

Cultural Issues for Syrians and Iraqis:

The following is generally true for both Iraqis and Syrians and for the most part apply to Christians coming from those regions: I will highlight the differences among Christians. I understand that many of these customs must be modified as they adapt to life in the West! I mention these not necessarily with approval, but to understand their background. I have gleaned the below from different sources (on and off the web) and I have added my own observations and insights.

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The Greetings:

- **Men greeting Men** – The most common greeting is a handshake and kisses on each cheek is common in most situations. The number of kisses may vary depending on the relationships and area of the country one is in. Two, three, or four kisses on alternating cheeks is most common.
- **Women greeting Women** – A handshake and kisses on each cheek is common in most situations.
- **Greetings between Men & Women** – Usually a handshake is acceptable, but a nod can replace that among conservative Muslims. It's best to wait for the woman to initiate if it all. ***Christian men do shake the hands of women***, but this may be done with caution because of the conditioning the Christians had under Islamic rules. Men in such cases should wait to see if a woman extends her hand.
- With that being said, some immigrants, depending on their exposure to other cultures may be awkward in greetings at the beginning as they observe the cultural norms there. Addressing proper greetings in Canada will be helpful. For example, hugging (neck hugs, full frontal hugs) between opposite sex may be confusing when it is seen in church though it is a common practice there. Appropriate times and ways to hug might be addressed as they are learning culture so as not to have misunderstandings.

Note: It is taboo for **Islamic** religiously observant men to touch women and vice-versa.

Space:

- An arm's length of personal space is common in most situations. This space may be considerably larger between members of the opposite sex.
- With business colleagues things may be a little different and depend on the nature of work. For example in the medical field colleagues of the opposite sex will get as close as it takes to handle the patient.
- Touching during a conversation is common, **but not** among people of opposite sex. *This may be less strict among Christians.*
- Touching the arms and/or shoulders during conversations is acceptable and common **between members of the same sex**. Touching of the leg is not usually acceptable. Touching between members of opposite sex in public is generally unacceptable.
- Close friends of the same gender often will walk hand in hand or arm and arm. This is the case for men and for women and is purely a sign of friendship. (It might be helpful as you orient them to life in the West, to help them know how others in public may interpret this Eastern way of friendship and allow them to decide for themselves when and where to be so free in expression)
- Putting one's arm around a person of the opposite sex and hugging them is not acceptable- even among Christians. This might change (especially for Christians) as they live in the West. (See note above)

Eye contact:

- A little eye contact is acceptable. Too much can be considered rude or even indicative of hostility.
- It's best for men to not look at women they do not know in the eyes. This is considered a kind of flirting.
- However, it is common practice for people while people watching to stare at others which in the West would be considered rude, it is not rude in the East – they may need to be made aware of this.

Gestures:

- Pointing with a single finger is usually considered rude. People usually use the whole hand to point to someone. Pointing to something with the whole hand is used for emphasis, both hands for further emphasis; often when angry. (However, when pointing to something on a paper or at a chalkboard, etc, one may use the middle finger to point with which does not mean anything here. The new immigrant may need to be told this will be offensive in Canada.)
- Putting the right hand on the chest means “thanks, but no, thanks”.
- Raising the right hand to shoulder height is a form of greeting when you pass by someone on the street or when greeting several people at the same time.
- It is not uncommon to see children kiss the hands of their grandparents or even the parents. This is not done by young children only, but by grown-ups as well. (This is a sign of respect for elders)
- Flicking the wrist with an outstretched hand usually means "What Do You Want?"
- Raised eyebrows, combined with a slight back flick of the head usually means "NO" !

Customs:

- For men in the Middle East, they try to be friendly with everyone and open up to others and do not hesitate to ask for the help of any one because they assume others will be very happy to help. Do not put yourself in a position as if you are coming to steal the girls from the other guys.
- Women, try to be as conservative and formal as possible in public places, because an open and forward attitude might be misinterpreted in their conservative and closed society.
- Respect is given to the elderly (grandparents) and women, especially those with children.
- Culturally, young men especially, may appear more physical than in the West in public. For example, in playing around they may hit each other in the head in a slapping way or “horse around” in a play fighting way.
- Doing things together in a group or as a family is highly valued – why would anyone want to be alone?

- Bringing gifts to a host when invited for a visit is a normal practice – they will need to be told that Canadians probably will not do this and to not be offended It just isn't done often.

Taboos:

- Sitting cross-legged with your shoe /foot in the direction of someone's face is considered rude. Middle Easterners don't point the toe or heel or any part of the foot at any person. They also do not use the foot or the sole to move anything as it is viewed as the lowliest part of the body. (They may need to be told that as most in Canada will not know this is offensive, they will need to practice grace as people will not be attempting to be rude but rather relaxed in their way of sitting.)
- ***Christians will not sit cross legged in church, nor will they put their Bibles on the floor. As this shows disrespect to the word of God.***
- ***Most Christians who come from a traditional background are unaccustomed to see dancing in church or raising and clapping the hands. Many will raise their hands with their palms upwards when reciting the Lord's Prayer.***
- ***Many Christian women will still wear a head scarf during the church services.***
- Kissing (between husband/wife or boyfriend/girlfriend) and showing affection in public is frowned upon. But men kissing men, and women kissing women each other on the cheek in public is considered normal, and has no sexual connotations.
- Shorts are unacceptable for men other than when exercising. For women, sleeveless or see-through clothing is unacceptable.

Communication:

- People usually take the long route in communication. The indirect approach is more common. They do not usually call a spade a spade!
- People are mostly complimentary, as saying things directly and straight forward might be considered rude sometimes.
- The communication style is usually indirect, especially when not conversing with close friends and family.

- It is common to hear people speaking in loud voices and becoming animated during conversations. This usually does not signify anger; people just tend to be expressive.
- When offering your hospitality (tea, coffee, or food) it's not uncommon for an Iraqi or Syrian to refuse. **It is considered rude to accept from the first offer.** Most expect you to "insist" at least 3 times!! With time they will learn to express their true intent sooner! (This was emphasized in orientation here to be more direct and straightforward as people will be in Canada, however, it will go against their culture and upbringing to do so.)
- The need to save face and protect honor is great among all Middle Easterners. So resorting to lying is not uncommon. In fact, sexual sins are considered much greater offenses than lying.
- People will withhold information, only telling what is required if they feel it is needed for whatever reason. Leaving out info or saying things in a certain way to imply something is not considered lying and this normal way of communicating may lead to misunderstandings in Canada.
- If you want to show a commitment to something but do not want to make caste iron assurances Middle Easterners may employ terms such as "I will do my best," "We will see," or the local term "insha-Allah" (God willing).
- ***The term Allah is used liberally. Many phrases contain it in Arabic. It is used by both Christians and Muslims to refer to the deity. It's the word used for God in the Arabic Bible. (Many when learning English will translate directly and hearing phrases like "thanks God" or "oh, my God" are used often. If this would be considered offensive they will need to be instructed.)***
- Asking blunt and probing questions are not uncommon. It is not uncommon for them to ask one's age, or how much money one makes.

Dating and Gender issues:

- Due to cultural restrictions, dating is largely nonexistent. If a couple is on a date (which is risky unless they are engaged) it would be something very simple, like a walk in a quiet area, coffee in a place close to campus, and it has to be in daytime.
- Dating in a universal sense dose not exists *although this has changed in recent years* but it depends whether the couple comes from urban or rural areas. It is mostly that men approach women and tell them that they like them and ask if

it is okay if they hang out together. Men are the ones that take the initiative and it is very rare that a woman would approach a man.

- Gender issues tend to vary from one city to another due to different traditions and the level of adherence traditions. In urban areas in general, women can be anything; teachers, lawyers, doctors, athletes, (singing, dancing, acting are a little less acceptable).
- One unacceptable role is to have a woman drive a taxi/bus.
- Women smoking publicly, is frowned upon.

Time:

- People don't care much about being on time; after all it can be quite difficult to be on time in a war zone where curfews and violent incidents occasionally block traffic.
- It is fine to be late a few minutes but should not exceed half an hour if possible. This could and should change as they become accustomed to their new home country. (The importance of time to Canadians will need to be emphasized.)
- Buses trains and even flights are never on time in the Middle East (that is when they are functioning).
- People are mostly generous with their time. It is not uncommon for Syrians and Iraqis to stay up late (after 12 midnight) eating or watching TV! To compensate for lost sleep, they might like an afternoon nap/ siesta. However, they will learn quickly that life is different in the West!
- Bed time for children is not a high priority as in the West and children are often up very late with the family.

Food

- Most of Middle Easterners' life revolves around food.
- The traditional Middle Eastern diet includes rice with soup or sauce, accompanied by lamb and vegetables. Lamb is the main meat for both Iraqis and Syrians. Beef is also consumed when available. Iraqis have more fish available to them from the Euphrates or the Tigris River. Syrians living in the coastal areas of the Mediterranean do eat fish as well.
- Wheat is the main crop and one of the staple foods. Vegetables, fruits, and dairy products also are eaten.

- The following foods are consumed by Middle Easterners: roast or grilled chicken or lamb with side dishes of rice, chickpeas, yogurt, and vegetables. A *mezze* is a midday meal composed of up to twenty or thirty small dishes. These dishes can include *hummous*, a puree of chickpeas and *tahini* (ground sesame paste); *baba ganouj*, an eggplant puree; meat rissoles; stuffed grape leaves; *tabouleh* (a salad of cracked wheat and vegetables); *falafel* (deep-fried balls of mashed chickpeas); and pita bread. Olives, lemon, parsley, onion, and garlic are used for flavoring. Popular fruits that are grown in the region include dates, figs, plums, and watermelons.
- Tea is the ubiquitous drink and is often consumed at social gatherings. Soda is also very popular, as is milk and a drink made by mixing yogurt with water, salt, and garlic.
- Muslims do not eat pork. ***Christians can eat pork. But because of the non-availability or the taboo attached to pork in Muslim society many Christians are not used to eating pork and will not have a taste for it.***
- In rural areas it is customary for families to eat together out of a common bowl, while in urban areas individuals eat with plates and utensils.
- Food customs at ceremonial occasions: It is traditional to sacrifice a lamb or a goat to celebrate holidays. However, today few Iraqis or Syrians have the means to do this, and celebrations are now minimal.
- Hospitality is Middle Eastern tradition is deeply engrained in the culture. They like to invite people to their homes. Visitors are treated as kings and must always be fed and looked after. Invitations to a home must be seen as a great honor and rarely turned down. The main entertainment for Middle Easterners is around food in their homes.
- Muslims and many Christians (by cultural exposure) use the right hand for eating and drinking.
- It is considered polite to leave some food on one's plate when you have finished eating. Many consider it rude to eat everything off the plate!

Grief Customs

- When someone dies in the Middle East they are usually buried within 24-36 hours. Followed by 3 days of mourning where family and friends sit together and share a big lunch each day (provided by more distant relatives, the church, etc) so that no one is alone in their grief. (Practices may need to be adjusted if

someone loses a loved one. Even if they cannot go back for the funeral, a time of receiving guests for condolences should be provided to meet their emotional needs.)

- Flowers are not a part of the grief custom as they are for happy occasions. Food is helpful but not sweets. Presence is the key.