

Unit 5: Hospitality and Friendship

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Reasons for Arab hospitality
- Customs governing Arab meals
- Muslim dietary restrictions
- Differences in American and Arab friendship practices

Identify

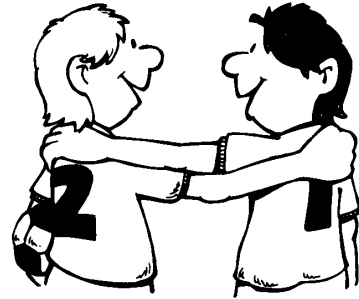
- Arab host and guest rules
- Ghutra
- Common misunderstanding Arabs may have of American friendship

Realize

- Importance of Arab hospitality and generosity
- Lack of after-dinner conversation in traditional Arab circles
- Necessity of hospitality in Arab circles
- Demands, duration and intensity of friendship in many Arab cultures

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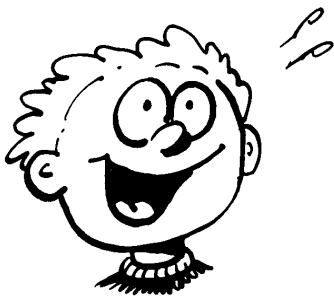
Probably the most outstanding feature of Arab customs is that of generous hospitality. To the Arabs, extending good hospitality is more than just an admirable thing to do--it is a matter of honor and also a sacred duty.



The reason for this is that the Arab Bedouins, especially those in the Arabian Peninsula, have always lived in a desert environment in which traveling nomads have depended upon each other's hospitality in order to survive thirst, hunger, and sudden raids or enemy attacks. In the course of time, these essentially Bedouin customs of hospitality became common to all Arabs, including villagers and city people.

The result of all this is that when a Saudi extends hospitality to you, he does it not only to make you, a guest in his country, feel at home, he also does it because his customs and culture require it and it demonstrates his virtue to do so. It is for these reasons that most Arabs you meet will turn out to be very skilled in matters of hospitality and we, as Americans, can learn a great deal from them in this regard. Hospitality is shown regardless of personal cost and is expected to be returned.

1. Generosity



The ingrained habit of most Arabs toward generosity is well-known, and most people have heard that if you praise something that belongs to an Arab, he will insist you take it. This does, in fact, happen sometimes, but it is also expected that you will refuse to take it.

Thus, the argument goes back and forth with each party proclaiming a position that is highly virtuous. This pattern of resistance and insistence will be seen again and again.

It seems that anytime something is offered, from a cup of tea to a villa, there is an attempt to refuse it; and every time that there is an attempt to refuse something offered there is an added insistence that it be accepted. In this particular case, where some possession has been admired, sometimes one party wins, sometimes the other. It is evidently usually apparent who is the more sincere in the argument.

This is not to say that Arabs are not proud of their possessions, for they are, and in privacy, will show them to their friends with great relish. However, "the point of it all is not to be rich, but to be profligate and generous beyond one's means" (Iseman 1978:51).

A story is told of an old man who came stumbling one night into a Bedouin camp, threadbare and exhausted. The people of the camp obviously knew him and greeted him warmly. A visitor to the camp wonders aloud why such a tattered old creature would be treated with such respect and affection. A Bedouin leader explains, "'He is of the Bait Imani and famous.' I asked, 'What for?' He responded, 'His generosity.' I said, 'I should not have thought he owned anything to be generous with,' and bin Kabina said, 'He hasn't now.



He hasn't got a single camel. He hasn't even got a wife. His son, a fine boy, was killed two years ago by the Dahm. Once he was one of the richest men in the tribe, now he has nothing except a few goats.' I asked, 'What happened to his camels? Did the raiders take them, or did they die of disease?' Bin Kabina answered, 'No, generosity ruined him. No one ever came to his tent, but he killed a camel to feed them. By God, he is generous!' I could hear the envy in his voice." (Thesiger, p.71). There are also numerous stories of families selling the last of their possessions in order to feed their guests.

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This intense dedication to generosity is evident throughout the society, but is offset by the demand for modesty or humility, which forces one to refuse most of what is offered as more than is deserved. On a more general level, it is said that "if a person tries to say something good about himself, he is a liar; if there is anything good to be said, other people will say it."



This generosity extends to the most minor social events. Whenever you are having something to eat, drink, smoke, etc., you must always offer it to anyone who is with you. If you are sitting down having a cup of coffee and someone joins you, you must insist on getting him a cup as well.

And if someone does this for you, you must not insist on paying for it. The only way to repay such a favor is to buy coffee for both of you the next time. If someone borrows money from you, if it is a small amount, you should not even expect it back, and if it is a large amount and is not repaid, there is a social pressure of just letting it go. Even if someone takes something from you, it is considered better not to ask for it back, although if it is something very meaningful or very valuable, you could discretely do so.

Visiting Americans will not be expected to give away their TIME magazine subscriptions or their American Express cards, but if something is admired that they can do without, giving it away may be the best deal they ever made. In addition, it is important for Americans to remember that an initial refusal of any offer, whether to help pay for something or to invite someone for dinner, should not be taken as a refusal in any real sense.



At least one refusal is demanded by the society, if you continue to insist and they continue to refuse, at some point you will have to give up, but the American tendency to ask just once, for instance, if a guest would like to have something to drink, and to accept the first refusal as sincere, is considered exceptionally rude in an Arab society.

2. Visiting Host and guest rules provide that the person issuing the invitation is the host. This applies not only to the home, but to chance encounters in restaurants and casual invitations to lunch. If you meet in a cafe or restaurant, the person already there is considered the host and most often will pay the bill.

If an individual Arab asks you to go to lunch with him he is the host. "Dutch Treat" is not known in the Arab world. To protect your own public image and status, you must return hospitality. By the same token, do not refuse hospitality extended to you.



If invited to an Arab home, arrive on time. When you visit a Saudi home and all the guests remove their shoes before entering a room, remove your shoes also. This is a sign of respect for your host. You are not expected to bring a present, unless you know the host and his preferences very well. Even today it is wise not to express admiration or unusual interest for any of an Arab's belongings, valuable or otherwise, since it may be offered as a gift to you on the spot. If accepted, reciprocation is expected.

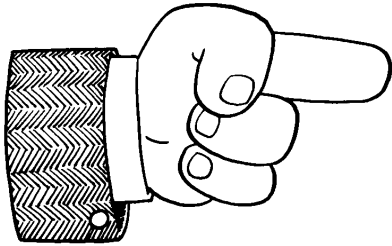
A meeting in a Saudi home will provide a few surprises to the uninitiated American. Probably the first thing that will happen is that a servant or relative of the host will come around with a large brass pot, pour a small amount of hot, bitter coffee into a small round cup which has no handle, and hand it to the guest to drink up on the spot. Usually a guest will have two or three cups of such coffee--it is considered rude to drink more than that. The coffee, however, will keep being poured unless the guest, when handing the cup back to the coffee pourer, shakes the cup from side to side to indicate that he has had enough.

In addition to this, you will find that many Saudis do not use tables and chairs in their homes; they sit on carpets on the floor, prop up their backs and elbows with cushions, and when eating, they may use only their hands (it is for this reason that they wash their hands both before and after a meal).

An American who is used to sitting at a table in a chair and using silverware might find this situation to be a

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difficult one. One way to prepare for it would be to practice sitting on the floor with your legs crossed (at first your legs will get very tired, but you will soon get used to it).



However, according to Arab customs, the soles of your shoes should never face a person. This is considered extremely bad manners, especially among older Saudis. American women should always keep their legs covered.

Develop a taste for Arab food. Roasted meats, rice, kebob, and Arab bread are some of the specialties. Give everything a try. You will like most Arab food right away. If you don't care for some of the dishes, you should try them again later on. Many Americans find that they develop a taste for foreign foods only after frequent samplings over a period of time.

When passing or taking food, Americans must remember to use only the right hand. In the Middle East, the left hand is used for purposes of personal hygiene and is not offered in any way to someone else. If you are left-handed, you will especially have to remember to be careful to observe this custom; otherwise you may insult a Saudi. Practice taking a handful of rice with your right hand and rolling it into a small ball and then eating it.

After the meal, the host will provide soap and water for the hands and then cologne or toilet water for the head. He will serve dessert and perhaps more coffee. Conversation will become more lively as the dishes and bowls are removed. When the host's interest in conversation slackens, it is probably time to leave. In the more traditional settings, the passing of an incense signals that the visit is over.



There is little or no after dinner conversation; Saudis consider the meal to be the climax of the evening. Upon leaving thank the host profusely for his hospitality and good conversation.

3. Hosting When we invite someone, we are fairly definite. We ask someone over at a specific time or we send a written invitation. In much of the Arab world you **MUST** show hospitality when on your own territory--your home, your office. This necessity is tied to protecting his public image, his dignity, and his status. Failure to be hospitable is one of the sins of the Arab world.

A true story of a man in ancient Arabia, Hatem at-Taei shows the pure meaning of hospitality and its importance to the Arab:



Hatem loved and owned the fastest, most beautiful, most famous horse of his time. One day a stranger stopped by Hatem's tent around dinner time. Hatem insisted, despite all protests, that his visitor stay for dinner.

After dinner was over, he asked the visitor his business and was told the King wished to have Hatem's famous stallion. In anguish Hatem revealed that having nothing else for his guest, he had had his stallion killed to serve a dinner. (Isfahani A.H. 1284-1285.)

Offer refreshments to visitors. At home or at work, remember to offer Saudi visitors coffee, tea, or a soft drink upon their arrival. And offer cigarettes to any Saudis who might be in your presence when you wish to smoke.

Provide your Saudi guests with plenty of food. When Saudis invite guests to their homes, they provide more food than the guests could possibly eat. This is done to demonstrate generosity and hospitality. You should do the same when you are the host. However, Muslims are forbidden to eat pork and the drinking of alcoholic beverages is also strictly forbidden, at least in public. Although not all Moslems adhere to these restrictions, it would be an insensitivity to offer pork or alcohol to a Muslim.

When entertaining Arab visitors or guests, the host should never give the appearance of wishing to terminate the visit, regardless of the press of business. Do not urge an Arab to remove his traditional headgear when visiting you.



A Saudi considers his headcloth (ghutra) or skull-cap to be an integral part of his outfit and normally takes it off only when undressing. Always accompany a guest outside the door or gate upon his departure.

4. The Concept of Friendship



One of the first complaints of many Arabs newly arrived in the United States is that Americans are insincere. When questioned more closely as to what they mean by this, it comes down to what the very concept of friendship entails--that is, what you can expect from a friend and how you know if you have one. The path that leads to this judgment of insincerity is very clear.

The visitors are initially pleased and encouraged by the effervescent friendliness they feel from Americans upon first meeting. They feel we show much more warmth and concern than they would expect from their own countrymen in a similar situation. However, we fail to follow up in the proper manner.

On first meeting, we smile and chat, we ask what they consider to be personal questions, we show interest in them and in their thoughts and lives, and indicate full willingness to meet again and continue the friendship. All too often, however, the relationship ends at that point, or it is not picked up by the American soon enough to satisfy the Arab's preconceptions of how friends treat friends. They feel slighted, disillusioned, and fooled.



Friendship in the Middle East is much more demanding than it is here, so that what we call friends they would consider merely acquaintances. There, a true friend is someone you feel free to impose on at anytime, knowing that he will do his very best to help you, even if it means a personal sacrifice.

This is not exceptional behavior, but simply the norm, and the person who does not live up to this standard would be open to criticism. Therefore, the Arab visitor, having drawn certain conclusions from the openness of the Americans when he first meets them, has expectations as to how they will act in the future. It is these expectations that are not met or even approximated. The next time he meets the American, that person may simply say hello and pass on by. He may fail to completely follow up on the initial meeting, or may do it so much later that the Arab has dismissed him as a shallow, unfeeling person.

The misunderstanding, then, is the result of two factors. One, that Americans tend to be abnormally open and friendly on first meeting a stranger; we are willing to help him or discuss any problem with him, though we have never seen him before. The second factor is that the demands of friendship and of socializing, in general, are much lower on the scale of priorities in the United States than they are in the Arab world.



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In the Middle East, it is not unusual to make a point of visiting a good friend every day, or at least several times a week, whereas, in the United States, several weeks could go by without you seeing each other and the friendship would be in no way impaired. Thus, not only are we unprepared to meet the Middle Eastern expectations at the level of friendship we actually feel, but by our actions we aggravate the situation by eliciting--unintentionally, to be sure--inflated evaluations of just how friendly we feel.

Most Arabs take friendship very seriously. Whereas Americans form quick and casual friendships, the Arab concept of friendship is one of duration and intensity. Before the Arab enters into a friendship, he must find out all about you to see how much influence you have, what you can do for him, and if you might embarrass him. Expect a healthy interest from the Arabs in your social, professional, and academic background.



Once a friendship is formed, you can expect the Arab to use all his influence, and that of his friends, to do things for you. Any Westerner who would like the benefits of a "real" Arab friend needs to realize the friendship has more intensity and involves a system of balancing favors against obligations. We trade "favors" also, rather than always money, and so do they.

In general, it can be said that the maintenance of friendships takes priorities over most other needs of life. If the demands of friendship interfere with work requirements or other duties, that is considered reasonable, expected, and very much accepted.

Review Quiz: Hospitality and Friendship

Multiple Choice Place the letter of the most correct answer in the blank provided.

1. _____ When eating with an Arab friend, it is customary for him to
 - a. remove traditional headgear at the place of eating.
 - b. point to the door when it is time to leave.
 - c. keep on traditional headgear regardless of the occasion.

2. _____ A person who issues an invitation is usually the _____ in Arab society.
 - a. wealthiest
 - b. friendliest
 - c. host

3. _____ The Arab concept of friendship is one of
 - a. quick, casual acquaintance.
 - b. prestige and status consciousness.
 - c. duration and intensity.

4. _____ After the conclusion of a meal at a Saudi Arabian home,
 - a. the night discussions begin.
 - b. music and entertaining continue.
 - c. the conversation is over. The meal is the climax to the evening's activities.

5. _____ In the Middle East friendship is
 - a. taken very seriously.
 - b. taken about the same way as in America.
 - c. less demanding than in America.

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6. _____ When passing food at a Saudi Arabian dinner, it is best to
- a. use any hand you deem fitting.
 - b. use both hands accompanied by a slight bow of the head.
 - c. use the right hand.
7. _____ Middle East friendship priorities generally
- a. take precedent over most other needs of life.
 - b. are the same as in America.
 - c. take second place to work requirements.
8. _____ Arab dedication to generosity is often offset by the demand for
- a. modesty or humility.
 - b. forced payback.
 - c. self-promotion.
9. _____ When in his own turf or territory, an Arab person must show
- a. prestige through objects of art.
 - b. hospitality.
 - c. off extensive furnishings--rugs, brass, gold jewelry.
10. _____ The most outstanding feature of Arab customs is
- a. generous hospitality.
 - b. protection of status.
 - c. praying five times a day.



“Challenge Yourself.”