:** **As-salam alaikum**

(peace be upon you)

**Reply:**

**Wa alaikum as-salam**

(and upon you be peace)

**Goodbye:**

**Ma salamaa**

**Please:**

**Min fudlek**

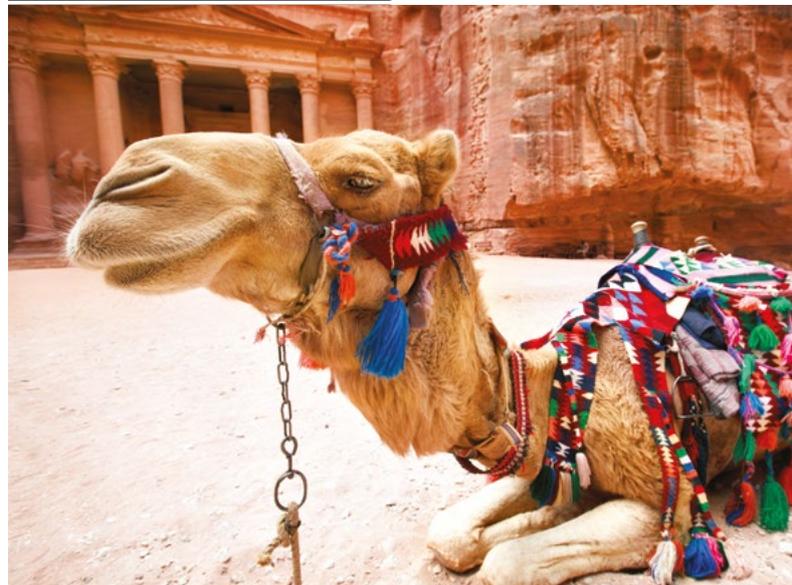
**Thank you:**

**Shukran**

**God willing:**

**Inshallah**

A common response when discussing a plan's next stages



## AT THE MEETING

### Attire

All business people should dress conservatively. Men are advised to wear suits (never shorts), though a smart casual combination – dress shirt, khaki trousers and potentially a tie – will be appropriate in some situations. For women, loose-fitting and concealing clothing is recommended with long skirts, elbow-length sleeves and modest necklines – with the exception of Saudi Arabia, where all women must wear the abaya (full length black cloak) in public.



### Timings and arrival

Though it is recommended that you arrive on time, your counterparts may not – punctuality is valued differently in Arab culture. Also remember that meetings may overrun – do not rush your counterparts.

### Meet and greet

When you are introduced to a group of people, begin by addressing the most senior person. Handshakes may last comparatively long. Women are advised not to offer handshakes to male counterparts (nor men to women) – though do reciprocate if you are offered a handshake.

Address your counterparts with their full titles (based on how they are introduced to you) to convey respect.

When you are offered refreshments, accept at least one drink to be polite.

### During the meeting

Your meeting may be interrupted by other guests coming into the room and your counterparts taking telephone conversations.

Be patient: take time to talk with your counterparts and establish a relationship. Do not be pushy and be prepared to not achieve all of your goals at the initial meeting.

Acceptable topics of conversation include your counterpart's health and asking about their family, e.g. where children are going to school – but do not specifically ask about female family members. Avoid discussing politics, religion and gender relations.

If your counterpart is reluctant to answer a question directly, this might be a sign that they are hesitant to give you a direct 'no'.

Never show the bottom of your shoes to anyone, as this is a sign of extreme disrespect – a relatively common mistake.

### Reaching an agreement

Be prepared for additional meetings to take place. Once you are at a contract stage, ensure that obligations of all agreements reached are clear to and fully understood by both parties. Verbal agreements are generally considered just as binding as written ones – only promise things you can actually deliver. Be prepared for some degree of negotiating and consider what concessions you can reasonably make in advance.



### Meals

Your counterparts may invite you to a restaurant meal. It is considered polite to return the invitation.

If you are invited to your (prospective) business partner's house for a meal, do not discuss business unless they bring it up.