

# Arab Culture - At a Glance

Common cultural norms, values, and traits of the Arabic population.



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## Quick Facts

- The term Arab is associated with a particular region of the world.
- Any person who adopts the Arabic language is typically considered Arab.
- There are 22 Arab countries/areas: Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.
- Iran and Turkey are not Arab countries. Not all Arabs are Muslims, nor are all Muslims are Arab.

## Gender

- The society is Patriarchal and hierarchal: Fathers/elders dominate.
- Not all women are oppressed by men, this is a negative stereotype.
- Men stand when women enter a room.
- Women wear headscarves as a show of respect, even if wearing Western clothing.
- It's customary to not stand close to, stare at, or touch a woman.
- It's customary to not ask men questions about his wife or other female members of his family.

## Religion

- The Arab world includes Muslims, Christians and Jews.
- Arabic is the official and the original language of the Qur'an, the Islamic holy book.
- Arabs are religiously diverse group – significant numbers of Arab Christians .
- Religion often play a role in politics
- Followers of Islam are called Muslims.

## Traditional Beliefs on Health & Medicine

- Personal hygiene is extremely important to Arabs for both spiritual and practical reasons.
- Meals are frequently eaten by hand. It is typical to wash the hands before and after eating.
- Formal washing of face, hands, and forearm required before daily prayers or fasting.
- It is considered bad manners to eat, drink, or smoke in front of someone fasting.

## Communication Styles

- Admitting, "I don't know" is distasteful to Arabs.
- Constructive criticism can be taken as an insult. Be careful not to insult.
- Body Language takes on extra significance in Arab culture.
- When speaking with Arabs keep in mind that they believe that words have power.

## Personal Space & Social Gestures

- Most Arabs do not share the American concept of "personal space" in public situations, and in private meetings or conversations.
- It is considered offensive to step or lean away. Women are an exception to this rule.
- When conducting business, it is customary to first shake the hand of all males present, taking care not to grip too firmly.
- It is important to first establish respect and trust.

## Familial Structure

- The family is the key social unit to an Arab. They honor and respect their family.
- Friendships are highly valued.
- Clan and then tribe in terms of loyalty follow family as a social unit, although most contemporary Arabs express a national identity as well.

## About ECHO

The mission of ECHO is to leverage partnerships to deliver vital health, safety, emergency and civic engagement information to help the ever-changing, diverse population integrate and become successful in our communities.

The above information was provided by the following organizations and individuals: the Confederation of Somali Community in Minnesota, and Stratis Health [www.stratishealth.org](http://www.stratishealth.org). This information sheet is not intended to be an exhaustive approach or complete representation of the Somali culture, but rather a basic introduction and foundation.



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