
IRAQI CUSTOMS

“Unlike the rules for most games we play, and unlike laws (social rules that have been written down), social rules are especially fluid, enacted by individuals, and subject to change. Remember that you'll see variation on them. That makes them confusing. That doesn't mean that you can therefore pretend they don't exist – they do, not in physical reality, but in social reality.

ONE key theme: One person's behavior reflects on the whole group. This culture is more collectivistic in orientation, as opposed to individualistic. It is the family's responsibility to make sure all of its members behave well, so when anyone does not, it reflects badly on the honor of that family. In the Team's case, the Team should think of itself as a family, and guard its reputation carefully.”

– Kathy Kamphoefner, on Arab culture

Being a Good Iraqi House Guest

When you enter a house, lightly shake the hand of everyone of your same gender (and possibly the other gender if they offer) and say, “Salaam Aleikum.” Sometimes you will kiss both cheeks of the person of your gender. Usually if this is going to happen on arrival it will be started by the oldest woman present.

Remove your shoes unless the host insists you not bother. You will be shown to the parlor (lined with couches or cushions, the best room in the house). Seat yourselves separated by gender.

You will be served something to drink, usually coffee or tea. Say, “Shukran” – thank you – when taking the beverage. If you don't like coffee or tea, you are obliged to take one sip, you can set the rest down. This is better than trying the switcheroo with a friend (which is always noticed). If asked why you didn't drink, put your hand to your chest, smile, and say ‘shukran, daime’ (Thanks, I've had enough).

Take a tissue when offered food; often you wrap one end of anything sticky in it, or hold the food above the tissue as you bring the food to your mouth. There will probably be knives with the fruit. It's considered more sophisticated to cut pieces of fruit rather than bite pieces off. Put any peels or pits in the ashtrays provided.

Invitation to Dinner

It's always nice to bring small gifts for the children. Stickers, crayons, or small toys will do. Check with your teammates to be sure.

When served dinner, you will most likely be shown to the sink – wash your hands.

Often you will share from a common plate, including common soup bowl. Usually Iraqis only use a large spoon for eating utensils. When you are not using your spoon, hang it upside down off the edge of the dish. Special hint: leave a little food on the plate or someone will heap more food on your plate.

Usually there is one common glass of water on the table. Fill it, drink it, pass it on.

If your hosts excuse themselves to pray, or pray right in front of you, carry on watching TV or whatever quietly until they finish. Just don't walk in front of them while they are praying.

Using the Washroom

When using the washroom, use the slippers near the door. They may have tissues, or you may wish to sneak in your own (but they may not have a garbage can!), or maybe it's finally time to learn how to use that bidet. Use the faucet low to the ground to fill the pitcher for flushing and/or cleaning yourself. It'll be a tad cool as you air-dry, but this is a warm country, so hey!

Hospitality – Being a Good Host

When Iraqis come to visit, whether socially or to report an incident, it is important for the team to show proper hospitality.

When the person arrives, everyone should stand and offer to shake hands. A male needs to stay in the room if it is a male visitor. As many people as work or energy allows should stay with the guest to be good company.

You cannot beg off for having no time to talk early into a visit, either when invited or when hosting. This is paramount to refusing hospitality and friendship and will cause serious insult.

If only female team members are at home and a male Iraqi comes to visit, you are obliged to tell him politely on the porch there are no men at home and ask if they could come another time. The phrase for this

in Arabic is, “Fish Rajal mawjood.” (No men here). This is doubly important (sometimes just for propriety, other times for safety) if you are a female home alone.

Immediately bring a glass of water or cold drink in summer, or in winter ask whether they prefer coffee or tea. When serving drinks, start with the guest (or person least acquainted to team). Iraqi tea is much stronger and sweeter than Palestinian tea, and they do not add sage or mint.

Always begin the conversation by asking about their well-being, their family, their work, etc. Do not get ‘down to business’ too soon. This is rude.

Security While Hosting Guests

We often close the office and bedroom doors when guests we do not know well come to visit. Remember that we store sensitive information (such as names of families we work with) in the logs, computers, disks, etc.

Personal items should be kept out of the main sitting area, as also expensive equipment. We may find these items end up walking out of the apartment. We do not leave the office unsupervised when any non-team person is in the apartment, even close friends of the team.

Cleanliness

Cleanliness is important to good hospitality. Most Iraqi NGOs we work with will keep their work space very tidy and they will clean every afternoon. Follow their lead.

Modest Dress

For men: in public avoid revealing clothing (e.g., no tank tops, no shorts), short sleeves are okay. Iraqi men tend to dress nicely. Follow their lead.

For women: in public avoid revealing clothing (e.g., loose fitting clothing that does not show bare arms, legs or neck is best). Head scarves may be appropriate at certain times and places, such as at a mosque). Iraqi women tend to dress modestly, but nicely.

Meeting with Community Leaders of Any Kind

In Iraqi society, relationships with local leaders are built slowly and carefully. Social conventions should be given plenty of room, and not interrupted prematurely by “getting down to business.” Often, Westerners are considered too aggressive and focused on business.

Appoint one main spokesperson to sit next to the translator and the rest of the team behind.

___ Allow plenty of time for small talk! Iraqis spend a long time on intros and catching up on how the family is, etc. After the small talk, there is usually a small pause. When the Iraqi contact or the team translator indicate it is time to discuss business, the team spokesperson should be assertive in stating the agenda for the visit. It may be that the Iraqi contact has new business that they wish to bring up. Allow time for them to raise their new concerns; this is a good reason to set aside the agenda. It is preserving the relationship above ‘business’ needs.

Introducing New People to an Established Contact

Strategically choose which meetings are appropriate for delegates or other non-team to attend with team. Often non-team people or new members will have a lot of questions to ask that may create tension (violating the ‘social conventions first’ rule) or pre-empt the business which needs to take place.

New team members should go along with team members that have a good relationship with an Iraqi contact, and expect to listen for the larger portion of the meeting. During this time the Iraqi contact is sizing them up, and using the relationship already established with the familiar team member to welcome them into the working relationship.

Promises, Promises

The team has found out through many mishaps that often Iraqis take any mention/suggestion of help that a team member mentions, even casually, as a promise, and will express much disappointment if you fail to follow through. Sattar, our translator, advises, “Just tell the truth if something will be difficult.” Be polite, but don’t mince words.