

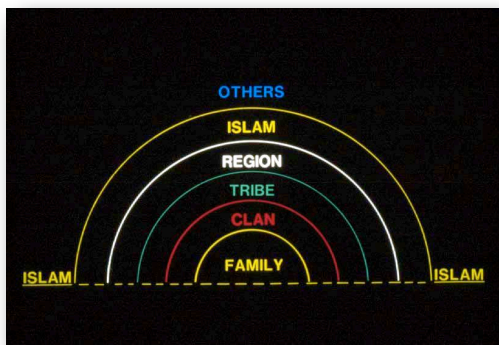
# Dr. Culture Country & Cultural Sketch: KUWAIT

Kuwait is slightly smaller than New Jersey covering nearly 7,000 sq. miles. It is the worlds 157th largest country. The capital, Kuwait city, lies on the southern shore of Kuwait Bay. Oil, no surprise, is Kuwait’s only major natural resource and dominates the economy. Water, on the other hand, is so scarce, the majority of water must be imported or processed at one of their several desalinization facilities.  
the Arabian Peninsula.

Kuwait “Snapshot” (CIA World Fact Book 2010 & Others As Indicated)	
Population .....	2,692,526 ( <b>NOTE:</b> This includes 1,291,354 non-nationals)
Population Growth rate:.....	3.5% Annually
Percentage Living in Urban Areas:.....	98%
<b>DEVELOPMENT DATA</b>	
Human Dev. Index* rank .....	31 of 177 countries (UN Human Development Report 2008-09)
Per Capita GDP .....	\$54,100 (#7 World Ranking)
Adult literacy rate .....	94% (male); 91% (female)
Infant mortality rate .....	18.97 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy .....	77.7 (male); 78.9 (female)

Meteorologically speaking, it surprises many that there are four distinct seasons in Kuwait; Summer is excruciatingly hot and dry with temperatures routinely over 120 degrees F. October is the beginning of Kuwaiti Autumn; it is cooler (down from 120 degrees OK?) but humid. In December, Winter hits but don’t put the skis on the car roof yet, as the average temperature “drops” to 59 degrees F. In February, Spring arrives and nearly 5” of rain fall across the next four months. Kuwait’s famous sandstorms also occur during the spring.

As a result, a lack of fertile soil and the extremely dry climate make any serious large-scale agriculture virtually impossible.



## AN UP-FRONT QUICK WORD ON CULTURAL COMPARISONS:

Analyzing and comparing critical or Hi-Value US and Kuwaiti cultural orientations based upon a typology developed by Geert Hofstede<sup>1</sup> show that on several dimensions, i.e., Individualism vs Group, Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance and Time Orientation (long vs short term perspectives), *the two cultures are almost polar opposites.* For instance:

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Geert Hofstede conducted perhaps the most comprehensive study of how values in the workplace are influenced by culture. From 1967 to 1973, while working at IBM as a psychologist, he collected and analyzed data from over 100,000 individuals from forty countries. From those results, and later additions, Hofstede developed a model that identifies four primary dimensions to differentiate cultures. He later added a fifth dimension, Long-term Outlook.

**Individualism** -- Hofstede ranks the Arab Culture as the least Individualistic cultural structure. Although not as typical in this regard as Saudi Arabia and other Arab regions, Kuwaiti culture is Collectivist as compared to an Individualist culture and is manifested in a close, long-term commitment to the member “group” -- family, extended family, or extended relationships. In a collectivist culture, loyalty is paramount and will often override other societal rules. In a collectivist culture -- and especially in Kuwaiti culture -- the “Avoidance of Shame” is the primary motivator. Preventing shame from befalling you individually, or your family, or your group, etc., is an ever-present duty for the male members of this society. For Americans, the primary motivator is Guilt -- or the avoidance of guilt. However, guilt is an individual-based phenomena and rarely translates to other members of the family and certainly not to out-lying extended family members, group, etc.

**Power Distance** -- This ranks the level of inequality of power and wealth within a society. Those populations with a high Power Distance ranking have an expectation and acceptance that their leaders separate themselves from the group at large and the remainder of society accepts this as a cultural heritage. This is very typical of the Kuwaiti culture although not as pronounced as you find, for instance, in the Saudi culture -- while *just the opposite* is considered appropriate by the American culture which, not surprisingly, ranks very low on this scale.

**Uncertainty Avoidance** -- a high ranking indicates a society’s low level of tolerance for uncertainty. As a result, strict rules, laws, policies and regulations are adopted and implemented in order to minimize or reduce this level of uncertainty. The goal is then, to control as much as possible in order to eliminate or avoid the unexpected. As a result, a culture with a high Uncertainty Avoidance description (such as Kuwait) does not readily accept change and is risk averse. A culture with a *low* Uncertainty Avoidance (such as the US culture) not only accepts change but encourages it -- and culturally views change as proper and appropriate. The US culture is ranked as *not* risk averse.

#### **WHAT THIS MEANS:**

This *doesn't* mean proper US-Kuwaiti cross cultural engagement is impossible -- but it will take effort and a commitment to continuous learning -- and often to Americans, this process may appear ineffective as it doesn't produce response deemed appropriate for the energy expended. Often called ROI or “Return On Investment” Americans generally expect a return for their investment of time and energy. If it doesn't materialize in a concrete fashion in a period of time felt appropriate, then the effort is viewed as ineffective. But can you quantify the unquantifiable? Can you establish a casual link between cultural competency and successful contract management, etc? In the Cross Cultural world -- and particularly regarding the US-Kuwaiti cross cultural business environment -- the rules are “floating” and very dependent on particular situations, personalities, friendships relationships, etc., but certain core cultural components remain unchanged. I'll explain more as this discussion unfolds.

**HISTORY:** Archeologists say Kuwait (derived from the Arabic term “akwat” the plural of “kout” meaning fortress built near the water<sup>2</sup>) has been populated for thousands of years and point to evidence the early Kuwaitis, living in small settlements, traded with Mesopotamian cities. Then in mid 1700s, a sheikdom (pronounced “shake”-dom) was established by the al-Sabah family -- and this family still governs Kuwait today. Across the next century, Kuwait became a significant and prosperous trading location. Although the Kuwaitis remained nearly autonomous from the Turk’s powerful Ottoman Empire reach, by the end of the 19th century the Ottomans pressed for control over Kuwait and the al-Sabah family turned to Great Britain for assistance. The British agreed to make Kuwait a protectorate in 1899. This would evolve into a long-term relationship -- a 62 year symbiotic relationship as the British enjoyed with their strategic and commercial interests in the Gulf. Then, in 1961 Kuwait was granted independence. However, 30 years prior to this, huge oil reserves were discovered in Kuwait and export began immediately. Not surprisingly, the enormous profits from the their oil industry significantly improved everything in Kuwait -- from education and standard of living to health care and infrastructure.

**Troubling Times:** Immediately after Kuwait’s independence, Iraq asserted claims to Kuwaiti territory but opposition to this was immediate and powerful -- Britain along with the the Arab Nations forced Iraq to “stand down” from this position. But, when Kuwait supported Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, relations between Kuwait and Iraq improved -- but this was short lived. In 1990, Iraq accused Kuwait of stealing oil from a contested reserve on heir border, exceeding oil production quotas, etc. Iraq invaded in August of that year quickly overrunning Kuwait’s defenses. Most Kuwaitis fled to Saudi Arabia or other countries and those in the country who couldn’t get out -- and they numbered into the several thousands -- were imprisoned by the Iraqi military.

When Iraqi President Saddam Hussein refused compliance with a UN resolution demanding Iraq withdraw from Kuwait, the US led coalition air strikes beginning in January of 1991 and soon the land campaign began which expelled Iraq from Kuwait in February -- but not before the Iraqi military destroyed most of Kuwait’s oil industry infrastructure resulting in huge open pipelines dumping oil into the Gulf and then set fire to 600 oil wells as they retreated. This eco-disaster turned the sky over Kuwait black with oil for nearly eight months consuming an estimated 5-6 million barrels of crude oil and 70-100 million cubic meters of natural gas per day. Smoke plumes containing a hazardous mixture of gaseous emissions and particulate matter engulfed a downwind area as large as 150 by 1000 kilometers.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>2</sup> Lesko, John P. "Kuwait," *World Education Encyclopedia: A Survey of Educational Systems Worldwide*, vol. 2, edited by Rebecca Marlow-Ferguson. Detroit, MI: Gale Group, 2002

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.espionageinfo.com/Ke-Lo/Kuwait-Oil-Fires-Persian-Gulf-War.html> also <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Kuwait/Background.html> and <http://www1.american.edu/ted/kuwait.htm>

It was estimated that 250 - 462 million gallons of oil - *more than 20-27 times the amount spilled in the Exxon Valdez disaster in Alaska* - flowed into the Gulf, causing inconceivable harm to the biological diversity and physical integrity of the Gulf. The crude oil slick -- at its widest, 101 x 42 miles wide and 5 inches thick -- soaked over 440 miles of Saudi Arabia's coastline.

In 2006, Sheikh Jabir al-Ahmad al-Sabah ruler of Kuwait for 30 years died. The illness of the crown prince -- successor to the Sheikh -- prevented him from taking the throne and the next in line, Sheikh Sabah al Ahmad al-Sabah was appointed Emir and he is credited with numerous “modernizations” to Kuwaiti society -- in 2005 the first female cabinet in Kuwaiti history was appointed, women were given the right to vote, and hold political office, etc.

**LANGUAGE AND RELIGION:** Arabic is the official language and regarded as the language of God due to Islamic belief and teaching that the revelations from the Archangel Gabriel were in Arabic. Foreign educated Kuwaitis usually speak English.

**Islam:**

Notable history of Islam affecting Kuwait begins in the seventh century when the Prophet Mohammed began proclaiming the message of Islam from the centers of the Saudi Arabia cities of Mecca and Medina. The adoption of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula radically changed Arab civilization: it united tribes to a common goal, and regulated virtually every part of the Arab life. The religion soon spread to parts of Asia, northern Africa, and other regions.



Approximately 85% of Kuwaitis are Muslim -- but that includes nearly all Kuwaiti citizens. The figure of 85% is misleading due to the high number of third party nationals in Kuwait who are not Muslim. There is also a small percentage of Kuwaiti Christians. Kuwait’s constitution guarantees freedom of religion while designating Islam as the official state religion and Sharia -- Islamic Law -- as the key element of civil law. Approximately 70% of Kuwaitis are members of the Sunni Islam branch with the remainder being Shia.

**Sunni - Shia Split:**

What’s the difference? As succinctly as possible, the two sects, branches or (as many Americans think of them) “Denominations” differ on the central point of succession of Islam’s leadership after the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

**Sunnis** hold that ABu Bakr was Muhammad’s rightful successor and the method of choosing or electing leaders endorsed by the Koran is the consensus of the Ummah or the Muslim community. Sunnis follow the Rashidun or ‘rightly-guided Caliphs’ who were the first four caliphs who ruled after the death of Muhammad; Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman Ibn Affan, and then Ali.

**Shia** believe that Muhammad divinely ordained his cousin and son-in law Ali (father of his grandsons) in accordance with the command of God to be the next Caliph, making Ali and his direct descendants Muhammad's successors. Shia discount the legitimacy of the first three caliphs and believe that Ali is the second most divinely inspired man after Muhammad and that he and his descendants by Muhammad's daughter Fatimah, the Imams, are the sole legitimate Islamic leaders.<sup>4</sup>

Approximately 70% of the world's Muslims are Sunni, 20% are Shia, with the remaining 10% divided between several other sects. FYI, Shia make up the majority of the population in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Bahrain and they are the largest group in Lebanon. Sunnis are the majority in other Muslim communities in SE Asia, China, South ASia, Africa and the remainder of the Arab world.

Muslims consider Muhammad the last and greatest of all prophets and that the Koran contains Allah's revelations to Muhammad. Religion is a matter of daily practice and a way of life for Muslims and for most Kuwaitis this is true. It is not just a matter of belief and acceptance and is not private as found in American culture. It is publicly displayed. In addition to a once-in-a-lifetime Hadj pilgrimage and five daily prayers, Kuwaiti Muslims also practice their faith through Shahada (professing Allah as the only God and Muhammad as his messenger), Zakat (giving a tenth of one's income to help the poor), and fasting during the month of Ramadan. Together, these practices are referred to as the Five Pillars of Islam.

#### **ADDITIONAL ISLAM TIPS:**

This sounds like a "no-brainer" but since Friday is the Muslim day of worship in Islam, people go to the mosque to pray and hear recitations from the Koran. *Do not expect to do business on Friday.* Additionally, don't expect much to get done on Thursdays either -- particularly in the afternoon. (See comment on page 12 - under "Punctuality" regarding Washington DC).

Don't forget to keep an eye on Ramadan dates. Since Kuwait runs on both the Muslim-Lunar (Hijri) as well as the "western" Gregorian calendar, Islamic religious event dates, then, change yearly. In 2010, Ramadan begins August 11 and runs until September 9. It is helpful for your Kuwaiti counterparts if you put dates in both the Hijri and Gregorian calendar. I know this sounds like unnecessary work, etc., but your Kuwaiti friends will appreciate it.

Working in Kuwait during Ramadan? Don't expect to get much work done -- if anything. (The only exception to this would be oil industry as they work "365 & 24/7.") I'm not saying it is right or wrong, it is just a fact -- no different than me telling you to not expect to get work done in Paris during August vacation time. Think your French colleague is going to be working his emails/reviewing contract proposals while on vacation in Spain or in Provence? Become familiar

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<sup>4</sup> Glasse, Cyril, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, Altamira Press, 2001, p.280, et al.

with Ramadan activities and adjust your behavior to meet with what is culturally and socially acceptable. And, if your Kuwaiti colleague is in the US during Ramadan, don't think he won't observe Ramadan. As a result, try and empathize with your Kuwaiti counterparts -- don't be eating fruit, sandwiches, etc., in front of them as you are coordinating business matters, don't offer them coffee when they are in your office. Instead, acknowledge what they are going through and explain you would normally offer them coffee, etc., but you know this is Ramadan, so "*don't think I'm a bad host! After Ramadan I look forward to having tea/coffee and hearing more about this year's Ramadan.*"

Final note: Ramadan calls for fasting from essentially, sunrise to sunset for about a month. The uninformed view is that if you are fasting for a month you should be losing weight. Right? Well, don't be surprised if your Kuwaiti colleagues are gaining weight -- *and a lot of it!* Here is a quick Do's and Don'ts Tip: **Don't** teasingly chide your Kuwaiti counterpart about his weight gain by saying something inane like, "*Whoa, Ahmad! How can you gain weight when you are (air quotes gesture here) FASTING all day?*" In addition to losing face, this of course calls into question your friend's Islamic faith, his allegiance to the Pillars of Islam, how his parents raised him poorly bringing shame to 50 past generations of family Muslims, etc.....*Ouch.*

Oh, the "Do?" **Do** remember this: "Never pass up a chance to keep your mouth shut."

Reason for weight gain: When the sun goes down, people begin to eat again. However, traditionally, families (read that extended families), friends, etc., all gather together at night and celebrate by eating...and eating. This may not happen every night but it is a very normal occurrence to visit friends-family and, of course, eat -- remember, hospitality is important. I think by now you are developing a much more clear picture of this caloric-overload environment. As one Pakistani friend explained to me, "*It is like eating an American Thanksgiving meal--every night for a month!*"

Now you know.

**GENERAL ATTITUDES:** Considering Kuwait has the seventh highest per capita income in the world<sup>5</sup> they generally value the benefits of this significant change to the Kuwaiti social landscape. Comfortable lifestyles, all the latest cars, comfortable homes, etc., are all recent additions to Kuwaiti lifestyles. However, Kuwaitis still have an overall attitude of perseverance of a conservative society in which Islam is still the strongest influence taking priority just in front of family and family obligations along with honesty, commitment to tradition, sincerity, honesty, etc. Avoidance of shame is just as important within the Kuwaiti culture as it is in most all Arab world locations. They are very conscious

Per Capita Income Rankings:	
1.	Liechtenstein -- \$122,100
2.	Qatar -- \$121,700
3.	Luxembourg -- \$78,000
4.	Bermuda -- \$69,900
5.	Norway \$58,600
6.	Jersey -- \$57,000
7.	Kuwait -- \$54,100
8.	Singapore -- \$50,300
9.	Brunei -- \$50,100
10.	Faroe Islands -- \$48,200
11.	United States -- \$46,400

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ku.html#top>. Top 11 country rankings found here as well.

of personal and family honor (you'll see this several times here) Marriages have been lost, academic pursuits curtailed, etc., all over shaming the family -- particularly if there is a woman involved. Why?

“The Honor of the Family Resides in the Woman.”

For instance, if the men in a family were so inattentive to their sister, for instance, and recklessly abandoned their primary family responsibility to protect their women/family honor and something bad happened to her (mugging, rape, murder, etc.) other families considering marriage with that family might well change their minds because the family men ignored their most basic cultural expectation of the family, Kuwaiti culture -- and most other Arab cultural outlooks.

The feeling is that if this family cannot responsibly handle the obligation to protect the women in their family, then this is no family with which we should associate. Shaming the family name not only falls to the present but also for well,.... years (*and years!*) into the future.

“Face” is an important concept for you to remember. Kuwaiti culture is a culture where confrontation, conflict, etc., is to be avoided if possible and resultantly, “saving face” etc., is virtually fundamental in this culture. Maintaining dignity, respect through compromise, patience, etc., has worked for the Kuwaitis for centuries to resolve conflict and avoid embarrassing others. Embarrassing your Kuwaiti colleague -- even if you are joking, etc. -- causes damage to their honor, dignity, etc., and this loss of face will haunt you for quite some time until they are able to “regain face.” So, here is another “no-brainer:” Don't tease your Kuwaiti counterpart -- even if they speak good english. Humor does not translate across cultural and linguistic boundaries.....

**ADDITIONAL SOCIAL OBSERVATION:** There seems to be an underlying tension or stressor running through contemporary Kuwait in that Kuwaitis are happy to modernize but are reluctant to “westernize.” A significant number of Kuwaitis feel political and social reform as necessary and vital to Kuwait's progress while another significant percentage of Kuwaitis feel that only by maintaining those traditional customs and attitudes can the country avoid the social problems seen in the west; drug abuse, illegitimate births, crime, etc.

### **OTHER ATTITUDE ISSUES: CLASS**

Stay aware that this is a class conscious culture. Two things to remember: (1) we Americans are friendly types and come from a general outlook of equality in our daily lives; at a hotel, we say good morning to housekeepers, say thank you to doormen, even gardeners trimming flowers, etc., on a sidewalk where you are passing by earns a “Good Morning” from you. Prepare yourself to hear from your Kuwaiti counterpart if he is with you and you do these things. He may comment to you to not do this. Reason? These people are of the much lower classes and by being friendly and informal with them shows you to be, in class terms, similar -- not a good thing. Anything you say or do identifying you as a lower class American speaks poorly for you -- and your organization. Understanding what the Kuwaiti views as an indicator of low-class,

surprises many Americans because “class structure” and avoiding contact/communication with “the lower classes” is generally new to us. This can develop suddenly during a discussion about your family, etc. For instance, Americans place great value on coming from humble beginnings and through hard work, etc., managing to rise up “from nowhere” and attain a successful, professional level of success. No so here. Kuwaitis are generally surprised that you would talk about your family’s poverty, or very humble, poor, life and the disadvantages they faced. In their eyes, *this shames your family!* Why would you do that? So, their focus shifts is not on admiring your success in overcoming such circumstances, they are wondering *why anyone would admit to such embarrassing family issues when it does not need to be known?* **What’s wrong with this guy?** You are “airing your dirty laundry,” and shaming your family! AAARRRGGGH! All the while, you were, in effect, (certainly as viewed by another American) praising your family; recognizing their hard work, sacrifice, etc.....

**Special Note To Military Members:** If you are a prior-enlisted officer, under no circumstances are you to share this fact with your Kuwaiti counterparts. In the Kuwaiti military (as you find in other international militaries--and especially in Latin America), enlisted personnel are not generally recognized as professionals; they are not considered the backbone of the military, etc. The fact that you had a tremendous enlisted career before becoming an officer just doesn’t translate. I had one international officer tell me this type of officer was just an “overpaid NCOs.”

**PERSONAL APPEARANCE AND DRESS:** Business attire is conservative. Foremost are the local standards of modesty. As a sign of respect, you should dress well and properly during business meetings. This means for men, conservative business suits and for women, high necklines, sleeves at least to the elbow and better yet, to the wrists. Skirts should be long and below knee in length. Kuwaiti men traditionally wear the *dishdasha*, a floor length robe and *gutrah* -- the cloth headdress. Since it is so well suited to the climate, this basic garment has changed little in the last few hundred years -- although 20th century innovations of front button-through-the-collar fastenings and buttoned cuffs were introduced by Indian tailors in the 20th century.



The *gutrah* is very functional and is in three parts; often a *gahfiah* or close fitting skull cap is worn under the gutra -- a large square piece of cloth folded into a triangle then placed centrally on the head allowing the ends to hang down equally over the shoulders. This is held in place by the *ogal* which is a double circle of twisted black cord and placed firmly over the head. In the summer, a matching white or cream *dishdasha* with matching gutra is typical while in winter, men prefer a red and white checked gutra and slightly heavier dishdasha

NOTE: Horror stories abound regarding Westerners showing up at a meeting with Kuwaiti businessmen dressed like a Kuwaiti -- complete with sandals, dishdasha, and gutra. This is awful -- and will be viewed as such -- they won't be sure if you are mocking them, shamelessly *kissing up*, or if you are a cross cultural transvestite....

Kuwaiti women often dress in western clothes however it is not surprising that they also wear an *Abaya* over them when in public. But this is yet one more area of change in Kuwaiti culture; younger generation Kuwaiti women are less inclined to wear the abaya and prefer wearing western clothes in public. Generally, the more conservative Kuwaiti women wear the hijab which covers the hair while leaving the face unveiled.

Modesty is of utmost importance, even in the heat of the Kuwaiti summers. Visitors are expected to dress conservatively. Tight-fitting or revealing clothing are simply unacceptable. But is the wearing of the abaya or a "cover-up" a religious directive? According to one my favorite resources on Islam, the Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World, (and in my discussions with Imams and everyday Arabs) there is no specific instruction in the Koran directing the wear of the Abaya but there is reference (Surah 24:30-31) to maintaining a woman's modesty and that is what the covering up is all about--maintaining a woman's modesty: "*And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments.*"

**GREETINGS:** Between Kuwaitis (as found in all Arab regions), the most common greeting is a handshake and the phrase *Asalamalakum* (The peace of Allah be upon you) and the reply is *Waalaykum As-salaam* (And peace be upon you). We're not done yet -- next is the almost-required series of inquiries regarding the welfare of your Kuwaiti colleague's family. "How is your family?" or "Do you have any other family in the United States while you are here? If the answer is yes, understand that if need be, there will be a super human effort made to connect with that family member -- it is one of those "unwritten-but-expected-family-behavior laws."

Frequently, males will follow up by extending the left hand to each other's right shoulder and kissing the right and left cheeks. The greeting used depends on the individuals' relationship and status in society. Generally, conservative Kuwaitis do not shake hands with members of the opposite sex outside their own families.

In general however, expect warm handshakes -- warm *extended* handshakes -- that go on for quite some time. In the US culture, a handshake lasts for hardly two seconds. In Kuwait (or with Kuwaitis outside Kuwait) it can often last much longer -- it depends on the relationship. The general rule here is that the handshakes are more gentle from your Kuwaiti colleague but last

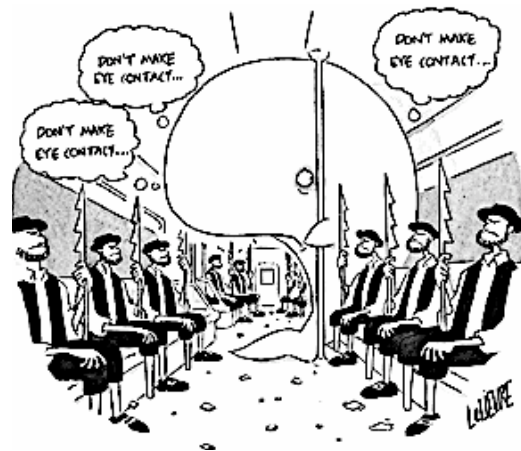
longer. The “bone-crusher” American style handshake is often viewed as a bit over the top and even, rude -- really! Surprise your Kuwaiti colleague; shake hands *softly* in a sophisticated style and watch their reaction. They are not expecting that from an American.

Between men the more traditional Kuwaiti man greeting involves each grasping the others right hand as in a normal westernized handshake, then placing the left hand on the others right shoulder and exchanging kisses on each cheek. With enough practice, most American men adjust this. Really! However, most never adjust to the Kuwaiti “nose-kiss” greeting between two good male friends....*whoa*.

Also, (men) placing a hand on your heart with a slight bow is certainly a sign of respect and often you will see this behavior when a Kuwaiti man (obviously a more conservative one) instead of shaking the hand of an American professional woman, will perform this gesture. This is a “handshake-substitute” and should be accepted as such.

Expect strong eye-contact from your Kuwaiti counterparts -- this is one area of similarity between Kuwaitis and Americans. This is interpreted as an indication of “good-guy-ness,” friendship, etc., and Kuwaitis feel, creates trust between two parties because it communicates importance.

Other last moment additions: if a Kuwaiti touches his nose and at the same time lifts his head upward he is saying “you are a snob” or something similarly insulting. Usage: often witnessed in traffic-related situations when, for instance, a driver being “cut off” in traffic follows the driver who was in the wrong and would point to his nose lifting it slightly upward. (Seems better than what happens in Los Angeles -- if you cut someone off on the LA Freeway, *you better be prepared to return fire.....*)



American men should brace themselves for a change in acceptable-distance-between-men-during-discussion. The Kuwaitis speak to each other -- and to you -- at a *much* closer distance than most American men find comfortable. However, this can be overcome in time as you adjust to this “New Normal.” When your Kuwaiti counterpart moves in closer than what you expect, *don't back up*, do not “shy away,” etc. Often, I have found many westernized or culturally competent Kuwaitis understand this issue with Americans and as a result, keep back to a comfortable “American-Style” distance for your benefit. However, understand that getting physically close for a proper conversation is viewed as “Arab-normal.”

Also, expect a significant amount of physical contact as the Kuwaiti is speaking to you. Watch how the Kuwaitis interact with each other and shaking hands; they kiss and pat each other on the shoulders on the arms, they hug, etc. Then emulate their actions -- you can do it!

Oh, as found in other Arab regions, Kuwaiti men often walk hand-in-hand. If a Kuwaiti holds your hand while you are walking across a park or across a room, take it as a sign that they view you now as a good friend not just a business colleague -- and cultural validation that you are doing everything right-- just go with it.

**Important:** When entering a room of Kuwaitis, “work the room.” In other words, walk around and shake hands with every person there -- do not overlook anyone -- **and always begin with the oldest, most senior ones.** Don’t shake hands with a few of the important ones and then “wave a hello” to everyone else. If you do overlook someone (or do the wave-a-hello maneuver) you will have shamed that person and caused them to “lose face” in front of their peers.

Not a good thing.

Likewise, when leaving a room of Kuwaitis, go shake hands with everyone again. Never forget this is a very, *very* social culture and your social graces here are just as important as your professional credentials and capabilities -- and sometimes more important.

**It’s not the job that is most important,  
it’s how you treat everyone in getting the job done  
that is important.**

**COMMUNICATING:** Kuwait is very much a “high context culture.” Context is anything surrounding or accompanying communication which gives meaning to it. This is a confusing analytical component for many Americans unfamiliar with other cultures. Normally, context refers to what is taking place around you; specifically those things that might affect the choices you make as part of a communication. As we discuss context here, instead of focusing only on what is going on outside, context also focuses on what is going on inside people affecting the way they interact with others and understand communication events. High context cultures rely more extensively on relationships to understand meaning and place less importance on verbal messages – the context in which the communication takes place is very important; what is status of person communicating. Are they older, or a higher positioned professional, is it your friend’s grandfather?

Generally, in Low Context cultures -- such as US culture -- the communicator or communication process must be much more explicit than found in high context cultures. Low context cultures depend little on existing relationships for meaning or validity in communication and rely instead on explicit verbal messages.

Always use titles if appropriate -- this is important. Do not move to using the first name until expressly invited to do so and then begin by using "Mister" in front of the first name -- listen to your Kuwaiti hosts as they can often indicate what is appropriate.

**Dr. Culture Tip:** If you have a deadline, and your Kuwaiti counterpart says, "*Inshallah, we will get it to you*" this means it is very unlikely you will receive it in time to meet your deadline. Inshallah means "if God wills it." So, practically speaking your Kuwaiti counterpart just told you, "If God wills it, then I will be able to get you the information by deadline."

Translation: Probably not going to happen -- make other plans. Especially if the phrase is accompanied by the noise of air being sucked in through the teeth....really! If so, there is *absolutely no way* this is ever going to happen. Could it get worse? You bet. If you hear the word "bukra," as in "*Yes, Yes, Mr. Mike, bukra, bukra. Absolutely, inshallah.*" Bukra is similar to the Latin American-Spanish expression, "*Mananna*" but Bukra "lacks the sense of urgency found in '*mananna*'...." 😊 !

**FINAL WORD ON COMMUNICATING:** You want to "delete" the "F-Word" from your vocabulary and especially the often used "GD" reference (can't write it out any more clearly without clearly writing it), such as "*'GD' you Ahmad, I needed this a week ago!*" In this culture, words and language use are important and often literally interpreted. You have just "damned" Ahmad and there have been instances under Sharia law that when Ahmad has something bad happen to him after you "damning" him, *you* are the one who is blamed for causing it -- and the court rules in Ahmad's favor. If you have team members who have hot tempers and "lose-it" complete with prolific use of these words/phrases, consider leaving them at home -- at least sternly warn them about this.



**PUNCTUALITY:** US-Style Punctuality? As they say in Brooklyn, *FUGETABOUTIT*. This varies, and in Kuwait it is not as frustrating for Americans as you find in other Arab regions, but you should not expect a US-style view on punctuality. Make your appointments for times of day, i.e., late morning, if possible rather than precise hours/minutes as the relaxed and hospitable nature of the Kuwaitis makes this an area of "inexact science." **Time is not an issue here;** therefore your Kuwaiti counterparts are generally considered (certainly by western attitudes) to be generally *un-punctual*. However, it is interesting to note that your meetings will never encroach on prayer time -- recall prayers are done five times daily.

Nothing predictable can be said about punctuality in Kuwait except that this remains an "unpredictable" component of Kuwaiti culture. Your Kuwaiti colleague may be late for an appointment or perhaps not show up at all. You however should try to be prompt. Kuwaitis prefer face-to-face meetings as this enhances the relationship between you and him. Establishing that

trust between you two is an essential part of your business tool box. **Remember, in Kuwait, it is all about relationships, friendships, respect, et al.** Coffee is often served toward the end of the business meeting and is often a signal that the meeting is about to conclude.

Something else about appointments: An appointment is rarely private. Don't be surprised if "your time" is interrupted by phone calls, visits from family friends, office colleagues, etc. Don't fall into the Western trap of becoming angry that someone is infringing on your "appointment time." Remember, time is not concrete here -- it is not saved, wasted, used effectively, etc., as we view it in the US. Time is fluid. Relax....have some more tea....

It may be different with military members, but remember despite all the outside appearances, this is a tradition-focused culture. And don't be surprised if afternoon appointments don't materialize or are cancelled. Look at it as if you were (1) in the Washington DC area (2) on a Friday afternoon and (3) trying to coordinate something with US government agencies.....

### **GESTURES:**

Although not as important today as in previous generations the issue of left-handed versus right hand public use -- particularly in a restaurant setting -- is still a consideration. Traditionally, the left hand was used for "toilet duties" only -- think about it; bedouins, thousands of years ago, in the desert; no newspapers, no banana leaves (or bananas) , and no *Charmin* anywhere. As a result, only the right hand touched food from the communal bowls and although not as pronounced as in generations before, it is still noticed.

But that "left-hand thing" is not limited to the Arab or Muslim world. It is surprising to many that upon analysis, Christianity is also strongly biased towards the right hand. It is the right had that gives the blessing and make the sign of the cross and the Bible contains over 100 favorable references to the right-hand and 25 unfavorable references to the left-hand, i.e., in Psalm 118 v. 15,16 "*The right hand of the Lord doth valiantly, the right hand of the Lord is exalted.*"

Also, for thousands of years, the Devil has been associated with the left hand in various ways and is normally portrayed as being left-handed in pictures and other images. In the seventeenth century it was thought that the Devil baptized his followers with his left-hand, in France witches greeted Satan with the left hand, 1500s Puritans felt you can only see ghosts by looking over our left shoulder, while others were convinced the Devil watches us over the left shoulder.

Although not as prevalent in Kuwait as in other areas, keep in mind the under-the-water-line stigma associated with the left hand. This is another fading Kuwaiti cultural component as younger Kuwaitis move away from this observation and/or attitude. Watch your host and other Kuwaitis -- then follow their lead.

One beckons someone by turning the palm down (right hand) and waving the fingers back and forth. It is impolite to point -- just don't do it. You can certainly gesture in general but no

pointing. My recommendation is to restrict (not easily done) your gestures and follow the lead of your Kuwaiti counterparts.

Typical Kuwaiti gestures include shaking the index finger to communicate “no” while another unusual gesture seems to be limited to Kuwait -- I only recall seeing Kuwaitis do this -- and that is a gesture communicating exasperation, impatience, don’t interrupt, a “*Hey! Let me finish!*” type of emotion. Here it is: the the right hand is palm up and the tips of the fingers are all together and the more the gesture moves up and down the more intense the emphasis.

However, the most offending gesture is a simple one; one that Americans overlook continuously as we are an individual-comfort-based cultural type. Here it is: crossing your foot or putting your foot up and exposing the bottom of your shoe or foot to someone -- or even in their general direction. I hear this from Kuwaitis and literally hundreds of other Arab world types -- they are horribly offended by this -- and most Americans have no idea about this. Your shoes have been walking the streets in the dirt, germs, filth, etc., and this is considered the most filthy part of the body anyway, so to now put this “in the face” of your Kuwaiti counterpart is, well, awful. Remember when Saddam Hussein’s statue was pulled down during Gulf War II? What did the Iraqis do? They rushed up and pounded the statue with.....their shoes. Got it? Don’t do it. *Do not point your shoe or show the bottom of your feet to anyone.*



**BUSINESS SOCIALIZING:** As you find in many Arab regions, hospitality is a big deal -- it is huge -- and it is no different in Kuwait. Not only is it considered a social virtue among Kuwaitis, it also speaks to the manliness and generosity of the Kuwaiti male. In Bedouin tradition all visitors are treated as family. In a practical sense, tradition is/was that if you showed up at a tent in the desert the host *must* take you in, treat you like family and cannot question your intentions for at least three days. Across the centuries, this has unfolded into a strong cultural component that covers the Arab world regardless of your financial wherewithal. Remember this is a critical component of Kuwaiti culture. They are responsible for your well-being and they take this

responsibility seriously. So, don’t be surprised that you will be asked repeatedly, “how are you?” Or “would you like more juice?”, etc. One thing is for sure: expect the amount of food to be overwhelming and excellent.

From time to time, you might be asked to remove your shoes before entering an area where you will be eating. This is a normal behavior for most cultures (see above comments on feet). Think about it - why would you track all the dirt and germs from the street into the area where you eat? Follow the lead/direction of your host.

Whenever you begin a business meeting, in Kuwait you will be offered tea, coffee, or juice every time -- and often throughout the visit. **Do not refuse this offer. Always accept even if you**

**don't drink it or want to drink it.** Don't say "*Oh, no thanks, I'm coffee-ied out this morning.*" This is not an option....

**NO BRAINER:** Remember that alcohol and pork are prohibited, so don't say, "*Man, this [lamb] is great -- I could really use a beer with this!*"

**THE NAME GAME:** Americans frequently find the Kuwaiti name structure confusing. Do address your Kuwaiti counterpart with the appropriate titles, Doctor, Sheikh (pronounced 'Shake'), Ustadh (professor), which is normally followed by their first name. Not sure? Get the names of those you will be meeting, etc., ahead of time.

The first name is the personal name and used in similar fashion as we do. This is followed by the father's personal name and is used with the connector, "al" The third and fourth names are the grandfather's personal name and a name that denotes the family lineage. both names generally begin with "al."

Example: Suleyman Al Ahmed Al Mustafa Al Sabah translates to Suleyman, son of Ahmed, grandson of Mustafa of the Sabah family/tribe.

Also, understand you will hear "bin" or "ibn" (son of) and "bint" (daughter of) more than a couple times in someone's name as Kuwaiti names are also genealogy indicators. The Ibn or bint is an ancestral bridge, i.e., Suleyman ibn al Ahmed bin Al Mustafa Al Sabah translates to Suleyman son of Al Ahmed who is son of Al Mustafa of the Sabah family or tribe.

Once you learn the system you will be surprised at how much information is contained in the name. You will want to spend some time learning about the naming system. Interlink trainer and prolific writer (14 books!), Dr. Margaret Nydell explains it this way in her book, *Understanding Arabs: Kuwaitis and Arabs in general*, don't refer to people by their third, or last name. Arab names for both men and women consist of a first name (the person's own ), the father's name and the paternal grandfather's name which is followed by a family name. In other words a Kuwaiti's name is simply a string of names listing ancestors on the father's side. A Western example might be John (given first name) Robert (his father) William (his grandfather) Jones. The good news for the Western mind is that when the genealogical name becomes too long (after four or five generations) some of the older names will be dropped.

But, making things *more* complicated for the western mind, a Kuwaiti (and many other Arabs as well) may retain several names for legal purposes but won't use them. A man named Ahmad Abdullah Ali Muhammad, for example, would commonly be known as Ahmad Abdullah; if he has a tribal name or family name, let's say Al-Harithi, he would be known as Ahmad Abdullah Al-Hirithi.

Because a person's first name is the only one that is really his or hers, they will apply the similar logic to your name as well, often referring to you as "Mr. John", or "Mr. Tom", or "Dr. Bill", or "the famous Dr. Culture....." (well, maybe not...)

**VISITING:** Generally, members of the Kuwaiti family -- and that is the extended family -- maintain close contact and visit each other often and although it is still accepted to just "drop in" for a visit, it is a recent change and acceptable to phone first. We Americans view as proper and customary an invite to new colleagues or friends to visit us in our homes. Kuwaitis are much much more relaxed on this as compared to other Middle East regions and it is very common to invite guests into their homes to share meals. If your previous experiences in the Middle East were to meet your Arab counterparts at a restaurant, you may be surprised to find yourself invited to visit your Kuwaiti colleague at his home. If you are invited to a Kuwaiti home, (1) you are, so far, doing well cross culturally and (2) your Kuwaiti counterpart has already established that you are culturally competent to a level they are comfortable with you in their home and around their family. As you find in many areas of the Middle East, men and women socialize separately -- but it depends on the Kuwaiti family's view on this. Women in your group will be with other women in the, for instance, living room of the home while your male Kuwaiti host entertains the male guests in the *diwaniyah*.

The *diwaniyah* is a separate area of the home or family compound where the "men-folk" -- those friends and often even business associates -- relax, eat, talk, eat, drink tea or coffee, *talk*, and relax, and *talk* and *drink more tea or coffee*, and *talk....* got the picture? Don't be surprised to see male teenagers and older children there but note they are very well-behaved and sit quietly with their fathers or behind them, etc., as the fathers serve refreshments and tend to the needs of the guests in the *diwaniyah*. Young children normally remain with the mothers. **GO TO THIS EVENT HUNGRY!** Expect an enormous meal and expect to be *force-fed* from the moment you arrive -- as discussed earlier, hospitality is a significant cultural component within Kuwaiti culture and it says good things about the hosts if they are overloading you with food, coffee, conversation, etc. In the words of Martha Stewart, "This is a good thing."

There is nothing dependably general to say about men dining with men and women with female guests -- it depends on whether the Kuwaiti family is more conservative or not. The more conservative families prefer that men and women eat separately.

For most Americans, the cultural Hi-Value components of equality and individualism are fundamental and very strong. As a result, expect some angst on several levels as you interact with Kuwaitis in these areas. The separation of males and females is a way of life in Kuwait though nowhere near as strict as you find in nearby Saudi Arabia. The Kuwaiti *nuclear* family group eat meals together usually and if extended family members or guests are there, well, everyone moves to the table to eat. Generations ago, Kuwaitis ate from a shared bowls, with the right hand, and seated on rugs, etc., but although this is a tradition still practiced, more often than not, they eat at a low table using individual plates, etc. My recommendation: be flexible and just go with the the host's recommendations.

TIPS: When people have had enough to drink, they cover the cup with the hand or shake it gently from side to side several times and say *bes* (enough). The guest usually leaves soon thereafter -- unlike in the US, when the coffee comes out, this does not mean the evening is over! In the US, we sit around after the meal over coffee -- often several cups -- and talk, or as they say in the South, we “visit.” I can’t tell you the number of Kuwaitis (and other Arabs) who have told me they were shocked that immediately after dinner, the host “terminated” the dinner evening by abruptly serving coffee! (*I am sure the American host was just as puzzled that the Kuwaitis ran from the home after drinking their coffee!*) ☺!



**DO I TAKE A GIFT?** *It is inappropriate for a first-time guest to take a gift to the woman of the house.* Otherwise, gift giving is common. Dinner guests usually present flowers, sweets, or other small items to the hosts as appreciation for their hospitality. Alcoholic beverages never presented as gifts or offered to guests. A great gift is something from the US, something meaningful -- not a tacky pen and pencil set with your organizational logo; candy is dandy, books, especially “coffee-table” types of books with big

beautiful photos -- very nice touch, especially if you sign it commemorating your visit, friendship, etc. Hand it to your male Kuwaiti friend, not to his wife for reasons already discussed. If you are “stumped” for a gift idea, ask your hotel concierge -- your new best friend.

**TOPICS OF CONVERSATION:** Discussing family -- the extended family is always good as is inclusion of comments on grandparents, children, etc. Surprising to many Americans, sports can be a good topic of conversation. Don’t be surprised that your Kuwaiti counterpart may have their own favorite American baseball or football team. This might be a good topic of conversation but I recommend learning a few interesting facts about the Kuwaiti soccer (football) team i.e., they wear blue uniforms when playing at home and red when on the road. Being able to recall some stats is also impressive: Kuwait’s biggest win was against Bhutan in 2000, when Kuwait *whacked* the Bhutan team 20 - 0 (good thing it wasn’t archery -- the famous Bhutan sport...!).

Also, camel racing is big in Kuwait -- and this tradition goes back, well, to the Bedouins. Racing the “ship of the desert” has an official season; from November to May and the high point for Arab’s camel-racing enthusiasts in the annual Gulf Camel Championship which is held in a different Gulf country every year. Winners receive vehicles, special commemorative swords, daggers, etc. This is a *big money, big deal* sport not unlike Triple Crown Thoroughbred horse racing or polo in the US.



**Impress-your-Kuwaiti-colleague-camel racing comment:** “I understand the Sheikh from the UAE is the one who wins many of the championship races. His name is (pause for effect here and touch your chin with your index finger)...*Mak-toum..right?*” (Easy to remember if you imagine a camel racing at a speed of Mach Two-um....*OK, that was a stretch....*) Anyone remotely interested in camel racing knows Sheikh Macktoun. He is famous for the treatment given his racing camels who receive special food, massages, etc., and employs an army of camel racing trainers, etc., in order to provide the best racing camels in history.

What does this have to do with your job? Nothing and everything. Remember, proper cultural competency interaction with Kuwaitis is all about relationships. This further delineates you from all the other American and international competitors because it shows you to be more personable, more interested in them individually, and especially culturally aware. You are, in effect, making it easier for them to work with you.

Again, in Kuwait:

**It’s not the job that is most important,  
it’s how you treat everyone in getting the job done  
that is important.**

**Topics to not discuss?** My recommendation would be (1) Arab Israeli State of Affairs (2) human rights, women's rights and (3) what you consider problems with Islam -- could I make this up? I have known of at least one fellow who discussed this with their Arab colleagues; the result was a cultural thermonuclear meltdown. Can you imagine someone doing this? Could you imagine your Kuwaiti friend telling you about his view of problems with Catholicism, or the Methodist Church, or Protestantism? Huh? *C'mon.....*

Any good news to this story? He wasn't American but that is about the end of the good news.

**Other “Unmentionables”:** Don't confide to your Kuwaiti counterpart that, “...well, my wife wears the pants in our family” even if it is true. This marks you as less of a man in their eyes, etc., and not being part of the natural order of things -- men have their roles as do women. Kuwaiti culture is a patriarchal culture and the men “wear the pants”-- or *thobe*. However, in the Kuwaiti culture, the smooth operation of the home, etc., is the woman's “world” (see comments on Family below).

Do not tell jokes that are even remotely “off-color” -- especially if it involves women. This marks you as a cultural *Neanderthal* with no appreciation for proper behavior/conduct and one who is unworthy of an otherwise good relationship.

**Final recommendation:** Stay formal and professional -- this will seem unusual to many Americans as we are always ready to adjust to a more informal structure, but you can do it.

**FAMILY:** Generally most activities for Kuwaitis center on their family - nuclear and extended -- as well as very distant relatives. Generally, young Kuwaitis often do not leave the family and continue to live with their parents until they marry -- and once married, parents continue to support their married children long after they are married. Although the man is generally considered the head of the family, Kuwaiti women *do* work outside the home as doctors, teachers, and other professional fields. but they still hold primary responsibility for household management and raising of the children.

I know American professional women will read this and say, “*Hey, that sounds familiar!*” But, most Kuwaiti families have servants so, cooking, cleaning the house, doing laundry, etc., are all handled by someone else. Combined with strong family support with children, etc., the world of working American woman and working Kuwaiti woman could not be more different.

It’s not right or wrong, it just is.....

### **So what About Marriage?**

Unlike earlier generations, a majority of today’s Kuwaiti parents are less likely to arrange marriages for their children. However, don’t expect a western style dating environment in Kuwait. A couple who wish to marry still must receive approval from each family. And, although this is different behavior than earlier generations, the issue of the dowry is unchanged. The groom is “required” to pay the bride’s father a dowry -- and the more important the wife’s family is, the higher the dowry.

Also, you should give thought to the public behavior not only of your group of Americans in Kuwait, but also in the behavior between each other. Overly enthusiastic greetings, animated and joking conversations and meaningless “let’s do lunch” invitations only reinforce negative stereotypes of Americans by many Kuwaitis.

### **DISPLAYING INTIMACY:**

Don’t do it -- tacky and in the eyes of the general Kuwaiti public sometimes viewed as obscene -- not even an “air kiss.” I’m not referring to an on-the-sidewalk embrace here (yikes!). I’m referring to male-female holding hands, or any gesture of affection -- especially kissing or prolonged touching. *Just don’t.....*

### **STATUS OF WOMEN IN KUWAIT:**

For many Americans -- men and women -- this is one area of great difficulty. This is normal because we, as Americans, come from a cultural structure that says we are all equal, have equal opportunity to succeed, endowed by the creator with certain inalienable rights, etc. Any attempt by society at large to change this is viewed by us as individually violating and repressive, etc.

Although my Kuwaiti friends add that in Kuwait a woman “can go shopping, attend public activities, or travel alone -- no problem,” my recommendation is that you always travel with a man or two. Physical and verbal abuse of women is an on-going problem. Since the beginning

of 2007, at least three attempted sexual assaults against western women in Kuwait City have been reported. Still today (traditional culture, remember?) a woman walking the street by herself is often considered, well a streetwalker/prostitute -- or at least, she is from a family that doesn't care about the public "image" of its women or the family's honor. Oh, and one other thing, forget the ankle bracelets. In many areas of the Arab world (but lesser so in Kuwait due to the relaxed nature of dress), this is considered a "flashing neon-sign" advertising that you are a prostitute. Think about it; if you are veiled from head to toe, how else do you, well, ....advertise your occupation? Got it? Now you know.



**DIET:** Since Kuwait borders the Gulf, fish has been a mainstay of the Kuwaiti diet for centuries. Kuwaitis typically eat seafood several times a week, including shrimp, hamour (grouper), hamra (red snapper), and the local favorite, zubaidi (pomfret). Chicken is also frequently on the menu. From the bedouin tradition comes grilled, skewered meat, both cubed and ground. Traditionally, the meat would be lamb, but the ease of international trade has made beef more accessible. Salads are usually made with romaine lettuce,

cucumbers, tomatoes, radishes, and red onions, dressed with lemon juice and salt. Pickled turnips, tomatoes, and peppers are common side dishes. *Majboos* (rice and meat) is a favorite dish throughout the country. Rice is also often served with vegetables and a green salad. Desserts are commonly fruits, especially dates. Obviously, pork or drinking alcohol is not done.



**HOLIDAYS:** Islamic holidays are set according to the lunar calendar. These include *Eid al Fitr* (a three-day feast at the end of *Ramadan*), *Eid al Adha* (the Feast of the Sacrifice, which commemorates the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son and celebrates the annual *Hajj*), the birth of the prophet Muhammad, and the Islamic New Year. As you know, during *Ramadan*, Kuwaitis do not eat, drink, or smoke from sunrise to sunset each day. Meals are in the evening and predawn hours. Public eating, drinking, and smoking are prohibited (even for foreigners) in the daytime. During *Eid al Fitr*, extended families gather for feasting, people visit senior relatives, children receive gifts, etc.

Here are the Kuwait Holidays for 2010 and 2010:

**2010**

- 1 Jan New Year's Day.
- 25 Feb National Day.
- 26 Feb Liberation Day.
- 26 Feb Mouloud (Birth of the Prophet).
- 9 Jul Al-Esra Wa Al-Meraj (Ascension of the Prophet).

11 Sep Eid al-Fitr (End of Ramadan).  
17 Nov Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice).  
7 Dec Islamic New Year.

**2011**

1 Jan New Year's Day.  
15 Feb Mouloud (Birth of the Prophet).  
25 Feb National Day.  
26 Feb Liberation Day.  
28 Jun Al-Esra Wa Al-Meraj (Ascension of the Prophet).  
31 Aug Eid al-Fitr (End of Ramadan).  
7 Nov Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice).  
26 Dec Islamic New Year.

**GOVERNMENT:**

Kuwait, a constitutional monarchy has the oldest directly elected parliament among Arab Gulf States. The head of state is the Emir or Sheikh, a hereditary office. The Prime Minister is the head of the Kuwaiti Government which must contain at least one elected member of the Kuwaiti parliament (confusingly referred to as the National Assembly). The National Assembly has the power to dismiss the Prime Minister or any member of cabinet through a series of constitutional procedures. All cabinet ministers are answerable to the National Assembly.

The National Assembly consists of fifty elected members, who are chosen in elections held every four years. The Kuwait Constitution specifies that nomination of a new Emir or Crown Prince by the ruling Al-Sabah family has to be approved by the National Assembly. Any amendment to the constitution can be proposed by the Emir but it needs to be approved by more than two-thirds of the members of the National Assembly before being implemented.

There have been several conflicts between the Emir, the government and the National Assembly over various policies. The National Assembly has been suspended three times since 1976 and was dissolved again in May 2009 by the Emir leading to the resignation of the Prime Minister and the rest of the Cabinet. Elections were held again in May of 2009.

Prior to 2005, only 15% of the Kuwaiti citizen population was allowed to vote, with all "recently naturalized" citizens (i.e. those of less than thirty years' citizenship), and members of the armed forces excluded. On 16 May 2005, Parliament permitted women's suffrage.

In 2005, the Prime Minister announced the appointment of the first women as a cabinet minister. Massouma Mubarak was designated the post of Planning Minister and Minister of State for Administrative Development Affairs. During the 2008 parliamentary elections, 27 of the 275 candidates were women. However, none of them won. In the parliamentary elections on 16 May 2009, 16 female candidates competed for 50 seats for a four-year term. Four female candidates won their seats and became Kuwait's first female lawmakers.



**Massouma Mubarak,  
First Kuwaiti Cabinet  
Minister**

## **ECONOMY:**

Kuwait has a geographically small, but wealthy, relatively open economy with crude oil reserves of about 104 billion barrels - and has a fifth of the world's oil reserves.<sup>6</sup> Petroleum accounts for nearly half of GDP, 95% of export revenues, and 95% of government income. Kuwaiti officials have committed to increasing oil production to 4 million barrels per day by 2020.

Kuwait has the highest human development index of the Arab World and classified as a high income economy by the world Bank.<sup>7</sup> Kuwait has done little to diversify its economy, in part, because of this positive fiscal situation, and, in part, due to the poor business climate and the acrimonious relationship between the National Assembly and the executive branch, which has stymied most movement on economic reforms. Nonetheless, the government in 2009 passed an economic development plan that pledges to spend up to \$140 billion in five years to diversify the economy away from oil, attract more investment, and boost private sector participation in the economy. Increasing government expenditures by so large an amount during the planned time frame may be difficult to accomplish.

## **EDUCATION:**

The development of the Kuwaiti educational system can be largely attributed to the wealth that oil has brought to the country. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there were very few educational facilities in the country. A small number of Koranic schools known as Al-Katatib taught reading, writing, and some arithmetic. There was no public education for the first part of the century and funding for education came mainly from Kuwait's wealthier private citizens.<sup>8</sup>

The government took control of education in 1939 and had begun 17 schools by 1945. As oil production picked up in the post-World War II era, the government began investing large sums of money into social services, and education was one of its top priorities. By 1960, there were about 45,000 students enrolled in the Kuwaiti educational system, including 18,000 girls.

In the 1960's, there were several more advances in education. The constitution of 1962 stipulates that education is assured and promoted by the State, thus reflecting the belief that education is a fundamental right of all citizens. Schooling was first made compulsory in 1965, and in 1967 a private school system re-emerged with the help of considerable government subsidies. Today, there are currently close to 500,000 students enrolled in Kuwaiti schools, constituting approximately 30 percent of the entire population.

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<sup>6</sup> *Oil & Gas Journal*, January, 2007

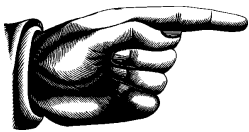
<sup>7</sup> "Human Development Report 2009: Kuwait, The United Nations. Found at: [http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country\\_fact\\_sheets/cty\\_fs\\_KWT.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_KWT.html)

<sup>8</sup> Much of this discussion comes from info found at: Lesko, John P. "Kuwait," *World Education Encyclopedia: A Survey of Educational Systems Worldwide*, vol. 2, edited by Rebecca Marlow-Ferguson. Detroit, MI: Gale Group, 2002 and <http://www.kuwaitculture.com/About%20Us/Education.htm>

There are three basic levels of education in Kuwait – elementary, intermediate, and secondary. Each level involves four years of study, and schooling usually begins at age six. Pre-school is available to four to six year olds, and students who complete their basic education can continue on to higher education. Schooling is compulsory for all children ages six to 14 (elementary and intermediate levels) and all stages of state education, including higher education, are free. Students in all Kuwaiti schools study English beginning in the second grade. Unlike most co-ed private schools, Kuwaiti public schools are segregated by sex beginning in the first grade. Women are granted the same rights to education as men and the Ministry of Education has worked to further the education of women through various programs.

Many Kuwaitis choose not to send their children to government schools but, rather, enroll them in private schools. There are numerous private schools in Kuwait, many of which have foreign sponsors and are co-ed such as The Bayan Bilingual School, the American School of Kuwait, the American International School, the British School of Kuwait, etc.

### **PERSONAL SECURITY AND CRIME IN KUWAIT:**



**In the final analysis, you are responsible for your own personal security.**



We know terrorist actions have taken place against Americans and westerners throughout the Middle East, (this certainly includes Gulf states such as Kuwait) and although I am not a big fan of the State Department’s Travel website, it is better than nothing so you might begin there for relatively up to date information and general -- very general -- recommendations.

Kuwait is not as “active” regarding terrorist events such as you find in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Saudi Arabia, but the threat does exist and the close proximity to Iraq and the profoundly attractive target of countless western business types and contractors and of course, the Kuwaiti oil fields makes Kuwait a tempting target. While in Kuwait, you need to increase your security awareness. Most techniques you either (1) already do or (2) have heard about them -- in which case it is time to implement them. Watch your surroundings, take note of what is going on around you, vary your daily routine, watch for people watching you -- if you spot them don’t confront them, go back to a public safe area and tell someone -- and finally, don’t jog through the streets in your little speedo shorts and tank top -- *could I make this up?* Also:

You should carry identification (passport or civil identification) at all times as authorities conduct regular checks for illegal workers, and the police don’t need a reason to stop you. Taking photographs of or near government buildings or other infrastructure, including oil fields, can lead to detention. It is even forbidden to take photographs at some shopping centers -- but all of this can be reconciled by simply asking your hosts what is appropriate/inappropriate regarding taking photos.

Often unknown to many travelers to Kuwait, you can go to prison for challenging the authority of the Emir or insulting him – whether by speech, writing, drawing or any other means of expression.

Homosexual acts are illegal in Kuwait as is also illegal for unmarried *heterosexual* couples to live together. Public displays of affection can lead to arrest.

Don't be lulled into thinking "it can't happen to me" because you haven't heard of anything happening in Kuwait. When someone says to you, "oh, it's pretty safe around here; nothing has happened," or "... the chance of you being involved in something like that is one in a thousand..." remember that if it happens to you the chances just went up to 100%.

As recent as August 2009, Kuwaiti authorities arrested six individuals with ties to Al Qaeda for planning attacks on US troops at the US military base, Camp Arifjan, as well as an oil refinery and government buildings. Soon thereafter, a warning was issued to American and other travelers in Kuwait warned that terrorists may be conducting surveillance on Westerners, particularly at hotels, housing areas and rental car facilities, and that contractors, especially those with links to the military, may be targeted. The Kuwaitis work aggressively to prevent terrorist events and most agree, these have been effective actions. Indeed, as recently as 2005, many media outlets were pointing to Kuwait as the next region to watch for terrorist activity. In 2005 the Asia Times Newspaper, for instance, referred to the seemingly inexhaustible flow of volunteer suicide bombers from Iraq that were headed to Kuwait. Prior to that, an attack on two American contractors in an SUV by a lone gunman left one dead and another seriously wounded.

Also, there have been a number of protests by expatriate laborers over their employment conditions. NO BRAINER: If you see a protest developing as you are in the street, you should try and get out of the area; avoid all protests and demonstrations as they may/often do turn violent. There is always possibility that troublemakers may infiltrate Kuwait from Iraq (historically) intent on causing harm to Kuwaiti interests by scaring away business investment, etc. Don't be paranoid, be prepared by using your knowledge here.

More Good News: Excellent "police work" and other resourceful approaches have dramatically eliminated (for the present time anyway) the number of terrorist incidents in Kuwait. For instance, extremely rigid checks on trucks and automobiles entering public areas or around government areas have stopped several bombing attempts and have forced bombers to try other methods -- or locations -- outside Kuwait. Also, the Kuwaitis are very public about their anti-terrorism actions such as the time when a Kuwaiti Al-Qaeda spokesman was seen in a video tape with bin Laden and al-Zawahiri and the Kuwaiti was stripped of his citizenship immediately. Also, back in 2001, Seikh Saud Nasser al-Sabah, a member of the royal family and a former oil and information minister, launched the first of several blistering attacks on Kuwaiti Islamist parties in al-Sharq al-Awsat. These attacks forced most respectable Kuwaiti Islamist groups, such as the Society for Revival of Islamic Heritage, to sever all contact with al-Qaeda.

CRIME: More Good news -- the crime threat in Kuwait is regarded as low. Violent crimes do occur but they are rare. Our recommendation is to exercise the same caution you would in any large city in the US or in other areas of the world. NOTE: An American passport earns big money for anyone in the Middle East who can “procure” one. Make sure you have copy of your passport (with all pages/stamps, etc.) in each of your bags. In the event you lose your passport, being issued a new one will still be a huge bureaucratic hassle -- but the copies will minimize much of the difficult issues. State Department guidance recommends that the loss or theft abroad of a U.S. passport should be reported immediately to the nearest US Embassy or Consulate (*duh, they're the ones who will get you the new one.*) and they will in-turn, notify the local authorities. LITTLE KNOWN TIP: In your luggage bags somewhere, throw in an extra set of passport photos. I know this seems a bit of an overkill but a quick visit into a Walgreens or CVS in the US and a \$7.00 investment helps minimize this issue as well and are invaluable if you need a passport replaced. Get new photos after 3-4 years. No big deal.

In reality, if you are a victim of crime, etc., the US Embassy/Consulate staff can, for example, be incredibly helpful -- remember you are not the first one to be in this predicament. *It is their job* to assist you to find appropriate medical care, contact family members or friends, etc. They generally do not conduct investigation and prosecution of the crime as this is the responsibility of local authorities.

Your most significant day-to-day threat: Automobile traffic; often getting to and from the office is the most life-threatening endeavor you will undertake while in Kuwait. ***Seat belts everyone*** -- and don't close your eyes or read a newspaper. Remember, be aware of what is taking place around you -- even it seems your life is routinely flashing in front of your eyes during a commute....

### **Other general security travel tips:**

Traveling in a group? Each member should pack a full change of clothing and give to one of your travel mates and they should do the same for you. Reason? If one of you ends up at your destination without your bags, you at least have a clean change of clothes available.

Sanitize your wallet - do you really need your library card in Kuwait?

Make copies (front and back) of all credit cards with which you travel. The copy of the back is necessary because it has the phone number for reporting your stolen card. It is helpful to notify the credit card company of your travel plans to avoid having your credit card “locked out” from your use.

Pickpockets are everywhere and they often work in well-choreographed teams who will “bump” into you, ask for directions, spill things on you -- even creating a disturbance for the purpose of distracting you and then pick you clean. If you notice the action by the time you determine who

did it, your valuables have been handed off to other team members three times or more. *Yea, they're that good.....*

Beware of child pickpocket teams -- they know you won't suspect them.

Bag Tags: DO NOT put your home address, home phone number, and full name on your bag tag. Instead, include your cell phone or work phone number and your organizational address.

ANOTHER NO-BRAINER: Many hotels have a "doorknob" breakfast order form -- are you kidding? After all the personal protection steps you have taken, NOW you literally *hang a sign on your door* saying that you are expecting a knock at the door -- *and will open your locked door* -- to whoever knocks between 6 and 6:30 AM?! Huh?

The form is titled "BREAKFAST" and "American Breakfast at \$23.50". It lists various options for breakfast items with radio buttons for selection. The options include:

- Choice of fresh juice: Orange, Mango, Pineapple, Tomato
- Choice of fresh fruit: Orange, Watermelon, Pineapple, Apple
- Choice of cereal with fresh milk: Cornflakes, Cocoa Crunch, Rice Crispies
- Choice of yogurt: Strawberry, Blueberry, Mix Fruits
- Two eggs: Scrambled, Over Easy, Sunny Side Up
- Choice of fried: Bacon, Ham, Sausage, Fresh Beans
- Choice of bakery with butter & jam: Omelet, Pancakes, Omelette
- Choice of: Coffee, Tea, Milk, Cream, Lemon

At the bottom, there is a section for "Please deliver between" with time slots: 6:30am to 7:00am, 7:00am to 7:30am, 7:30am to 8:00am, 8:00am to 8:30am, 8:30am to 9:00am, 9:00am to 9:30am, 9:30am to 10:00am. There are also fields for "No. of persons", "Room Number", and "Day/Date".

Single woman? Buy a cheap "wedding ring" band and wear it. In many regions, the thought is that a single woman is clearly "in the market" to find someone.....

Carry minimum number of valuables, minimum jewelry.

Forget fanny packs -- they are a "come rob me" signal to all the bad guys.

Use a security wallet. The best we have found are available through Magellans (no, we don't get a commission....) and range from an undercover leg stash holder to a specialized "Hidden Pocket" that hangs from your belt and into the front of your pants or skirt.



I'm not crazy about "money belts" because they look like, well, *money belts!* I don't like the neck pouch although it seems very handy -- and it is, *for the bad guys*. They just snatch it and run. I know it has a strong cord attaching it to you but sooner or later, you will drop off. <http://www.magellans.com/>



**NOTE: The local equivalent of the "911" emergency line in Kuwait is "777" and can be reached 24 hours a day, seven days a week.**

**HEALTH:** Information below from recommendations on the CDC website. Always check with your doctor regarding immunizations and your particular medical threat profile. Before going to Kuwait, you should ensure you have the vaccinations listed below and medications for vaccine-preventable diseases and other for which diseases you might be at risk.



Vaccination or Disease	Recommendations or Requirements for Vaccine-Preventable Diseases
Routine	Recommended if you are not up to date with routine shots such as; measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccine, diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus (DPT) vaccine, polo-virus vaccine, etc.
Hepatitis A	Recommended for unvaccinated people traveling to or working in countries with an intermediate or high level of Hepatitis A virus infection and Kuwait is included in this list as exposure may occur through food or water.
Typhoid	Recommended for unvaccinated people traveling to or working in the Middle East, especially if visiting smaller cities, and/or staying with friends or relatives where exposure might occur through food or water.

**H1N1 ISSUES:**

In January 2009, Kuwait instituted its H1N1 vaccination program. The first two priority groups were (1) Hadj pilgrims and (2) school children. Later, in May 2009, the first confirmed cases of H1N1 were reported in Kuwait -- and they were 18 American soldiers arriving in Kuwait.

REALITY CHECK: H1N1 has accounted for 1,018 deaths worldwide as of Feb 2010 (WHO Statistics -- <http://www.emro.who.int/csr/h1n1/>). It is of limited threat to the Kuwaiti traveler.

More information is found on the Center for Disease Control Website, [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) and World Health Organization website, <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/> .

**ADDITIONAL NOTE:** I know this sounds like another “no-brainer” comment, but if you have prescription medicine needs, *ensure you have enough medicine for at least two weeks more than you are planning to stay in Kuwait.* The more critical your medical condition, the more important this is. Diabetics that need one or more daily injections, etc., or have an insulin pump need to pack enough medicine to avoid a dramatic situation. Remember to pack about a week’s

worth in your carry-on luggage because if your bags are lost for a few days, you still have your “lifeline.”

## **US-KUWAITI CROSS CULTURAL POTPOURRI**

### **COGNITIVE STYLES**

This is an associative culture; the group ethic rules. As a result, final decisions may prove elusive -- particularly to the American mind. For some, “outside information” that does not reflect Islamic values is viewed with suspicion while a large majority of higher class, educated business and government types completed their education in the United States, England, etc., where they learned to process information conceptually, analytically, and not just associatively. But, remember relationships and relationship maintenance is virtually institutionalized in this culture. As a result, there will be a tendency for many Kuwaitis to rely on their personal involvement (and those of their friends-colleagues) than using rules or laws to solve “issues” or facilitate business endeavors.

### **THE LOCUS OF DECISION MAKING:**

Again, a reminder to never overlook the fact that this is a group-focused culture and one that often relies on group consensus as an important part of the decision making process. This is an interesting social-cultural structure in that the male leader may be the decision-maker but he does so through consensus of the group “collective.” The individual is subordinate to the family, tribe, the collective soul, etc. Leadership and identity come from one’s lineage; their name and so on and one’s ability to protect the honor of the extended family.

### **NEGOTIATING WITH YOUR KUWAITI COUNTERPARTS**

“RUSH” really doesn’t translate here. Especially *un*-important to your Kuwaiti counterpart is your organizational timeline. That isn’t to say they try to sabotage your business efforts but Kuwaitis prefer to do business with those with whom they have a personal relationship -- so expect to spend a significant amount of time engaged in “getting-to-know-you activities.”

**On your first business meeting, don’t expect to discuss business.** On your first business meeting surprise your Kuwaiti counterpart by not talking about business but by asking him about his family; his father and his grandfather, and so on. Drop in tidbits of Kuwaiti history you find interesting, historical locations, food such as the famous fish dishes you want to try because Dr. Culture recommended it.... Don’t specifically ask about women of the family this is viewed as a rather rude behavior -- it is none of your business. However, there is nothing wrong with “*So, Ahmad, how is your family?*”

Expect to drink tea over and over as you discuss your family, your Kuwaiti colleague’s family and so on. If you are asked, “*tell me about yourself*” don’t say anything about the job. This is difficult for many Americans because most they normally “launch” into a not-so-brief synopsis of their resume; how long they have been with the company or agency, jobs and responsibilities held within the agency or organization etc. This is often viewed as rude self-promotion. The Kuwaiti wants to learn about *you*. He wants to be comfortable with you personally so that you

can move into a professional relationship comfortably. This is important to the Kuwaiti so it should become important to you. I recommend practicing what you would say - and bring pictures of your family including your father, mother, children, etc. **One Note:** In the Hadith (the thoughts and narrations of the Prophet Mohammed as opposed to his recitations in the Koran) it is written that “angels will not enter a home where dogs reside” so, *DO NOT* bring pictures of you with your dogs. In the Arab world, dogs are useful for farming, security, etc., but not residing in the home, sleeping in your bed, etc., such as you often find in the US. Also, if asked how many children you have, *do not include your dog in the count* -- and absolutely, do not refer to your dog as “my youngest” or, “my baby” and especially avoid saying, “...and this is a picture of my “grand-dog.”

### **Other:**

Kuwaitis have a reputation as shrewd negotiators that do not respond to high-pressure sales tactics. “Issues” in contract negotiations are best worked out of the larger meeting and in a one-on-one arrangement; remember: shame avoidance, relationships, etc....

As you find in Asian cultures, being direct is not always the best approach in an “indirect” culture such as in Kuwait -- although not as pronounced as you find in other Arab regions.

Kuwait culture is a hierarchical society so don't be surprised to learn the Kuwaiti company you with whom you are negotiating is structured around a family representative that owns the business or is extremely influential within the agency. Obviously, this is a bit different in US government to Kuwaiti government work but it is a strong indicator of how “tight” business and family are in Kuwait -- and within the government.

One of The Most Difficult Issues: Since, generally, there is no “hurry” or rush in Kuwaiti business or their personal lives, Kuwaitis do not fear silence. Do not feel obligated to speak during each and every period of silence!

Not surprising, with this much emphasis on personal relationships, trust building, etc., do not change your lead negotiator, team leader, or company representative. If you do, you may have to start over because they don't know this “new guy.”

Finally, never forget saving face and avoiding shame are vital to Kuwaitis. Try to stay aware of this. I have heard of times where a company had to compromise on some issue in order to protect someone's ego on the Kuwaiti team of negotiators.

**DR. CULTURE SECRET WEAPON TIP:** For many Americans, patience is something of which we are short. Unfortunately, becoming impatient with your Kuwaiti colleagues is viewed

by them as an embarrassing criticism of them and their culture -- once again, this is a “shame-avoidance” culture. By becoming publicly frustrated and impatient in your Kuwaiti interactions, you are embarrassing them, causing loss of face, etc. Be patient, adjust your timelines, and try to get your supervisors to understand this as well. Now, *that* may be more difficult than becoming more patient with the Kuwaitis!

### **BUSINESS CARDS:**

Your business card should be printed in English on one side and Arabic on the other. If you have difficulty getting Arabic on the back of your business card, when you get to Kuwait, locate the hotel concierge and he will make it happen. You are not the first one to need the service and you can feel confident that the local translation should work better than someone in the US trying to render a good translation.

### **THE ARAB - ISRAELI STATE OF AFFAIRS: THE GORDIAN KNOT?**

Most Americans are woefully ill-informed about the complexities of this cultural-historical-political-religious-military-catastrophe. The issue of the Arab-Israeli state of affairs might come up but generally, I would recommend avoiding this topic entirely unless you are *extremely* well versed in all historical, religious, military, political components -- and especially as these components are viewed from the Arab or Kuwaiti position.

### **IN CONCLUSION:**

I hope this information provides you a basic framework from which you may be able to make sense of the US-Kuwaiti Cross Cultural arena. This work hopefully, will only be the beginning for you. This country sketch is also supplemented by additional information on the [www.drulture.com](http://www.drulture.com) or the [www.interlinkconsultin.com](http://www.interlinkconsultin.com) websites. Much of the information for this work came from several varied and trusted sources including numerous new articles, books, such as Dr. Margaret Nydell's *Understanding Arabs* and Mr. Bill Baker's *The Cultural Heritage of Arabs, Islam, and the Middle East*, as well as several other Interlink subject matter authorities who received a 10 PM call from me asking for clarification on a cultural issue.

Thanks to their work, research, and incredible knowledge, the Interlink team of authors, trainers, friends and advisors have been instrumental in compiling this country sketch. It's all about relationships...

Dr. C