



# Middle East



## Welcome

Hospitality, as a host or a guest, is very important throughout the Middle East and a friendly and welcoming greeting is expected. Saying 'al salaam aleikum' – which literally means 'peace be with you' - is the usual form of greeting. The response is 'wa aleikum salaam' which means 'and also with you'.

**'Welcome!'**  
*Ahlan wa sahlan*  
أهلاً وسهلاً!

The usual greeting between men is a handshake with the right hand, although when meeting family and friends, members of the same sex will kiss each other on the cheeks. It is always best to follow a woman's lead when greeting her: some women will shake your hand but others will simply nod. It is important to show respect to women and be aware that men may speak on behalf of family members as a matter of honour and protection.

As a mark of respect, it is advisable to use their surname when speaking as this often refers to their ancestral village or family history. Take the time to learn to pronounce it correctly. When introduced, they will often reply using your first name and title, so that you become 'Mr. Michael' or 'Miss/Mrs./Ms. Susan'.

As temperatures can reach 50°C, people from the Middle East often travel away from home during the summer months. London is a popular destination.

## The Language

### Hello

Marhaba

مرحباً

### Goodbye

Ma'ass'salama

مع السلامة

### Please

Min fadhlik

من فضلك

### Thank you

Shukran laka (m) /

Shukran laki (f) \*

شكراً لك /

شكراً لك

\*Choose the phrase marked (m) if you are talking to a male and (f) if you are speaking to a female.

Arabic is used by over 200 million speakers across the world. It is the official language of much of the Middle East, the countries of northern Africa and the Arabian peninsula. As the religious language of Islam, it is also the second language of millions of Muslims around the world.

There are many regional dialects of Arabic in the Middle East, and French is widely spoken in the Lebanon. Arabic script is written and read right to left, so bear in mind that it may take extra time for people to absorb information written in English.

Most men and younger women speak and understand English well, but pronunciation may sometimes be difficult to follow. If you do not understand, it is more polite to say 'Sorry, I didn't hear you' than 'Can you say that more slowly or clearly?'



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## The Culture

The majority of countries in the Middle East are Arabic-speaking and share the same official religion, Islam. It is impossible to understand the Middle East without understanding a little about Islam. If Muslims do not have the chance to attend a mosque they may request a quiet, private place to pray in, and remember that Friday is their holy day.

Muslim men and women are expected to be polite and modest, especially in the way they dress. Though women wear '*Hijab*', which means modest dress, this does not mean that they must wear a veil, called '*abaya*', or a headscarf, though many choose to do so.

Although men may speak on behalf of women and other family members, decisions about sightseeing and restaurants, for example, take account of the needs of the whole family.

### 5 Pillars of Islam

- **Shahada** – profession of faith
- **Salat** – prayer 5 times per day
- **Zakat** – giving alms
- **Sawm** – fasting during Ramadan
- **Hajj** – pilgrimage to Mecca

## Customer Service Advice

A high standard of customer service is expected. If the reality falls short, there may be a quick reaction, which can seem dismissive and cause misunderstandings. Simply remain patient and work to resolve the situation.

People throughout the Middle East are good at negotiating, and will often ask for a discount for the slightest imperfection. Quality is important, as are prestigious brands.

- **DO** give and take things with your right hand as the left hand is considered unclean.
- **DO** expect Arab families to spend all evening at a restaurant, very small children included.
- **DO** find out if it is '*Ramadan*', when adult Muslims have to fast, with no food or water, from sunrise to sunset.
- **DO** make it possible for food to be shared among everyone at the table as this is the tradition in the Middle East. A little food is left on each plate when finished.
- **DO** remember that Muslims do not drink alcohol or eat pork.
- **DO** be prepared to explain the smoking ban, as smoking is very common and not restricted in the Middle East.



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## The Arabian Peninsula

The Middle East is traditionally defined from Egypt in the West to the Arabian (Persian) Gulf in the East. 65% of the world's oil is found in this region.

Although many people think of the Middle East as a single region, each country is different. Their cultures and history vary considerably, so it is worth spending time learning about each one.

Many people in the Middle East have adapted from an existence as desert settlers to life in very modern cities in little more than a generation, yet have retained their own traditions and royal families.

### Key Facts

- **Countries** – Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, Yemen
- **Population** – approx 200,000,000
- **Religions** – Muslims 90%, Christians 5% (40% in Lebanon)



## Where to go next

For more information about welcoming international visitors to London, visit [www.rln-london.com/welcoming](http://www.rln-london.com/welcoming)

RLN London's *Service Finder* can help you find language and cultural services – including translation, detailed cultural briefing and language training. [www.rln-london.com/servicefinder](http://www.rln-london.com/servicefinder)

*'Welcoming the World' is an initiative which aims to help people in frontline roles to give great customer service to international visitors. RLN London has endeavoured to ensure the accuracy of the information contained within this country profile, which is one of a wider series. However, views or opinions presented by the contributing author do not necessarily represent those of RLN London.*

### Remember!

These are general guidelines on how people from different cultures *might* act and the customer service they *might* expect. They can't predict every individual's behaviour in every situation.