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ARABIC CULTURE - INFORMATION SHEET

BACKGROUND

The Arab world means those countries where the Arabic language is the dominant language and where the Arabic culture is practised regardless of religion, colour or ethnicity. They are: Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somali, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Emirates and Yemen.

THE ARAB PEOPLE

The most populous Arab nation is Egypt. There are over 200 million Arabs worldwide. To be referred to as an Arab does not denote a particular race or lineage; on the contrary it is a cultural trait not a racial one. Arabs are those people who speak Arabic and practise Arabic culture.

LANGUAGE

Arabic is the official language and original language of the Quor'an, the holy book of Islam.

RELIGION

Not all Arabs are Muslims; some are Christians and Jews. Any person who speaks the Arabic language is said to be an Arab. Not all Muslims are Arabs either, in fact only 12% of the world's Muslims are Arabs.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

Arabs see the family as key to their social life. Respect for family is paramount. The authority figure and decision-maker is the father and, in many instances, male children are favoured. This is because daughters go to live with the in-laws when they marry and sons look after the elderly. The family structure in the Arab world is much more rigid and highly emphasised in comparison to the West. There are several types of family units in the Arab Middle East.

- The nuclear unit, consisting of the father, mother, and children. This type of unit is more common with western type Arabs.
- The aila is the extended or the joint family. It consists of father, mother, unwed children, as well as wedded sons and their wives and children, unwed paternal aunts, and, sometimes, unwed paternal uncles. It is largely composed of blood relatives plus women who were brought into the kinship through marriage. This unit is an economic one as well as a social unit and is governed by the grandfather or eldest male.
- The hammula, or clan consists of all individuals who claim descent from the same paternal ancestor. The Arab village community is normally composed of three or four such hammula units, which may be called the qabila, and each of these units of hammulas are composed of several joint families.

CHILDREARING PRACTICES: In traditional Arab society, Christians prefer to give their children a biblical name, followed by the father's first name, then by the family name. Muslims commonly use the names of Mohammed and others in his family, as well as "servant of God" names (Abdul-Rahman "servant of the compassionate", Abdul-Aziz "servant of the beloved"). Names may also carry secular meaning (Hassan "good" or Laila "night"). Ibn/bin or bint means son or daughter of, respectively, and may follow the middle name. Last names may denote a person's profession or the city of origin. The individual Arab identity is viewed as less important than the identity defined by the extended family affiliation. Loyalty to the family is paramount. When a child is born the parents thereafter become known as father of----- or mother of-----.

SOCIAL ETIQUETTE: Men shake hands and only with the right hand. Muslims place their hand on their heart and bow slightly as a sign of respect. It is normal for men to hold hands and hug each other. There is no physical contact between the sexes in public. Personal space is different and conversations take place 'closer' than in the western world.

CLOTHING: *MEN:* Arab men wear clothing ranging from traditional flowing robes to jeans and T-shirts. Some Arab men will also wear a headdress that could signify the country they are from. For example red and white checked headdress is usually worn by Jordanians who have made Hajj, black and white checked headdress could indicate the wearer is Palestinian. *WOMEN:* Compliance with wearing traditional dress for women varies from country to country. Women from Saudi Arabia are more traditional. The traditional dress called either a abayah, a jilbob or a chador, coupled with the veil is worn out of a need to maintain modesty.

CUISINE

Arab Muslims do not eat pork, unscaled fish and they do not consume alcohol. Meat must be killed in an appropriate way, called Hallal (permitted). Many Arabs will eat using their hands, and if they do so they will only use their right hand. When offering food, drink or passing anything, the right hand should be used. It is acceptable to leave food on the plate, in fact it is considered a compliment as it indicated a sign of wealth.

References:

Arab Cultural Awareness: fact sheet, TRADOC DSCINT Handbook No 2, Jan 06
http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/cultural/oldworld/middle_east/arabculture.ht
Guidebook to understanding Arab culture: Omar Alomari