

**A SENIOR OFFICER'S GUIDE TO
ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING A COUNTERPART WORKING RELATIONSHIP
IN SAUDI ARABIA**

**PRODUCED BY THE
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PURPOSE

The purpose in creating this brief document is to assist senior U.S. officers in establishing, and then expanding, their professional/personal relationships with high ranking Saudi military and civil officials. It is, essentially, a guide to help you in dealing with our Saudi Arabian allies. The information presented is not intended to be a definitive or exhaustive treatment of Saudi culture, religion, or society; nor is this document intended for use by all soldiers. It is instead focused narrowly at the potential needs of the senior officer who is required by position to interface directly with high ranking Saudi Arabian military and civil personnel.

BACKGROUND

It is hardly an overstatement to say that American and Saudi cultures are very different. The differences are so stark in fact, that at times, we may seem incomprehensible to one another. The American officer must learn to adapt to Saudi thinking and behavior in order to work together toward common goals. This requires interpersonal skills not normally taught to senior officers who are judged on their achievement of results. The "bottom line" mentality of most American officers may be considered offensive to many Saudis. Western linear logic does not fit well into a society where prayer is done 5 times a day, and where family needs and friendships can be considered more important than the American notion of "business". Because of the American predilection for "getting down to brass tacks", many Saudis think us rude and impolite. To Saudis, getting to know you, and reaffirming a friendship regularly through conversation, and by keeping company with one another, is a necessary and pleasant prerequisite of doing business. To many American Officers it appears to be a waste of time - to Saudis it is a minimum of courtesy.

Do not make the error of assuming that because the society is incomprehensible to you, that because it doesn't conform to what you have come to expect from your own society, that it must therefore be irrational. Arab civilization has existed for centuries. They have dealt with many of the same issues and problems that we face in our own society. The solutions they have found may not be the same that we have arrived at in our own society, but for them their solutions have worked. Even if you believe that their solutions might not always be the best solutions, try to understand why they behave the way they do and

the result will be a more rewarding and productive relationship.

Though it is not mandatory, it would be simple good manners to learn simple greetings and phrases in Arabic. Nothing pleases a people more than an attempt by a foreigner to speak their native tongue. The Saudis you will be dealing with know that their's is a difficult language for Americans. They will appreciate your efforts all the more because of this.

HISTORY

The Arabian Peninsula has been inhabited for thousands of years. Approximately one third the land mass of the continental United States, it existed on the periphery of the great ancient empires of Mesopotamia to the north and Egypt to the west. Arabia gained importance because of its location on the trade routes between India, East Africa, and the Mediterranean. Modern Saudis dismiss the period prior to Islam as the "Age of Ignorance" and date their tradition back to the Prophet Mohamad who established the religion of Islam in the 7th century AD. In the century between the death of Mohamad in 632 AD and the battle of Tours in 732 AD, Islam expanded to encompass a vast empire extending from Persia all the way to the Atlantic. The Muslim empire was short lived, succumbing to internal divisions and factionalism, but the religion of Islam survives as the dominant religion in the Middle East and North Africa.

The modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia traces its origins to the rulers of a small emirate north of Riyadh in the early seventeenth century. Saud ibn Muhamad, the nominal founder of the family became ruler shortly before 1720. Under Saud's son Mohamad, the family became associated with the religious scholar Mohamad ibn al Wahab who preached a stricter and more fundamentalist interpretation of Islam which was to give the family its ideological foundation. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were periods of struggle during which the Saudi family gained and lost large areas of Arabia. It was King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud who established the modern Saudi state, recapturing Riyadh in 1902 and the Red Sea coastal area in the 1920s. In 1932 he proclaimed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Oil was discovered in the Eastern Province in the late 1930s, setting the stage for modernization and economic development in the post World War II era. Oil brought sudden wealth to a nation which had known only relative poverty for millenia. The 1970s and 1980s were a time of massive development projects, creating a modern infrastructure with some of the most advanced facilities in the world. At the same time the sudden

wealth has created stress as a society, many members of which were literally born in tents, is confronted with the unfamiliar culture of the West.

RELIGION

Saudi Arabia is a country with a strong religious tradition. Islam was founded in Arabia and the country is host to the annual pilgrimage of Muslim believers to the Muslim holy shrines. The modern state of Saudi Arabia was founded on religion and its sense of legitimacy comes from its role as protector of the faith. There is no division between church and state as in our western tradition. To the Saudi, religion and government are considered identical and synonymous. Mohamad, God's messenger on earth, wrote the Koran. The Koran provides to believers the "word of God", which guides the Moslem in all things personal, professional, political, as well as religious. Because it is the literal "word of God" it must be obeyed by all believers. It is a holistic philosophy for living one's life on earth through justice and mercy.

Devout Muslims are responsible for performing the 5 pillars of Islam: (1) SHAHADAH - the profession of faith that, "there is no God but Allah and Mohamad is his prophet", (by the way, Allah is the same God revered by Jews and Christians). (2) SALAT - the prayer which the Muslim must perform 5 times a day. (3) ZAKAT - a system of alms-giving which in Saudi Arabia is treated similar to a tax. (4) SAWM - the Moslem must fast in daylight hours during the holy month of Ramadan. (5) HADJ - if possible, the believer must make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his lifetime.

The well known Islamic system of justice (Sharia), which sometimes beheads serious criminals, is considered offensive to American sensibilities. But remember, it is also possible to walk through Saudi streets at any time of day or night and not fear a mugging. Saudi justice is swift and permanent - and Saudi crime statistics are among the world's lowest. Despite your personal feelings concerning Saudi justice - it seems to work quite well.

The Islamic Police (Mutawwa) are responsible for ensuring appropriate dress and behavior in public. They are sanctioned by Royal decree. Mutawwa wear traditional Saudi dress, are normally bearded, and carry a large stick which is treated like a badge of office, as well as something with which to "correct" those who engage in offensive public behavior. This may be difficult for us to understand or appreciate, but it is their way of life and is deserving of our respect and tolerance.

Islam is the only religion permitted in Saudi Arabia. Because religion and government are considered identical, teaching against the religion of Islam in Saudi Arabia is considered subversion. For most Saudis, Islam is the only religion they have ever known and is in their eyes the only possible religion for a rational human being. When they make your acquaintance they may feel an obligation to convert you to their point of view, thinking that your unfamiliarity with the religion is the only reason you have not adopted it. It is best not to argue religion with a Saudi as this is unproductive and could lead to needless animosity. Instead it is best to stress the shared values between Islam and our western traditions.

As in western religions, there are those who are more, or less, faithful than others. There are true believers and there are those who merely go through the motions. Behavior of individual Saudis which appears to be in conflict with the teachings of Islam should not detract from the significance of the religion in the lives of the vast majority of Saudis.

POLITICS

The Saudi government is rooted in ancient bedouin traditions, even as it adopts modern methods of administration. The king is chosen by decision of the ruling family, that is the descendants of King Abdul Aziz who conquered the area early in this century. The King is nominally an absolute ruler, but he does have a number of constraints on his power. The kingdom is a consensual monarchy, meaning that the ruler must serve the best interests of his people. It is a kind of compact between the King and his subjects. This is how the Emirs and Sheiks of old Arabia held sway. It is still possible today because of Saudi Arabia's enormous oil wealth. Essentially, there is enough money to provide employment and social services to all Saudi citizens. Distribution of the oil wealth to all of the population serves as an effective brake on whatever social discontent might exist.

The King is aided in his duties through numerous family relationships (Saudi Arabia's 5,000 princes). Royalty is spread throughout the Kingdom and can be found in most key governmental positions, to include the military.

In order to modernize the country the King has sent an extraordinary number of his countrymen overseas to become educated in the uses of Western technology. He has also hired a large number of foreign experts. This has made possible rapid

development but at the same time has caused social conflict as the western educated technicians have introduced new western ideas, often in conflict with the conservative traditionalists.

The government bases its legitimacy on its role as guardian of the Islamic traditions. In Saudi Arabia the legal basis of government is the Islamic religion. The Koran is the functional equivalent of a constitution, and the religious leadership acts as a sort of judiciary, ruling on the legitimacy of government actions and decisions. This makes it imperative that the king not do anything to offend the sensibilities of the religious elite, and necessitates a strong government stand against western cultural penetration. Possibly the most meaningful touchstone of Monarchical legitimacy is the fact that the king is the "Protector" of the holy shrines of Islam located in the western Saudi cities of Mecca and Medina. Every year, millions of Muslims from all over the world visit the city of Mecca to perform the Hajj, the religious pilgrimage which is the duty of all Muslims.

THE ORIENTAL - OCCIDENTAL DICHOTOMY

Arabs have a deep sense of their rich cultural heritage. The Middle East is the birthplace of three of the world's great religions,. This has provided a value system which has served as a guide for the world. Medieval Arab scholars achieved world renown in the fields of science, mathematics, and literature. At the same time, Arabs are painfully aware of their long history of domination by foreign powers stronger and more capable than themselves.

The Middle East sits upon one of the major crossroads of the world. The Persians, Greeks, Romans, Ottomans, British, and to a lesser degree French, all ruled over portions of the Middle East at different historical times. Other than during the time of the Arab Renaissance and the rise of Islam, the Arab world has been occupied or dominated by foreign military powers, often with alien cultural values.

This has led to a deep sense of frustration. How is it that the West has come to dominate the Middle East? To the Arabs it is not conceivable that this could come about from some failing in their own society since it is so clearly superior to that of the West. Instead, theories of evil foreign conspiracies to thwart Arab aspirations in order to dominate and exploit them have become widely popular.

Saudis both admire and fear American military and economic power. To grow stronger, the Arabs must draw on the West for technological assistance, painfully acknowledging their own inferior position. At the same time they reject the cultural values of the society which created the technology which they covet. They are appalled by our western culture of crime, drugs, and licentious living, but at the same time, to many Saudis our culture of apparently easy sex, pleasure oriented activities, and materialism is extremely seductive. Much of this is counter to the dictates of Islam which places a high value on modesty, family, and selflessness.

This brings us to the root of our cultural differences. American/Western society places a premium on the importance of the individual. Individual rights are the bedrock of our Constitution and Bill of Rights. Societal and family responsibilities are generally accorded less worth in the American context. The reverse is true in Saudi Arabia; as in most of the remainder of the Oriental World. Arab Moslem society, or Umma (believers), place a premium on the predominance of the importance of the family, and by extension, the society as a whole. This difference in cultures is both stark and fundamental. What this means for you is if you are working a "hot action" for the Commanding General, and it involves coordination with the Saudis, a pressing Saudi family matter is likely to be more important than our General. The General might have to wait. None of us want to tell our boss that it can't be done "now"! But, the needs of one's family in Saudi Arabia is just that important.

Sex and Saudi Sensibilities

Saudis, and Arabs in general, have a completely different view of all matters sexual. Do not make value judgments. Their sexual norms need not be considered either better or worse than our's - they are just different. You need to have some understanding of the inherent value of the Saudi system. After all, it has worked here for over a millennia. The Arab view of women is one of "protected status". Women are very special and respected under Saudi law; but their status is different from what you and I might consider to be correct.

Leave your personal values behind. From an American's perspective, you are now living and working in the single most sexually repressed society in the world. This is a particular problem for our female soldiers. Although we are accustomed (now) to treating female soldiers on an equal footing with males - it is not the case in Saudi Arabia. Our very presence

threatens Saudis at multiple levels. Everything about us is foreign to them. At different times they might be curious, amazed, excited, and appalled by our sexual freedoms.

An excellent case can be made that the greatest difference between our two cultures can be found in our sexual relationships. Saudis who have been educated, and have travelled in America and Europe, like many senior Saudi military and civil leaders have, know us much better than we know them. The bottom line is this - we won't change them. Since we are currently living in their country, we must adjust to their ways and not the other way around. Your female soldiers have to be taught not to insult our hosts by dressing inappropriately, or by going about alone. A woman travelling alone, in this part of the world, is begging for trouble. The common American female response, that: "I can take care of myself", is dead wrong here. It may be that these females can take care of themselves in Western settings; but it is a wrong-headed attitude in Saudi Arabia that can cost dearly. Although your female soldiers might not like it, protect them from themselves. Personally insure that they abide by all the rules of behavior and dress laid down by the Command.

In conservative Saudi society, sex is part of marriage - not to be practiced elsewhere. That means that unmarried Saudi males are often looking for a sexual outlet. For a male of any nationality, including a Saudi, to even speak to a Saudi female outside his family, is a gross violation of social custom. American women, who are generally believed to be immoral, will be a constant source of sexual excitement to Saudi males. Should an American female soldier demonstrate even a passing friendly interest in a Saudi male, it could easily be construed as a sexual advance. The Saudi male will likely not understand a refusal to follow through subsequently, and he will be angered. The best advice for American females in Saudi Arabia is to be polite and respectful, and that is all. A simple smile can easily be misinterpreted as a sexual come-on.

CUSTOMS AND PERSONAL TIPS

Doing business in the Middle East depends to a large degree on developing close personal relationships. All business dealings are preceded by long conversations on any number of seemingly unrelated subjects. To many this would seem to contradict the Western adage 'Time is Money'. We are accustomed to hustling to nail down agreements on potential deals in the shortest time possible in order to be able to rush onward to pursue other deals elsewhere. Not so in Saudi Arabia. To a Saudi, conversation is

important. Just as important as the terms of the deal is the question of who you are dealing with. It is important that he be dealing with a reputable trustworthy individual. It is during the seemingly unrelated conversation preceding business that he is offering himself for your examination while at the same time taking you measure as a potential partner. The Arab wants to know what sort of a person you are. For instance: Are your family relationships important to you? (Show him pictures of your children.); Do you have a strong religious faith? (Islam is preferred but Christianity and Judaism are respected if you have strong convictions.) Do you respect Saudis? (Never patronize.) Are you enjoying your stay in Saudi Arabia? (Find something nice to say.) You are being judged, not as a soldier, but as a human being. If you fail this judgment, then be prepared for disappointment in later dealings. It is not unusual for most of the time in a meeting to be absorbed by this "small talk". In an hour long meeting, the real "meat" will often not be discussed until the last 15 minutes. Be patient! Try and enjoy yourself. If you gain their respect, then cooperation can be expected.

When entering a Saudi office, shake hands with everyone present. Also shake hands when leaving. Grasp the Saudi's hand firmly and hold the hand a bit longer than you might normally. For added emphasis you may place your other hand over his during the handshake. Look into the Saudi's eyes when you do this. It is rude to look away or converse with anybody else while doing this. Greetings are exchanged during the hand clasp. Try and learn some of the basic Arabic greetings. If you speak no Arabic, greet the Saudi as you would a good friend back in the United States - "SMILE". A smile is universal. A stoic look, considered in America to be soldierly and business-like, will only spoil any chances you might have had to do business.

You will note that personal space in Saudi Arabia is not what you are accustomed to. Saudis will have a tendency to get very close to you when conducting a friendly conversation. Get used to it if you hope to be successful in establishing a real relationship with your counterpart. If you back up, don't be surprised if the Saudi you are conversing with attempts to close the gap again and again. Eye contact while in conversation with Saudis is especially important. While conversing, many Americans look over people's heads, look around the room or at the floor while speaking. A Saudi might judge you insincere, rude, or mindless if you were to do this. You need not stare; but be aware that eye contact during speech is a necessary part of building a bridge between our two cultures.

Hospitality is legend throughout the Arab Middle East. It is a custom to offer refreshment at time of meetings. Normally this amounts to tea or coffee served in small cups. It is rude to refuse refreshment, but it is also rude to be gluttonous; 3 cups is an appropriate compromise. Take it and drink it, whether

you like the taste or not. You may be surprised - Saudi tea is quite good. Be sure to compliment your host on the quality of the tea or coffee. It is, after all, only good manners. You may also be offered small cakes or dates. Accept, and eat a few; these items haven't killed an American soldier yet. Also, when you have the opportunity to host Saudis, ensure that you reciprocate in kind. Make sure that you have coffee or tea available, and remember to offer it. Take the extra time and effort to be especially hospitable. It will make a difference. When serving food to Saudis, always remember the Muslim prohibition on consumption of pork products. If you should be so fortunate to be invited to a Saudi traditional dinner (where you eat with your hands) - use only your right hand to eat. The left hand in the Saudi context is used for matters of personal hygiene.

Few things are more important to Saudi males than personal honor, or face. Never do anything that might put your counterpart in a bad light publicly, or privately. Criticizing a Saudi in public would be humiliating to him. This is sometimes done in our Army. It is anathema here. NEVER criticize! To embarrass a Saudi will likely end what ever chance there might have been for a positive relationship, and in fact might make you an enemy. Criticism should be in the form of a positive suggestion given privately.

Conversely, a Saudi will try to assuage your feelings, even at the cost of misunderstanding, by withholding or minimizing the significance of bad news. He will try to be agreeable to any suggestion, even if he knows it to be impossible. In Saudi Arabia it is very bad manners to directly say no to any request. Be aware that there are endless number of ways for a Saudi to say no, even while nodding his head in the affirmative. Knowing what is truly meant comes with the building of a relationship. The better you get to know your counterpart, the better you will know what is truly meant, and therefore what is really possible.

An essential part of establishing a relationship with a Saudi is the giving of gifts. This is an ancient tradition and sign of Saudi trust, respect, and friendship. Do not admire any of a Saudi's possessions or he may feel obligated to give it to you. If you are given a gift, accept it despite regulations to the contrary. To refuse would be considered bad manners. Remember, you can always turn the gift over to the the Judge Advocate General's Office. Gift giving is often reciprocal. This is not a requirement, but it will help relations to develop more smoothly. Even more important are acts of assistance you might perform that demonstrate your personal concern for the needs and welfare of your Saudi counterparts.

Your Counterpart

The chances are good that your counterpart speaks English. A significant number of Saudi Air Force pilots and Army Officers have received both their civil education and military training in the West; in many cases in the U.S. They are intelligent, well educated, and sophisticated. Don't make the assumption that they don't know us or our ways.

You can expect that many senior Saudi military and civil officials will understand something of your problems and be aware of the differences between our two cultures. Despite their knowledge and understanding of us and our ways, do not expect them to make major adjustments to accomodate us. There is only so much they can do.

Both military and civil power is very diffused throughout the country of Saudi Arabia. And because this is a consensual monarchy, even small decisions may sometimes require a great deal of discussion with more senior officers. Immediate answers are often hard to come by. Be patient and tell your boss to be patient; "we aren't in Kansas anymore". Be tolerant and civil at all times, and no matter what the provocation, never get angry. There is a compromise. You just have to work a little harder to find it.

CONCLUSION

In many ways the Saudi Moslem life style possesses much to admire. Their devotion to family and friends is especially noteworthy. Their religion has much in common with Christianity and Judaism. Theirs is a way of life that has worked for them for centuries. Use this opportunity to learn and enjoy a way of life which may be foreign; but founded upon principles not really so different from our's. Lastly, it should be clear that successful mission accomplishment may well hinge upon our ability to make and keep Saudi friends.

Now that the war is over there is a danger of complacency on our part. The attitude that "we saved the Saudi's bacon" is prevalent in the command. What we did we did for reasons of State; that obtained results that were in our's, as well as Saudi Arabia's best interests. We are allies and we are invited guests. It would behoove us to act accordingly.