

This article is one of a series of "Cultural Context" profiles that was written for an Eaton Consulting Group newsletter.

## **The Cultural Context – United Arab Emirates**

*by Bob Riel*

While logistical information and protocol tips are necessary for navigating the day-to-day challenges presented by life in a new country, a key to long-term business success is one's ability to adapt to cultural differences. This following section focuses on important elements of a country's cultural profile which affect the way people communicate, make decisions, negotiate, conduct business, and build relationships.

### **Religious Faith**

Perhaps no trait is more characteristic of the United Arab Emirates than its religious faith. In fact, throughout the Middle East, no understanding of national identity or culture is truly possible without first grasping the spiritual heritage of Islam. Muslims do not perceive a separation between their faith and the rest of their lives.

The Muslim religion is based on five "pillars of Islam. All Muslims are expected to accept and recite a religious oath on a daily basis, say prayers five times a day, donate a portion of their income to the poor, participate in a daily fast during the month of Ramadan, and make at least one pilgrimage during their lifetime to the city of Mecca.

One of the ways in which Arab culture has been affected by Islam is in the perpetuation of a hierarchical society. The fact that it teaches submission to a higher being has produced a cultural impact that is hierarchical. The religion also professes that the temporal community should be governed by a just leader who makes decisions through consultation. Traditionally, this has resulted in governments that are led by individuals or small groups.

### **The Bedouins**

Other than Islam, the values of the Bedouins has exerted the greatest influence on the culture of the UAE. Before the modern era, many Arab lands were populated primarily by Bedouins. Most Arabs today have settled in cities and small towns, but there are still many Bedouins around. These nomadic tribes traditionally traveled through the desert, herding camels and goats, hunting for food, and foraging for water.

One of the Bedouin values that has influenced Arabic culture is a style of leadership that is both hierarchical and consultative. In a Bedouin tribe, authority was vested in a sheikh. Although he was a single ruler, it was traditional for the sheikh to consult with others. This tradition was passed on to the Islamic religion, which believes in the traditions of a just ruler and consultative decision-making.

Second, the importance placed on honor means that Arabs try to avoid being shamed in public. A person's honor could be damaged by not living up to one's responsibilities or by the actions of one's family.

Finally, the Bedouins passed on a tradition of hospitality and generosity. This stems from the harshness of desert life, where everyone was required to provide food and shelter to guests, regardless of one's own financial situation. This generosity has passed down to the present day, as Arabs are welcoming and generous hosts.

### **A Group-Oriented Culture**

The UAE has a group-oriented culture, with much of the focus falling on family and religion. When meeting a newcomer, an Arab will often try to determine a person's family background, in much the same way as people from some other cultures will ask about one's job.

Families tend to be very cohesive, with extended families living with or near each other. Young people usually live at home until they are married. It is still typical in the Arab culture for marriages to be arranged.

The religion of Islam is also an important aspect of the society's collective nature. The very word Islam means "submission to God," and a Muslim is "one who submits." Many of the central beliefs of Islam involve sacrificing one's individual needs for the greater good. Many of the beliefs and actions of the Arab people are integrally connected to their identity as Muslims.

### **Gender Identity**

There tend to be strictly defined gender roles in the UAE and other Arab countries. The situation is not as extreme as it once was, particularly in urban areas, where a number of females can be found in professional positions. However, traditional male-female roles still pervade much of Arab society.

For example, men are expected to get an education and a career, while many women are raised with the sole goal of being married. After marriage, a woman's primary role is to bear and raise children. Females have a great deal of latitude within the family, and mothers are revered in the Arab culture. However, if a decision has to be made it is still considered the duty of the male, who is seen as the family's prime authority figure.

### **View of Time**

The Arab philosophical traditions cause them to see time as cyclical and flowing. This is in contrast to the linear view of the West, where time is divided into segments along a straight line

with opportunities needing to be seized in the present. Arabs tend to have less urgency about immediate achievement. They see life in longer spans of time and are generally more interested in preserving the past than in changing the future.

The Arabs also have a polychronic culture, which means that it is natural for many things to happen at once. People have a less regimented notion of time, they don't feel compelled to always be on schedule, and they take interruptions in stride. Individuals may walk in and out of a meeting, or your host may stop numerous times to take a phone call. In a group meeting, many agenda items may be placed on the table without feeling a need to resolve any or all of them at that time. This contrasts to a monochronic culture, where time is compartmentalized and tasks are accomplished one at a time.

### **Fatalism**

Arabs have a sense of fatalism about life, a belief that they are more at the mercy of their environment, rather than in control of it. This leads to the assumption that success is not always the result of good planning or hard work. In fact, they are more likely to believe it is the result of fate.

This fatalistic view of life is often traced to the cultural influence of Islam. It is common for Arab Muslims to believe that the events of their life are in the hands of God. A very common phrase throughout the Arab world is "Inshallah," which translates as "if God wills." It may be seen as blasphemous to believe that one can influence the future.

### **Communication Styles**

Arabs emphasize personal relationships. Thus, personal and social issues are of primary importance in communication between individuals. An Arab will want to get to know someone as a person before engaging in business discussions. This is not always limited to simple pleasantries, but is a sincere effort to be friendly and interested.

The focus on interpersonal relations means there is often more of an emphasis on what someone wants to hear rather than on directness and honesty. Because of the nature of community life and the preponderance of interrelationships between families, there is traditionally more of an effort made to not offend another person. Another characteristic of Arabs is their tendency to be very polite. They will always treat other people, especially guests, with courteousness.

Arabs value the ability to speak eloquently. They are very expressive and place great importance on words. Observers have remarked that the manner in which a statement is made is sometimes more important than the content of one's words. Arabs use excessive hand gestures and speak loudly. They often use emotion to drive home their point. A person who is inexpressive may be seen as insincere.

Communication in the UAE is also high context, meaning a great deal of contextual information is known about the people with whom you interact and do business. It is assumed that there is a shared understanding between members of a group. Thus, there is little need to repeat information that has been built up over time.

*This article was contributed by Bob Riel, a cross-cultural writer and consultant.*