

When dealing with Muslims in the Arab world, it is important to bear in mind that their religion has a strong influence on their social and political life. This is why it is of utmost importance for the foreign negotiator to be familiar with Islam and Muslim culture, as many of its traits are part of business protocol and culture.

## **BUSINESS PROTOCOL AND CULTURE**



### **General issues. Greeting**

Arabs are generally friendly and hospitable, and tend to have more physical contact than in the West. Even for people travelling from Latin or Mediterranean countries, which are 'famous' for their closeness, they may be surprised that the physical space when chatting is much smaller than in Western culture. We should not try to move away from them because they may take it as a discourtesy.

During a conversation, physical contact such as tapping or touching on the forearm, hand or arm can be made, but you

should never go so far as to slap them on the back. We should let them take the initiative in physical contact.

The most common way of greeting when making introductions is to shake hands. However, contrary to the way it is done in the West, this greeting usually lasts longer. It is advisable to wait until the other person withdraws his or her hand before ending the greeting. It is very important to always use the right hand, for them the left hand is impure.

In some cases it is possible to give two kisses or embrace when there is greater confidence, but it is essential to remember not to have physical contact with women. Do not even shake hands with them. A simple gesture of courtesy will suffice to greet them, unless they are Western women.

If a foreign woman is rejected when offering her hand, they can replace this gesture by placing the palm of the right hand over the heart. This gesture is a sign of respect and courtesy and is considered an acceptable alternative as an option to the traditional Western greeting. If, on the other hand, you are dealing with an Arab businesswoman, the most appropriate way to greet her is to wait for her to extend her hand. It may happen that the woman chooses not to shake the man's hand, a gesture that should be respected and not interpreted as a lack of courtesy, as it is normal for some women not to shake hands with men.

It is essential to respect local cultural traditions to avoid misunderstandings or disrespect towards hosts. The rules of etiquette and certain customs and traditions in the UAE may vary according to the region, the religion practised and the social context.

Greetings are usually made in order of importance at more formal events, with the oldest person being greeted first.

It is important to always address people with the appropriate titles, so it is advisable to find out their full names and titles beforehand. In this culture, titles are synonymous with status and those who hold them do so with pride.

When coming into contact with members of the Royal Family or Government in some countries, it is important to know how to treat them politely. If you are dealing with the Royal Family, you should use 'Your Highness' - Sumuk - 'Your Highness'. For government ministers, the address is 'Excellency' - Tafawaq - 'Excellency'. For any other person, the name should be preceded by the appropriate title. The most common title is Sir - Syid - 'Mister'.

When greeting, it is advisable to maintain direct and discreet eye contact during the conversation to build confidence in the other party. A look that is too persistent or too fleeting can be unfavourable. When saying goodbye, it is appropriate to thank the other party for the attention and time spent in the conversation.

The usual greeting is "As-salam alikum", which in English means "peace be upon you". The common response is usually "wa alikum al-salam", which can be translated as "and peace be upon you too". If we wish to ask a polite question, such as "how are you", we can use the expression "Marhaban, kaif halak". This formula is commonly used in the United Arab Emirates and is equivalent to the English "how do you do? Expressions of politeness may vary slightly from area to area or region to region.

### **Issues to consider when holding a business meeting**

In Arab culture, it is necessary to set business appointments several weeks in advance as a sign of respect and interest.

On the day of the meeting, the Arab businessman may arrive up to half an hour later than agreed, while the foreign negotiator must be punctual, which is interpreted as respect for his host.

Before scheduling meetings, it is imperative to take into account prayer times, official holidays and the holy month of Ramadan.

Ramadan is the most important and sacred religious celebration in Islam; it is a month of fasting, prayer, reflection and community

that is celebrated once a year for 30 days. The dates change from year to year, as they depend on the lunar calendar.

In 2023, Ramadan will take place from Wednesday, 22 March to Thursday, 20 April. In 2024 it will be from Saturday, 9 March to Monday, 8 April.

During this month, work and study hours are reduced. Business meetings can be held between 9:00 pm and 11:00 pm, as the daily fast is over in this time slot. Meetings between 2:00 pm and 8:00 pm should be avoided. Therefore, during Ramadan it is important to be flexible with meeting times, speed of communication and decision making in the ninth Muslim month when there is no eating, drinking or smoking from sunrise to sunset.

Throughout the year, Muslims are called to prayer five times a day, during which time everything comes to a standstill. Separate prayer rooms for men and women are often found in offices. Prayer times are announced by calls from local mosques and are also often reported in the news. The prayer times are as follows:

1. Al-Fajr: At dawn.
2. Al-Zhur: At noon, after the sun has reached the highest point in the sky.
3. Al-'Asr: In the late afternoon.
4. Al-Maghrib: Just after sunset.
5. Al-'Isha: Between sunset and midnight.

It is advisable to find out in each country what time the prayers are held in order to avoid interruptions.

Fridays are considered holy days, so no negotiations take place.

In general, the progress of negotiations in the Muslim world tends to be much slower than in Western culture. The Arab

businessman is likely to want to discuss decisions privately with his entire team before signing agreements or closing negotiations.

Other recommendations to keep in mind are:

If the meeting is to be held under invitation to a house, it is important to bring a small gift as a thank you. In Muslim culture, the consumption of pork and alcohol is forbidden, so gifts of this kind are frowned upon.

It is preferable to eat with the right hand. This is understood as a gesture of respect to the host and a tradition of the Muslim religion.

When sitting in a room, office or at a table, one should avoid crossing one's legs. Showing the sole of the foot or the sole of the shoe is considered offensive.

## **Dress code for a business meeting**



In Islam, as in Arab culture in general, there are different types of dress that vary according to social hierarchy, religious nuances and countries. To Western eyes it may appear that all Arabs dress alike, however, there are subtle and symbolic differences that should not be taken lightly.

In business, short-sleeved shirts and shorts should not be worn.

Women should maintain a conservative style, covering arms at least to the elbow, legs to the ankles and no cleavage of any kind. Likewise, Western women should not wear traditional Arab dress as this may be considered offensive to the cultural heritage and tradition of the host country.

It is also important to be careful about the use of non-verbal gestures such as thumbs up, hugs and high-fives.

In some cultures, displays of affection may be different from what we are used to in the West. It is possible that, among friends or people you trust a lot, you may walk hand in hand. In these cases it is advisable to follow the initiative of the other person.

It is important to remember that each culture has its own rules of etiquette and customs, and it is essential to respect them in order to avoid misunderstandings or disrespect towards the hosts.

### **The importance of food in the Muslim world.**



The Qur'an states what types of food Muslims may and may not eat, so they are forbidden to eat meat from animals that have not been slaughtered according to Islamic rules, as well as alcohol, fermented liquors, blood, pork and its by-products. It is important not to eat any of the forbidden foods in their presence as it is considered disrespectful.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), "Halal foods are those permitted under Islamic law, which must meet the following requirements: they must not contain or contain anything that is considered unlawful under Islamic law; they must not have been prepared, processed, transported or stored using equipment or means that are free from anything that is unlawful under Islamic law; and they must not have been in direct contact, during preparation, processing, transport or storage, with food that does not meet the requirements of the preceding paragraphs (...)".

Undoubtedly, knowing the culture and customs of those countries to which we want to expand our business or with which we want to have commercial dealings, will be a fundamental issue if we want to be successful in our business. If you have any doubts or you are simply determined to succeed, do not hesitate to contact us and we will help you to successfully complete your next business landing.