Doing Business in
The Middle East

Workplace Culture Across A Diverse Region

A White Paper

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Behind The Middle East

One of the major economic powerhouses in the world is the Middle East, a large, diverse and complex region.

Often called the Mideast or Near East, this region is located where Europe, Asia and Africa meet. Well-known sub-regions within the Middle East include the Maghreb countries of northern Africa, the Gulf States that sit on the Persian Gulf, and the Levant, which is made up of the group of countries on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Descriptions of the Middle East often do not include Israel, a Jewish-majority country in the Levant, because of the linguistic, ethnic and cultural differences between it and the surrounding countries.¹

The Middle East is geographically diverse – with deserts, coastal areas, river systems, fertile plains and mountain ranges. It also has a rich history, and was the home of the world’s first civilization, the Sumerians, who rose 6,000 years ago in what is now Iraq.

Many people often refer to the area as the Arab World, although not all countries in the Middle East are majority ethnic Arabs. The Arab-majority countries in North Africa are (from West to East) Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia. The Arab countries in the Levant are the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. The Arab Gulf is made up of Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Yemen. The Comoros Islands lay in the Indian Ocean off the eastern coast of Africa.

¹ For the purposes of cultural accuracy, we will not be including Israel in our coverage of Middle East business here, but welcome readers to explore the Israel Country Guide on the Cultural Navigator.
The non-Arab countries in the Middle East are Iran, where people speak Farsi; Israel, where people speak both Arabic and Hebrew; and Turkey, where people speak Turkish.

The population of the Middle East is around 357 million, though that number varies depending on which countries are included.

While the region is mostly Arab and Muslim, there are large ethnic and religious minorities. For example, there are around 19 million ethnic Kurds in the Middle East, who live mostly in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. There are also around 12 million Christians in the region, most of who live in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria.²

**Business in the Middle East**

Though the region is widely known for its volatility and violence, it is home to numerous advanced and rapidly developing economies. Investors from around the world have seen opportunities in the Middle East for decades, not just in the oil-rich states of the Gulf, but also in the countries that boast large middle-class and highly-educated populations, such as Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria and Tunisia.

In fact, the Middle East’s developing countries have seen tremendous growth in key indicators in recent years. For example, the region saw a 2.5 percent growth in GDP in the year 2014, according to the World Bank. Services made up around 70 percent of these countries’ GDP.³ The level of educational attainment has tripled in the past 30 years across the region, and except in a few countries, more female students are enrolled in colleges or universities than their male peers.⁴

There is good infrastructure in many parts of the Middle East – especially in the more politically and economically stable countries in the Gulf and Levant – and the region has high rates of cellular phone ownership and internet penetration.⁵ Because of the prevalence of US media, and because of the British influence on the education system, college-educated people almost always speak fluent English in the Gulf and Levant. French is the most common second language in North Africa.

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Many international companies have offices in Middle Eastern countries, most notably in the Gulf. These companies usually have some expatriate staff members acting in executive or advisory roles, but also have locals occupying positions across the hierarchy. While international companies have their own corporate cultures established, they often shift toward the local culture, especially when it comes to certain preferences, outlined below.

**Beginning a Journey**

I was born and raised in the US state of New Jersey, where I completed my undergraduate degree. I was interested in international relations, so I decided to pursue my graduate studies abroad. I first moved to the Middle East in 2005 to begin my Master’s Degree at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon. Shortly after graduating, I began working at a Beirut-based news website. Over the next five years I would travel and work with partners from across the region.

My Middle Eastern colleagues and I faced many cultural gaps that impeded our ability to communicate and collaborate effectively. At the time I did not have the cultural awareness to recognize the gaps we were facing, nor could I leverage the neutral and non-judgmental vocabulary of the Cultural Orientations Approach to frame and discuss our cultural differences. As a result of our lack of understanding, productivity suffered, communication was weak, and feelings often got hurt.

Over time, I learned a lot about the cultural preferences common across workplaces in the region. Now that I have the vocabulary and framework outlined by the Cultural Orientations Approach, I can recognize and understand the cultural gaps between visitors and Middle Easterners, and use that understanding to create solutions.

**Common Middle Eastern Cultural Preferences**

Though the Middle East is extremely diverse, because of the shared language and history, there are a number of common cultural preferences that impact doing business there.

It is important to remember that each country in the world has its own cultural norms, that is, the behaviors that are expected, reinforced and rewarded there. Furthermore, there are cultural differences among individuals, groups and organizations within any given country. But the below preferences are highly widespread in the Middle East, and visitors doing business in any part of the region can expect to encounter them during their work.
One of the first aspects of business and social life that newcomers to the Middle East notice is the particularistic preference. Particularism is the emphasis on difference, uniqueness and exceptions. It is the opposite of the universalistic preference, in which people place emphasis on the uniform application of rules, standards, processes and procedures. When a person or company is particularistic, it means that they expect individual cases to take precedence over others. For example, it is extremely common in the Middle East for people to rely on family connections to secure deals, advance in their careers, gain entry for their children into schools, expedite official or legal procedures, etc. It is not considered corrupt; rather, it is seen as a very logical way to get things done. In addition, using connections to facilitate business or personal matters strengthens bonds among families and friends. A person who asks for help or advice from a connection can thus expect that person to ask them for help in the future.

Closely linked with the particularistic preference is the being preference. In essence, a being preference is the focus on establishing personal, trusting relationships in both business and personal life. There can be no deal done without a relationship – and therefore, trust – established beforehand. Almost every business partnership in the Middle East is preceded by a sit-down meeting over tea or coffee. Because of the importance of family in Middle Eastern societies, partners and colleagues ask each other about their marital status, children, parents, etc. This is not considered an invasion of privacy in the Middle East.

The fluid-time preference is also highly visible to newcomers to the region. Meetings rarely start on time, deadlines are very flexible, and there is little sense of urgency around most work-related or social activities. In the Middle East, being on time is not conflated with respect for one’s hosts, and being late is not conflated with disrespect. All meetings – whether social or business – start about 15 minutes past the given time. Then, in line with the typical Middle Eastern being preference, there is a period of light chatting before the parties start talking business. However, it is important for newcomers to err on the side of caution and to arrive on time, especially to preliminary or introductory meetings.

The fluid preference is entwined with the constraint preference. The general view of life and work in the Middle East is that individuals have little power over any given situation’s outcome. People do not tend to try and take control of situations to influence their results. In the business context, this means that getting approvals, setting deadlines and seeing results often takes a lot more time than expected, as those involved do not push for faster outcomes. Another manifestation of the constraint preference is the extensive use of the term Inshallah, which literally means “God willing.” When speaking about any event or action that will take place in the future, Arabs in particular will say Inshallah to indicate that the results are not in their hands, but rather in God’s. It is not a particularly religious sentiment, rather an expression of the feeling of constraint over one’s circumstances.
There are other widespread preferences across the region, of course. Middle Easterners are usually hierarchical; they have a past orientation in that they prefer to focus on what has worked well before; and they are high-context and indirect communicators. However, the particularistic, being, fluid and constraint preferences tend to be the strongest and the most omnipresent. They are, indeed, among the first that newcomers notice when living or doing business in the Middle East.

**How To Work Around These Preferences**

When it comes to doing business in the Middle East, visiting businesspeople have to work around the strongest and most omnipresent preferences. This is where the Cultural Orientations Approach, and specifically the Four Key Cultural Skills, comes in.

The first of the Four Key Cultural Skills is **Cultural Due Diligence**. By studying the cultural norms of a country before doing business there, an individual can gain access to the information they will need to tailor their strategies.

The second key cultural skill is **Style Switching**, which is adapting behaviors and expectations to fit the new cultural environment.

If the local preferences are too strong for an individual to style switch, they can engage in a **Cultural Dialogue** with their colleagues or partners to work on solutions to overcome the cultural gaps.

Once an individual has used the previous cultural skills to overcome cultural gaps, they can engage in **Mentoring**, the fourth skill. Establishing a mentoring relationship – whether as the mentor or mentee – creates a valuable resource for knowledge sharing and also acts as a networking opportunity.

How can a visitor put the Four Key Cultural Skills to use in a Middle Eastern context? Newcomers entering the region for work can follow these points of advice.

- Going through networks is important. Visitors are advised to reach out to their company’s HR or embassy to introduce them to locals in their industry. Using professional social media sites can also work. This establishes the visiting businessperson’s presence and trustworthiness among local businesspeople.
- Before starting a business-related discussion with a person or group, visitors are advised to spend time chatting about light topics. They should not be offended if their Middle Eastern counterpart asks personal questions about their private life; it is a way to break the ice and build trust.
• One should arrive on time to meetings, but expect delays. It is best to wait until everybody arrives to start, or defer to the highest-ranking member of the partnering organization to decide when to start.
• One should also expect to hear that requests they make are not possible. This is part of the constraint orientation. Visiting businesspeople should continue to gently pursue their objectives and engage in polite follow up. This not only bolsters connectivity, but also helps expedite processes.

Conclusion

The Middle East is a large and diverse region that is widely known for its history, but also its volatility. However, for millennia it has been an important player in international trade. Currently, it is a quickly developing region with vast natural resources and great human capital. That is why many international companies and organizations have set up business there, particularly in the most stable areas of the Gulf and Levant.

Despite the Middle East’s size and diversity, there are some widespread cultural preferences that visiting businesspeople can assume will be an important part of working in the region. Particularistic, being, fluid and constraint are the strongest and most omnipresent work-style preferences across the Middle East.

By using the non-judgmental framework of the Cultural Orientations Approach, and specifically the Four Key Cultural Skills, visitors can build strategies to work around cultural gaps. They can then increase understanding, bolster connectivity and reach maximum efficacy.
About The Author

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She has extensive experience living and working throughout Europe and the Middle East. Louisa is currently the content editor for TMC. She writes, researches and edits material for the Cultural Navigator and also manages TMC’s social media. She is also on TMC’s Client Strategy Team and is Level-2 certified in the Cultural Orientations Approach.
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