Diversity in the Middle East Faculty Development Workshop
Washburn University
April 3, 2015
Languages in the Middle East

• The multiplicity of languages spoken in the Middle East reflects ethnic diversity. Most these languages come from the major language “families.”

  • Semitic (including Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic)
  • Indo-European (Kurdish, Persian, Armenian)
  • Turkic (Turkish, Azeri)

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/themes/culture/
Who are the Arabs?

• Arabs are people who speak Arabic. عربى
• They believe themselves to be descendants of Abraham in the Bible through his son, Ishmael.
• Most are Sunni Muslim, some are Shi’a, and a few are Christians or other religions.
The Family

- The family is an important part of the culture in the Middle East.
- A man may be called Ibn (“son of”) followed by his father’s name or Abu (“father of”) followed by his child’s name.
- In traditional Arab societies the family unit is an extended family—cousins, grandparents, second cousins, cousins-in-law, nieces, nephews, and more—

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/themes/culture/
Religion in the Cultures of the Middle East

• The Middle East is the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

• All three religions share a tradition of prophets, from Adam and Abraham to Solomon and Joseph. Jesus is significant for both Christianity and Islam, and Muslims in addition follow the teachings of Muhammad.

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/themes/culture/
Religious Groups in the Middle East
Similarities

- All believe in one God (**monotheistic**)
- All trace ancestors back to Abraham
- All began in the Middle East
Conflicts

• Most **Iranians** (Persians) are **Shi’ites** (Shi’a).
• Most **Kurds** are Sunni, but are more closely related to **Iranians (Persians)**
Islam

- Islam is monotheistic, like Judaism and Christianity.
- Islam teaches a belief in an afterlife. Those who hope to achieve this afterlife must submit to the will of Allah (God).
- Muslims do not believe that the Prophet Muhammad was divine; they believe that he was a man.
The Five Pillars of Islam

1. Declaration of faith.
2. Daily prayer.
3. Charity.
4. Fasting (Ramadan).
5. Pilgrimage (Haji).
The Role of Women in Islam

- Originally, the *Quran* granted women spiritual and social equality with men. Both men and women were to be friends and protectors of one another.

- Women could earn a living and own and inherit property. They played a prominent role in the rise of Islam.

- Men and women had assigned social duties, but most societies in which Islam arose were male-dominated.
The Role of Women (Continued.)

- Women in these societies had to have a male guardian, and parents arranged marriages for their children.
- Men could have up to four wives, but they had to pay a dowry (gift of money or property) to their wives’ families.
Areas of Misunderstanding:

Body language can be divided into the following categories:

• Facial expressions
• Eye contact
• Touch
• Use of space
• Gestures
• Sounds and other actions
Traditionally, many Muslims only shake hands with someone of the same gender.

When greeting someone of the opposite gender, people may keep their hands to the sides, bow their head slightly, or just provide a verbal greeting.

Foreigners should follow the local person's lead when it comes to shaking hands. It makes everyone uncomfortable if you initiate a handshake which cannot be returned.
Personal Space

• In the Middle East, people of the same sex stand much closer to each other than North Americans and Europeans, while people of the opposite sex stand much further apart.

• In Arab culture, physical space requirements vary according to gender.
Eye Contact

• In general, Middle Eastern cultures, particularly Muslims, do not see direct eye contact between the sexes as being appropriate.

• Business women traveling to the Middle East may draw attention simply for being different, and some men may try to make eye contact. However, be advised that making or holding eye contact can communicate the message that your interest is less than casual or curious.
How to be rude without realizing it:

- Sit with the soles of your shoes showing.

In many cultures this sends a rude message. In Thailand, Japan and France as well as countries of the Middle and Near East, showing the soles of the feet demonstrates disrespect. You are exposing the lowest and dirtiest part of your body, so this is insulting.