



## **Why would you want to go there?**

### **A Guide for Skeptics**

Whether you are an employee, a business owner, or a curious traveler, you are bound to have a whole lot of ideas about the Arab & Islamic region.

Some of your ideas may be well informed, some half-formed, a few impressionistic, and others imagined.

This Guide answers the most commonly asked questions about venturing into the Arab countries – about dress code, gender relations, social taboos, security - so that you can test your ideas on these answers, discard the unhelpful, and build on the best.

We want you to have the confidence to reassure family, friends, business partners, employees, or work colleagues that your decision to engage with, or visit, or live in an Arab country is well considered and an opportunity well worth exploring.

We want you to be fully confident about expanding your professional capacity in a multitude of positive ways.

Our E-guides help you and your network put concerns in their proper context.

So you can go forth and be exceptional.



## Who are Arabs?

Ask your family, housemates, or work colleagues to sit down together and define your country's culture. Describe what distinguishes your country from the rest of the world.

You will get some predictable answers, flush out all the favourite stereotypes, and probably have a few laughs at your own expense along the way.

You are bound to stir up disagreements too. Perhaps even a bit of controversy.

Ultimately you are bound to agree that there are common characteristics that can be loosely tied to your country, and others that are highly contentious because, while they exist, you don't like them and refuse to accept that they define you.

This is exactly what a group of Arab friends or work colleagues would experience if they sat down to do this exercise.

Because social norms, cultural stereotypes, and defining characteristics in Arab countries are as open to debate, and as prone to change over time, as they are in your country.

There also are a myriad of personalities interpreting and enacting cultural 'norms' in a variety of ways.

When all is said and done, most Arab societies tolerate a certain degree of variation in what they consider 'normal behaviour', just the same as you do in your country.



## 5 Helpful Descriptions of Arabs:

1. Arabs are Semites, just like Jews.
2. Most, but not all, Arabs are Muslim.  
(Muslims are all nationalities. Most are NOT Arab.)
3. Arab and Muslim are linked in people's minds because Islam was revealed to Prophet Mohammed in the Arabic language so all Islamic teaching and prayer is in Arabic. It is WRONG to presume Arab = Muslim. See above.
4. Arab culture is a mix of ideas based on ethnic and environmental roots in Arabia.
5. Arab Christians and Arab Muslims have a lot in common. For example, 'Allah' means 'God' to both Arab Muslims and Arab Christians.

## Arabic Language

About 200 million people around the world speak Arabic. It is one of the six official languages used at the United Nations, and is the second most used written script in the world.

Chances are you already speak some Arabic.

If you drink coffee with sugar and are fond of alcohol, magazines, satin and chiffon, then you speak Arabic each time you mention them. There are thousands of Arabic words like these in the English language. Any word starting with 'al' is bound to be Arabic.

Most Arab countries teach English at secondary school and use English in medical clinics and hospitals, in business, and often in higher education.



Other commonly used languages in the Arab countries are French, Berber, Urdu, Hindi, Malayalam, and Tagalog.

You don't need to speak Arabic to visit or live in an Arab country, but it undeniably helps you understand the culture and lets you have some great conversations.

## Social Rules

The most common questions we are asked to answer about the Arab world are to do with social etiquette and gender politics.

People want to know how women should behave, what sort of freedoms they can expect, what they must wear, and whether they can drink alcohol.

- Why do women have to cover up like that?
- Will I have to wear special clothes?
- Will I be permitted to drive?
- Can I walk about by myself safely?
- Will Arab men harass me, or my wife, my girlfriend, or my daughters?
- Will I get into trouble for shaking hands with a woman, for smiling at her, or speaking with her?
- Will I be able to drink wine and eat bacon and eggs?



The short answers are:

- Modesty.
- Not usually.
- Not in Saudi Arabia.
- Yes.
- Not normally.
- Depends on your motivation.
- Depends what country you are in.

The longer answers are as follows:

1. The primary reason women cover their body shape and their heads is modesty. The Qur'an states it is required that men and women cover their 'adornments'. Some Muslims interpret this to mean that a woman's full physique and her 'crowning glory', her hair, should be covered. One reason some Arab countries dictate a uniform outfit for females is to protect the pedigree of families. By neutralizing a female's physical form, romantic dalliances outside of marriage can be better avoided. There also are many remarkable side benefits to dressing this way.
2. Only Saudi Arabia requests that all females wear the black gown in public places and that non-Muslim females cover their heads if asked to in certain locations. No other Arab country requests this dress style for foreigners.
3. Due to Saudi Arabia's conservatism, women have not been permitted to drive in public there. Women in every other Arab country – and Iran - are allowed to drive.
4. As for getting about safely on your own, Arabs tend to view independent forms of behaviour and walking or being alone in any setting as unusual because one is defined – and thrives - by social connection. There is a tendency in the MENA region to regard most solo activities as anti-social and even counter-cultural. Someone seeking privacy is likely up



to no good. So in certain contexts, a man or woman walking on her own conspicuously alone may arouse curiosity, concern, or unwanted attention. For men of a predatory nature, it may elicit bad behaviour. It is likely the same in your own country in certain contexts.

5. Arab men are not prone to predatory behaviour. It is not at all 'normal' for them to be discourteous or offensive to a female. A female dressed revealingly, out on her own, or being flirtatious may get attention she does not like or know how to read. In your own country the protocols of dress and the contexts of behaviour are understood. In a country not your own, it is best to be more cautious so as not to send unintentional messages that could end badly. We recommend you remain open to learn but always follow your instinct. When something does not feel right it, it usually isn't.
6. Arabs do not expect a non-Arab male to be discourteous or offensive to an Arab female. A man's friendly smile, handshake, and brief exchange of words with an Arab female cause no offence. Keep it neutral and you are in safe territory. Open flirtation or explicit admiration of a female can be offensive, however, because it puts her in an awkward position by drawing public attention to your interaction with her. Similarly a man asking after a female whom he has met can be offensive because it implies a relationship with her beyond the casual, and that can cause her, and her family, significant embarrassment.
7. In Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Libya no-one is permitted to consume alcohol or pork products and none are available for purchase. In other Arab countries, alcohol and pork products in all their variety are available but should be consumed only in private homes or in designated areas such as hotel bars.



## Security

It is generally accepted that individuals working in certain foreign Embassies, associated with the oil and energy industry, or associated with political activities are the most common likely targets for harassment, molestation, abduction, or violence in the Arab countries.

Incidences against these specific targets are the most common trigger for governments' warnings.

Yet high level travel warnings for Arab countries feature prominently on many governments' Foreign Affairs advisory services.

Arabs and veterans of the Arab region often find such government travel warnings unjustly prejudicial against Arab countries when compared to the warnings issued for other countries where major natural disasters, mass violence, or terrorist acts occur.

They argue that these warnings are prejudicial because most people outside the region lack adequate contextual information about the Arab region.

What does that mean?

It means that you're probably familiar enough with a lot of countries around the globe to make a balanced decision about whether to travel to one or not after there's been some major violent event.

Australians, for example, mostly have enough experience, knowledge and social networks to be able to put the Bali bombings, the London riots, and the events of 9/11 into the sort of



context that lets them feel fine about traveling to Bali, London, or New York.

But much of the world knows so very little of the Arab countries that most citizens of any country have only their government's travel warnings to guide them.

People who are there on the ground, or who know people there, are better able to comprehend the cultural and daily social and political contexts in which violent incidences happen.

As an Arabic speaker and regular visitor to Arab countries over a long period of time, of course I've got more cultural context than most other people I meet (outside the Arab region).

And if I were convinced an Arab country was dangerous, I would NOT hesitate to say so - and to explain why.

If you have any security concern about a specific Arab country, it's always good to get some input from those folk who know that country better than most.

No-one – and I do mean **no-one** – with a conscience is going to send you off into danger, or even the risk of danger.

Promise.

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