

Unit 4: Gestures and Taboos

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Importance of gesture/taboo knowledge for Arabic linguists
- Helpful cross-cultural perspectives possessed by military linguists
- Necessity of personal restraint and effort to become culturally adept
- Universal cultural message of the smile
- Foundational attitudes helpful in dealing with Middle Eastern peoples
- Greetings, gestures, and eating "dos and taboos"
- Cautions military linguists should employ
 - Qur'an and mosque etiquette

Identify

- General Khaled Bin Sultan
- Lieutenant General Gus Pagonis
- Ugly Americanism
- T.E. Lawrence
- Golden Rule
- Sura
- "Face"
 - In Sha Allah

Realize

- Magnitude of customs and taboos within the Middle East
 - Importance of humility, sincerity, and restraint when working cross-culturally

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"When the time came for me and accompanying staff to perform the noon prayers, I was touched to notice that the division had prepared a place for us to make our ablutions and pray. A soldier was there with a jug of water."

-- General Khaled Bin Sultan, Desert Warrior, p. 201.



Manners, morals, customs and taboos--it is impossible to know all the elaborate and complex rules which govern interactions within a given society or culture. The task overwhelms.

Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center personnel have excellent resources available to assist. The Saudi-Arabic Headstart Cultural Notes booklet (AN0050S) gives well-organized, detailed information. The 5th Special Forces Group (ABN) Military Intelligence Company's 2ND Edition Arab Customs and Culture booklet is easily understood and thorough. The handbook used by the United States Air Force Special Operations School (AD00020T0) entitled Middle East Orientation Course gives helpful insight into customs and taboos. In addition, it discusses useful perspectives trainers and supervisors can employ in cross-cultural settings.

The purpose here is not to rephrase guidance given in these texts. Rather, this section first outlines general perspectives military personnel can take in approaching a new culture. Then it treats common attitudes, greetings, gestures, eating practices and cautions to employ when dealing with Middle East peoples.

I. General Perspectives

1. Confidence As members of the United States Armed Forces, we maintain a sensitivity to 'culture' whenever we put on our uniforms.

Higher ranking officers receive salutes, a sign of respect due to their rank. Noncommissioned officers exert hands on guidance and supervision. The titles, sergeant and petty officer, suggest a different--though no less important--type of respect. These courtesies recognize varied "cultures" within the military.



Applied to dealing with peoples of other lands and societies, these same habits and respect for authority become invaluable.

Desert Storm/Shield/Farewell authenticated the sensitive and knowledgeable cross-cultural abilities possessed by our armed forces personnel. Logistician Lt. Gen. Pagonis in his account of the conflict, described the potential for 'Ugly Americanism' in the region. More than 560,000 service personnel passed through the area, encountering drastic cultural differences.

"And what happened, when these two vastly different cultures came together? Nothing.

There was not a single incident of deliberate misconduct on the part of our service members...our soldiers showed great understanding and compassion."
(*Moving Mountains*, p. 228.)

The Gulf conflict demonstrated the certainty that, when put to the test, training prepares airmen, soldiers, sailors and marines to deal with sensitivities of other cultures.



2. Restraint T.E. Lawrence, British adventurer, writer, and Arabist of the early 20th century, described this sense of tempered behavior. "Keep always on your guard," wrote Lawrence, "...be a little stiff at first."

We may feel the best way to get along is to imitate, in some ways, the conduct of Middle Easterners in order to be accepted. Imitation does have its place. Margaret Nydell, in her book Understanding Arabs, advises, "*In a social situation with Arabs, never be the first one to do anything...The safest course of action is to imitate.*" (p. 68.) The best approach however, is to restrain our impulsive, up-front, forthright, let-it-all-hang-out behaviors.

Treating individuals as if they were entering our living rooms--by dispensing courtesy and grace--goes a long way to cement solid relations with others. Possessing a cautious and restrained demeanor--always observing and seeking to learn--does much to promote meaningful interaction. Recognizing the long-standing, tradition-bound nature of Middle East cultures assists.

Harmony then comes in possessing a nonjudgmental frame of mind. Such restraint helps avoid actions which are shocking or insulting.

3. Wholehearted Effort Based upon his years of living with desert Bedouins of the Middle East, T.E. Lawrence wrote guidance for those interested in forging alliances with Arab peoples. Lawrence's vision can help inspire a lifelong goal of cross-cultural learning. *"Learn all you can...Get to know...families, clans and tribes, friends and enemies, wells, hills, and roads..."*



The beginning and ending...is unremitting study...

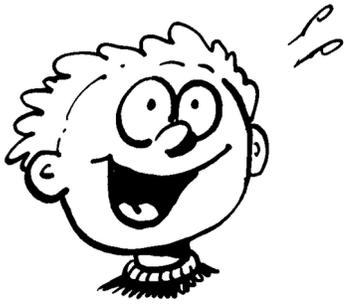
Your success will be just proportioned to the amount of mental effort you devote to it."



(As quoted in Prince of Our Disorder by John E. Mack, pp. 463, 467.)

4. The "Ultimate Gesture" Business advisor Roger Axtell, in his book Gestures, The Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World, describes the universal symbol known around the world. Called the "ultimate gesture," it is rarely misunderstood, releases positive energy, and assists in the most complicated of situations.

"What is this singular signal, this miracle [manner], this giant of all gestures?"



It is, quite simply, the smile.

Use it freely. Use it often." (p. 113.)

II. Overall Attitudes

The following general principles apply when dealing with peoples of the Middle East.

1. Recognize Long-standing Traditions Recognize that manners and customs in the Middle East go back to the beginnings of civilization. Long-established practices and conventions--fashioned over centuries within the harsh desert environment--govern interactions between individuals.

2. Practice Civility and Respect Jordanian professor Dr. Marwan Al-Kaysi describes an underlying concept which guides behavior within Middle Eastern Muslim circles.

"...any particular conduct is tolerated or accepted if it is civilized (i.e. considerate of others) and respectable (inoffensive to the individual and community.)" (Morals and Manners in Islam, p. 52.)

Such a courteous and gracious attitude is critical.



Most cultures generously accept people who show consideration of others, who maintain fairness in clarifying their views, and who model a tolerant approach which seeks peace.

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3. Show Kindness

"According to a saying of the Prophet, kindness is required in every instance of Muslim conduct...[the] main end is to train people to be kind and gentle."
(Marwan Ibrahim Al-Kaysi, Morals and Manners in Islam, p. 23.)

The Qur'an mentions those who show "charity, kindness and peace among men" as the ones whose counsel is valid. (Qur'an 4:114). In an imitation of the golden rule, a hadith enjoins:

"A Muslim should treat others as he would wish them to treat him...Like for others what he would like for himself."

4. Practice Humility A demeanor which models kindness--forbids being harsh, rude, or even speaking loudly to others.

5. Seek Moderation The Qur'an, Sura 25:65-66, describes the sense of balance governing personal habits and relations.

"True servants of the Merciful are those who walk humbly on the earth and say: 'Peace!'...who are neither extravagant nor [stingy], but keep the golden mean."

Many Muslims value deliberation, a careful consideration which focuses on the outcome of a matter. Moderation in speech, and avoidance of being nervous, highly strung or liable to sudden anger, characterizes many of those who "submit to God."

6. Sincerity A kind, honest, humble approach--free of an arrogant and overbearing attitude--naturally opens the way for agreeable exchanges. Writes Dr. Nydell,



"Foreigners are forgiven a great deal--even conservative people make allowances, particularly when they know your motives are good. The essential thing is to make a sincere, well-meaning effort to adapt and understand."
(*Understanding Arabs*, p. 112.)

7. Remember Honor and Status One's perceived standing within the group often demonstrates God's will--one is born into the right family or given a respected position. Many Middle Easterners protect this positioning, (one's status), especially from public criticism and insult. Individuals maintain "face" at all costs. In the process they may reinterpret facts which are often seen as subjective entities. Appearance in front of others is the crucial matter.

III. Greetings

1. Small Talk and Ritual Greetings Middle Easterners often greet each other with a number of ritual phrases and fixed responses. Ancient custom governs these interactions. To Western eyes, profuse greetings, inquiries about health and well-being, often take up inordinate amounts of time. Remember, however, it is insulting to ask about a Muslim's wife or another female family member.

2. Hospitality Giving a warm reception to strangers harks back to the culture of the desert.

Developed over centuries, where the desert environment bound traveling nomads to depend on the graciousness and generosity of others, hospitality enabled inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula to survive thirst, hunger and sudden raids/attacks.

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Many Middle Eastern peoples continue this custom of showing courtesy and consideration to strangers. Demonstrating friendliness, generosity and hospitableness become expressions of personal honor, even sacred duties.

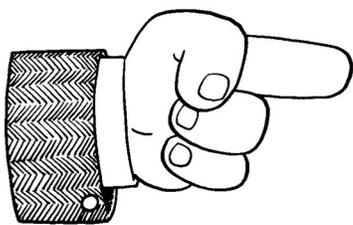


3. Body Language Handshakes, though regarded as important, usually do not possess the same firmness as handclasps of many Europeans or Americans.

Many Middle Eastern men are touchers. Touching--such as long handshakes, grasped elbows, even walking hand in hand by two males--may be common.

Distance in talking with one another (body space) may be much closer with Middle East peoples than with Westerners. Eye contact during discussions--often long and direct--is important. Staring is not necessarily rude (except gazing at women).

IV. Gestures



1. Right Hand Leads Use the right hand to eat, touch and present gifts. The left is generally regarded as unclean.

2. Sitting Take care when sitting. Avoid stretching legs in front of or sitting up higher than others, sitting with the left hand behind the back, or positioning oneself so the shadows fall upon half of one's body.

3. Posture Avoid putting feet on tables or furniture. Show respect. Refrain from leaning against walls, slouching in chairs, and keeping hands in pockets.

Keep from pointing with the feet. Do not show the soles of the feet, as they are the lowest and dirtiest part of the body.



4. Outward Displays of Affection Guard public demonstrations of affection for your wife or significant other.

Bridle all interest in Muslim women. Do not stare at or "give the eye" to women.

"If a man should happen to look at a woman, he must turn his eyes away. An accidental glance is allowed, a second look is forbidden." (Marwan, p. 163.)

Shake hands with a woman only if she extends her hand first.

5. Thumbs up This gesture, expressing connotations of "I am winning," historically is offensive to many Arabs. After the Gulf conflict, however, Middle Easterners of the Arabian Peninsula adopted this hand movement, along with the OK sign, as a symbol of cooperation toward freedom.

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6. No The gesture "no" may often be done by tilting the head backward, raising eyebrows, jutting out the chin or making a clicking sound with the tongue.

