

## Unit 7: Concept of Time/Conversation Guidelines

### Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

### Be aware of the following

- Differing American/Arab perspectives toward time
- Difficulties for Americans to implement plans and commitments in some Arab circles
- Sensitivities required in conversation with Saudi personnel
  - "Personal space" difference between Saudi Arabians and Americans

### Identify

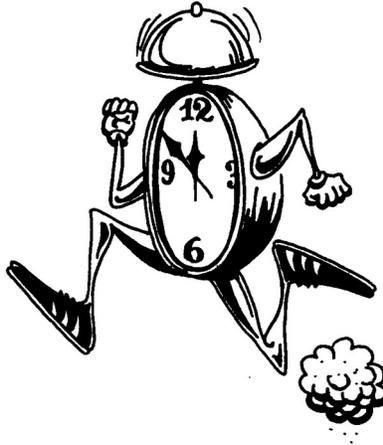
- Common ritual phrases used in Saudi greetings
- Introduction and farewell etiquette in Saudi Arabian circles
- Common titles and forms of Saudi Arabian address
  - Conversation taboo topics

### Realize

- Necessity of continual coordination in implementing plans in Arab circles
- Length of time required in the Middle East to accomplish seemingly routine business tasks
- Importance attached to creating a favorable impression
- Practice of indirectness in Saudi Arabian conversations
- Importance of tact in Middle East interactions
- Answers to seemingly difficult questions which may arise in casual conversation

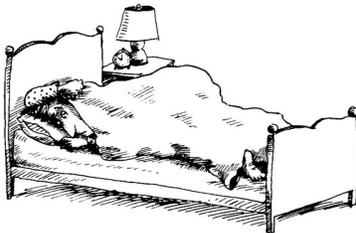
## Unit 7: Concepts of Time/Conversation Guidelines

### 1. Time



The saying "Haste makes Waste" truly applies in much of Arab society. A common Arabic proverb says "Haste is from the devil and patience is from Allah." Our foreign speed not only will not work in the Arab world, it will be misinterpreted as an insult, as hustling. Although one attempts to be on time to appointments or social gatherings, there is much less rigidity in these matters than in the United States.

Given a choice between treating a friend you meet on the street abruptly by scurrying off, and being late to a meeting, it is simply understood that being late is the better choice. If you should have an appointment with a very important person or if you were the guest of honor at a dinner, you would try very hard to be on time, and if you could not be on time, you would call with your apologies. But in other less critical areas, a much greater leniency is tolerated.



Deadlines are not absolute, and such activities as relaxing, daydreaming, and visiting with friends are not considered a waste of time, but rather, as time well spent. In this culture, it is considered rude to be caught looking at your watch during any sort of social interaction.

A natural consequence of these attitudes is that planning very far into the future makes everyone uncomfortable; after all, things may change at any moment, and definite commitments for the future are considered too restricting.

This attitude makes it very difficult for a Western businessman trying to deal with an Arab society, for in the West, planning is elevated almost to the status of a religious tenet.

In much of the Arab world, continual coordination is essential.

In government and business offices, there is often more than one person in the office at the same time. If you enter the office and there are already people there, you can usually go on in, greet everyone, perhaps chat for a bit, and wait your turn. The result is that it can take many hours or days to conduct the simplest item of business.

This maximally relaxed attitude toward time, though infuriating to the Westerner trying to function in his normal style, serves quite well the needs of the society in which it has developed. The general attitude is that although it is not really a good thing to miss an appointment or to be terribly late, it is not the end of the world, for after all, "I'm still alive."

Thereby, an appointment for 10:00 usually means around ten, which means about 10:30 or so. If you arrive too early, which might well be "on time" for us, you may send the message that you are very, very eager to please the other person...even too eager.

If you have a driver who keeps showing up "late," such as at 8:00 instead of 7:30 each morning, tell him to come at 7:00! This way you blend two worlds.



## Unit 7: Concepts of Time/Conversation Guidelines

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American: "I said I'd bring the reports today, but I'm sorry, they're not ready yet."  
Arab: "It doesn't matter. They'll be ready sooner or later."  
American: "I'd like to meet him. Today if possible."  
Arab: "Perhaps on your next visit?"  
American: "But how long will it take to get the message through?"  
Arab: "It will get there, and then they'll answer. We'll let you know."  
American: "If I could see the list now, then I could tell you immediately..."  
Arab: "Of course, you can see the list, yes. I'll tell my men to make a copy. On your next visit you will have one."  
American: "We've had several meetings with him. But that's as far as it went."  
Arab: "Ah, several talks, yes. That is very good."

**2. Conversation** In any contact with most Arabs, it is never appropriate to display impatience or undue haste since these traits are normally interpreted as evidence of insincerity or a lack of self-control. Conversation is opened with small talk and pleasantries, centered on the health and well-being of the participants and their respective families.



However, avoid direct questions about female relatives. Stay away from political subjects. Religion is OK, but know what you are talking about and do not attempt to convert the Arab to your faith.

If an individual Arab avoids you, or changes the subject on you when you try to talk about something particular, take the hint.

Use the Arabic that you have learned. Most Saudis do not speak English, so you will need to speak to them in Arabic. Saudi officials and military officers quite often

## Unit 7: Concept of Time/Conversation Guidelines

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do speak good English, but they, too, will highly appreciate your efforts to speak their language. Do not patronize an

## Unit 7: Concepts of Time/Conversation Guidelines

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Arab, talk on an adult-to-adult level and do not talk down to someone if he doesn't speak English well.



Avoid argumentative situations. Once most Arabs make a decision, it is unlikely that they will immediately change their mind. Better to drop the argument for a while and perhaps approach the problem from a different direction later.

**When sitting with an Arab, do not point the soles of your feet at him.**

Pointing your soles at him tells him that you are placing him under your feet, i.e., you are equating him with dirt. Place your feet flat on the floor when seated in a chair, or fold them under you when sitting on the floor. Never place your feet on furniture.



**a. Greetings** The Saudis' social customs are essentially the traditional ones of Arab Bedouins and townspeople, strongly influenced by Islam. Saudi life revolves around these ancient customs and conventions to a degree that Americans will find quite surprising.

This fact is nowhere more apparent than in the vast numbers and variety of ritual phrases, with fixed responses, with which Saudis greet each other, wish each other well, show hospitality, and so forth. In fact, they have standard

ritual-type phrases appropriate for almost any situation which occurs in life. Saudis do not expect Americans or

## Unit 7: Concepts of Time/Conversation Guidelines

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other foreigners in their country to know all their customs or to master all their polite phrases. But for an American in Saudi Arabia, knowing at least some of them will make a great deal of difference and create a very favorable impression, even if he has little or no command of Arabic.

In Saudi Arabia, there are various forms of greetings, which correspond to different situations. Among friends, they convey affection; otherwise, they convey respect. In either case, they uphold the dignity and honor of all present and so acknowledge those two important values. In any formal setting, the person entering the room (or joining the group) is expected, almost obliged, to say "*as-salaam alaykum* (Peace upon you)." (Westerners are expected to use this phrase as well). If he does not so preface his entry, he may hear a contemptuous "*wa alaykum-us-salaam*"--the obligatory reply--from someone present.

The incoming person will then shake hands (right always) with some or all of those present, depending upon who they are and what they are doing. Superiors, close friends, and relatives normally get special attention.



Whatever the case, it is always polite to place the right hand over one's heart upon completing the handshake. This gesture implies that the greeting is heartfelt.

Upon greeting close friends and relatives, Saudi males will embrace and kiss the cheeks or nose. The U.S. military member who becomes well-liked can expect such a greeting. The hand-shake or embrace will then lead to a rather drawn out ritual of asking about one's health and well-being. In this exchange, it is not proper to ask about or mention wives or other female family members. The person who

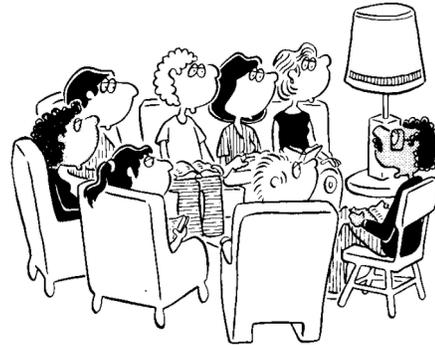
applies himself in Arabic will soon learn many of the appropriate phrases.

## Unit 7: Concepts of Time/Conversation Guidelines

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Regarding introductions, the rules also vary with the situation. In business settings where the gathering exceeds eight or nine people, the attaché should wait to be introduced to Saudis and other Arabs. Otherwise, he may introduce himself, especially when his presence is expected.

In social settings, the rule is reversed. Within large groups, the attaché may be beckoned by relative strangers who seek to add their hospitality to that of the host. The attaché should then introduce himself. Within smaller gatherings however, he should rely on the host to make introductions.



The attaché is not likely to meet Saudi women, except in the last mentioned case. When that situation occurs, he need only nod and say "hello" (in English or Arabic). He must refrain from touching or complimenting. In rare cases, a Saudi's family may be sufficiently "Westernized" such that the wife will want to converse with male guests.

Bidding farewell is a comparatively simple process. For social engagements, the only requirement is that the guest acknowledge the generosity and hospitality of his host. After that, any reasonable excuse to leave will be accepted—although not without one or two entreaties to stay. In Saudi Arabia, one departs from a business meeting much as one does in America. Upon leaving the room (or site), the appropriate saying is again "*as-salaam alaykum.*"



**b. Titles and Honorifics** Titles and honorifics have their place in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. However, their use is largely restricted to the pages of official correspondence and newspaper articles and announcements. In conversational situations, the terms of address are much more casual. Two titles are commonly used--*amir* for male members of the Saudi family (except the King) and collateral lines, *shaykh* for tribal leaders and members of the religious establishment.

Regarding proper forms of address, the visitor should note that an Arab's full name may include as many as five elements. The *nisba* and *laqab*, which roughly correspond to the American's last (or family) name, are seldom used. Titles and ranks are both used with the *ism*, that is, the personal name which corresponds to the American's first name. Once acquaintances become good friends, use of the title becomes unnecessary, and the more familiar *kunya* replaces the *ism*. The former is comprised as follows: *Abu* (father) plus the name of the person's oldest son. When appropriate, Saudis and other Arabs will apply this custom to their American friends, and so one may hear the names Abu Steve, Abu Mike, and so forth.

**c. Distance** During conversations, the Arab custom is to stand very close (about one foot) to the person he is talking to. Don't move away from this to a normal "American speaking distance," it would be considered impolite and would imperil any personal relationship you may be seeking.

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Most Arabs thoroughly assess a person prior to entering into a business or personal relationship.

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The close stance is a means, passed on through the centuries, to evaluate eye movement, smell and thermal qualities of the other person. Touching and patting is an important part of this evaluation process.



**d. Indirectness** Because American "frankness" and directness is apt to be read as criticism requiring instant defense, the Middle Eastern way of life values and uses indirect ways of saying the same thing.

It is "natural" for an Arab to speak with a double meaning...and those of us from the United States who fail to watch for this and listen accordingly can make unnecessary mistakes.



Most Arabs, then, learn to be a diplomat in the cradle. Every remark is tactful...and has a second message. The tact protects the other person's public image, avoids insult, and shows that the Arab, himself, is cultured.

Americans traditionally speak much more directly-- perhaps because of the many languages in its history. No insult is meant, but when other people are unfamiliar with our ways, directness is usually misunderstood.

Also, be alert for nuances in the conversation; Arabs are hesitant to say "no" directly and are also reluctant to use the phrase "I don't understand." Often they will attempt to convey an idea through what we have termed as "double talk." Once again, it is natural for an Arab to speak with a double meaning.



If we say what we intend to "gently," "smoothly," and above all "tactfully" there will probably be less misunderstanding. At the same time it means we have to learn to listen more carefully than we are used to or we may miss the message. Our children are encouraged to speak up. The Arab child is told this is rude. The differences begin, then, in our childhood learning.

**e. Sensitive Discussion Topics** Just as we have our own local idea of what kind of question is personal and what kind is not, so do the Arabs.