

## Islam - Body language basics



There are some very specific body language conventions and matters of basic etiquette that most Arabs will recognise but do not share with others. In practice many Arabs, especially in the Gulf, will understand that expats and other non-Arabs do not always appreciate the nuances; but at the very least it is polite to be aware of them.

1. It's normal to shake hands for longer than Westerners would, and with less pressure than you might expect from a Westerner. Touching the elbow while shaking hands is quite common. In social situations, one should greet the party in rough order of seniority. Do not attempt to shake hands with an Arab woman unless she initiates the handshake, do not try and engage a woman in conversation unless you have been formally introduced and do not stare at women or maintain eye contact except in a business situation. It is not considered polite to ask an Arab man questions about his wife or other female members of his family).
2. Eye contact during discussions – often long and direct – is important. Lack of eye contact indicates that other person is unimportant or insignificant. Indeed, staring is not necessarily rude – unless you're looking at Arab women, which is offensive.
3. Same-gender body contact is more common among Arabs (especially men) than Westerners. On meeting, good friends may hug each other, touch noses, or kiss the cheek. This would signify close friendship and should only be initiated by an Arab.
4. Contact with the opposite gender in public is regarded as virtually obscene by many Arabs, though they may tolerate it in Westernised environments such as the malls.
5. Arabs generally believe that words have power, and accordingly will choose their words with care. For instance, they feel that negative speech compels negative results and so may avoid speaking about unpleasantness. One effect is that euphemisms might be used when discussing someone's plight – a mutual acquaintance who is seriously ill might be described "well but a little tired".
6. In general, the left hand is considered unclean and should never be used. In particular, when eating, drinking, offering something, accepting something or passing something to an Arab companion, use the right hand only.
7. The gesture of placing the right hand or the right forefinger on the tip of the nose, on the right lower eyelid, on top of the head, or on the moustache or beard has the meaning of "it's in front of me, I see it", "it's in my head, I understand it, I have to do attend to it" or simply "it's my obligation".
8. Holding the hand in a slightly cupped fashion at about waist level with the fingertips pointing upwards and moving the hand slightly up and down indicates "wait a bit", "slow down" or "be careful". It may be accompanied by curses from a taxi driver or someone trying to cross a street.
9. Placing the palm of the right hand on the chest, bowing the head a little and closing one's eyes means "thank you" (specifically, "thanks in the name of Allah").
10. A quick snap of the head upwards accompanied by a click of the tongue signifies "no", "unlikely", or possibly "what you say is inaccurate, false or a lie".
11. The A-OK sign beloved of Americans – right forefinger touching the thumb – is the sign of the evil eye. Arab gestures of this type have varying degrees of intensity depending on the circumstances and locale, and should probably not be used by the average Westerner.
12. Other insults: Hitting the right fist into the open palm of the left hand indicates contempt and can be regarded as an obscenity. Placing a half-closed hand in front of the stomach and then turning it slightly indicates that the person to whom the gesture is made is a

liar. Placing the tips of the left fingers on to the thumb then touching the tip of the right forefinger on to the left fingertips is an insult directed at one's birth or parentage.

*[Originally published in Abu Dhabi Week vol 2 issue 18]*