

Unit 6: Gestures

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Different body movements used by Arab peoples to communicate
- Arab society may condone outward displays of affection between male friends
- Common practices used when greeting in Arab circles
- Offense caused by using obscene Arab gestures
- Habits Saudi Arabians may employ in crowded situations

Identify

- Common Arab gestures and their meanings
- Gesture used to beckon someone to come
- Respect shown through common gestures
- "Evil eye"

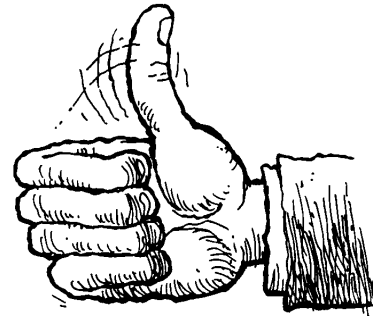
Realize

- Arab men may show friendship by kissing
- "A-OK" symbol is not a positive expression in Arab culture
- Appearing in a hurry can cause offense to Saudi peoples
- Negative implications of pointing a finger at someone

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Arabs, like most people, use gestures and body movements to communicate. It has been said that "To tie an Arab's hands while he is speaking is tantamount to tying his tongue." However, Arab gestures differ a great deal from American (or Western) ones.

1. Shaking Hands We usually learn to shake hands only the first time we are introduced to someone. Most Arabs shake hands every time they meet you and every time they leave you. This applies whether they meet you on the street, in an office, at a conference, restaurant, or at home.



The pattern in Saudi Arabia is to shake hands on meeting, chat a bit, and shake hands again on leaving--even if you meet ten times a day. If sitting, rise when shaking hands as well as when an esteemed person enters a room.

2. Touching A considerable number of Arabs touch more between the same sex, to show liking--not sex. They hold hands, hug each other, kiss if close friends. As Arab society condones the outward display of affection between male friends, one may see Saudi men, even officials and military officers, holding hands as they walk together or otherwise converse with one another.



If an individual Arab does not touch you, he does not like you--or he may be trying to restrain himself because you are not used to being touched. A full body embrace, accompanied with hugging, should not be initiated until you are sure that the Arab is a close friend. If the Arab initiates it, participate and consider yourself honored and/or accepted. Contact between the opposite sex in public is considered close to obscene.

3. Common Gestures Although there are numerous other gestures associated specifically with the Arab culture, the following have been identified as some of the most common and widespread in the Arabian Peninsula.

- The gesture of placing the right hand or its forefinger on the tip of the nose, on the right lower eyelid, on top of the head, on the mustache or beard has the meaning of "it's in front of me, I see it or it's on my head to accomplish." Another meaning is "it's my obligation."
- Forefinger and thumb of one or both hands on the jacket lapel; or one or both hands held at chest height, palms open and facing out, has the meaning, "it's not my responsibility."

• Right hand out, palm down, with fingers brought toward oneself repeatedly in a clawing motion, is the sign for calling someone to come.

- Placing the palm of the right hand on the chest immediately after shaking hands with another man shows respect or thanks. A very slight bow of the head may also be added.
- Touching the tips of the right fingertips to the forehead while bowing the head slightly, or kissing the back of a dignitary's hand also connotes "Respect."

- Grasping the chin with the thumb side of the right fist is a sign of wisdom or maturity.



- By holding the fingers in a pear shaped configuration with the tips pointing up at about waist level and moving the hand slightly up and down signals "wait a little bit" or "be careful." This gesture can be observed extensively when driving in the crowded

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streets of the Arab cities. In such a locale, it may be accompanied by curses from an anxious taxi driver or a pedestrian trying to cross the street.

- Hitting the side of one's face with the palm of one hand, head slightly tilted, and eyes wide open, is meant as an expression of surprise.
- Flicking the right thumbnail on front teeth can be translated to mean "I have no money" or "I have only a little."
- Biting the right forefinger, which has been placed sideways in the mouth, may be a threat or an expression of regret.

- In Western culture the "A-OK" sign is a positive gesture. However in the Arab world, if the gesture is shaken at another person it symbolizes the sign of the evil eye. An Arab may use the sign in conjunction with verbal curses.

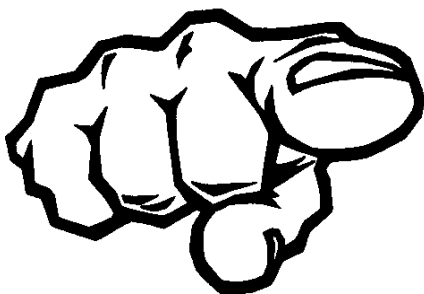


- Hitting the right fist into the open palm of the left hand indicates obscenity or contempt.
- Placing the tips of the left fingers and thumb together so that the hand faces right, then placing the tip of the right forefinger directly on the left fingertips indicates an obscenity or insult directed at one's birth or parentage. Specifically "You have five fathers."
- Placing the palm of the right hand on the chest, bowing the head a little and closing one's eyes connotes "Thank You" (in the name of Allah).
- Touching noses together three times when greeting is a Bedouin gesture of friendship and respect.
- Two men kissing each other quickly on the lips when greeting is an expression of friendship.
- A quick snap of the head upwards with an accompanying click of the tongue connotes: "No", "perhaps", or "What you say is false."



- By joining the tips of the right thumb, forefinger, and middle finger and then moving the configuration rapidly in front of the body, an Arab will add emphasis to his speech.

- Patting another person's shoulder with the right hand is a conciliatory gesture.
- Before serving coffee, a bit of it may be poured onto the ground. This is a Bedouin gesture of sacrifice.
- During the Hajj (pilgrimage), people may kiss only on the shoulders as a gesture of friendship and greeting.
- Flipping the hand near the mouth and simultaneously making a clicking sound with the tongue and teeth is used to indicate that a person is not to worry.
- By holding the right hand in front of the face with the back facing forward and then flipping the hand so that the palm is up, the Arab will indicate that the person asked for is not present.
- If an Arab rubs his earlobe with the tips of his right forefinger and thumb, he may be asking, "Do you want me to answer the question for you?"
- Placing a half closed hand in front of the stomach, and then turning it slightly connotes that the person to whom the gesture is made is a liar.
- By first touching the tip of the right forefinger on the tongue and then placing it on the tip of the nose, an Arab gives a sign for a person to hurry.



- Open hand, palm down, pointed in a particular direction and accompanied by the phrase "Il-Khamsi bil'een" (the fire in the eyes) is a gesture "To ward off the evil eye."

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- Shaking the index finger sideways is similar to the western gesture which connotes "No" or indicates the negative.
- A snap of the forefinger or middle finger on the thumb is similar to the western gesture which connotes "Forgot something."
- A gentle graze of the chin of another person with the right fist is an admonition not to argue.
- Gently grazing another person's chin with the right forefinger is a threat or challenge.
- Holding the right hand, with the back forward, then lightly brushing the tips of fingers beneath the chin several times with a forward motion has the meaning of an insult.
- Holding the middle finger down with the thumb while the other fingers are extended, and then shaking the hand at someone is an expression of anger or a threat.

WARNING!! Gestures indicating obscenities or insults should not be used by non-Arabs. Arab gestures of this type have varying degrees of intensity. Depending upon circumstances and country, incorrect usage could lead to serious offenses and cause diplomatic incidents.



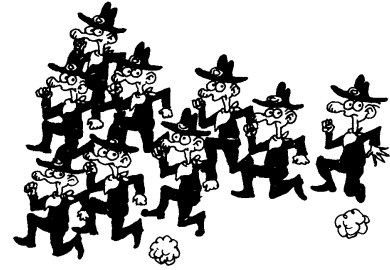
4. Be Aware of...

Appearing to be in a hurry when you are among Saudis. For example, during a business appointment or social visit with a Saudi, do not look at your watch or otherwise act as if you have little time to talk. Saudis can be very offended by this. Time is much less rigidly scheduled in Saudi Arabia than in the U.S.; so, in any case, you will have little need to be in a hurry.

Pointing your finger or a pencil at anyone while speaking, or beckon anyone with your finger. It is

considered a threat, and only animals are treated in this manner.

The Saudis disinclination to wait in crowded situations. Due to subjectivity in perception and sense of dignity, every man considers himself to be "first in line."



"Appreciate Your Accomplishments"

Review Quiz: Gestures

True/False Place a T or an F in the blank provided.

1. _____ Non-Arab personnel should take care not to knowingly or unknowingly use gestures indicating obscenities or insults.
2. _____ To beckon someone, many Arabs place their right hand out, palm down, and bring their fingers toward oneself in a repeatedly clawing motion.
3. _____ Two Arab men, who quickly kiss each other when greeting, may be expressing wholesome friendship.
4. _____ In Arab cultures, pointing an index finger at a person, while speaking, is considered a good way to emphasize a point.
5. _____ Most Arab men seldom shake hands with others.
6. _____ Many Saudis automatically form a long line when in crowded or waiting settings.
7. _____ The "evil eye" is a meaningless, antiquated superstition in many Arab circles.
8. _____ The "A-OK" sign, when used in Arab circles, carries negative connotations.
9. _____ In public, contact between members of the opposite sex in Middle East circles is considered close to obscene.
10. _____ In Saudi culture, appearing in a hurry is a mark of importance and prestige.