

Business Negotiation in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The article provides a well informed presentation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia followed by invaluable tips for all those who intend to negotiate with business people from this country. The authors are more than conversant with the topic, the first being a Saudi diplomat and the second, a Romanian employee of the Saudi Embassy in Bucharest.

Keywords: *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Saudi hospitality, dress code, business negotiation, women in business*

Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the largest countries in the Arab World and in the Middle East, situated in the south-west of Asia and bordered to the west by the Red Sea shore, to the north by the borders of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the Republic of Iraq and north-east by the State of Kuwait. To the east it is bounded by the Arabian Gulf coast, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the State of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. In the south, it has borders with the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Yemen. The total area of the KSA is around 2,250,000 square kilometers covering 80% of the total surface of the Arabian Peninsula.¹

This unique location allowed Saudi Arabia to play a major role in the world history, as a transit point for the ancient trade and as the birthplace of Islam. One major factor in the cultural development of the Arabian Peninsula was the appearance of the Arabic language as “the language of international learning.” It is known as a period of “Golden Age”, the Muslim world becoming the center for learning and scientific advances, many of the ideas and many methods of the Muslims scholars are the foundation of today modern sciences.

In 1932, after a 30 years campaign (1902-1932) of unification of almost all the tribes and small kingdoms from the Arabian Peninsula, King

¹ Data collected from the Central Intelligence Agency Internet resource, web link in the Bibliography section.

Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Al-Faisal Al Saud, known in the world as Ibn Saud, founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a monarchy with the Holy Qur'an as its constitution and Arabic as its national language, Al-Arabīyah.

"Ibn Saud was twenty-seven, enormous in build, strong, lean, and hard, an accepted leader with a reputation as a fierce fighter and all the prestige of victory behind him, a tremendous virile force of a man who had defeated the Turks, overthrown the Rashid, and conquered Nejd by the strength of his own right arm." (Armstrong, 2005, p. 89)

King Abdul Aziz set first two major bodies to govern, the Consultative Council, Majlis Al-Shura and Council of Deputies, Majlis Al-Wukala, which in October 1953 became the Council of Ministers, Majlis Al-Wuzara, the most powerful from all the Government institutions because its powers comes directly from the King and can examine any issue in the Kingdom.

The Founder, the great King Abdul Aziz, was a remarkable leader with vision and imagination and through the discovery of the petroleum in 1938, the great King headed Saudi Arabia towards a road of modernization, turning it from a desert nation to a modern and sophisticated state but keeping its values and traditions, opening the way to the business world and most important of all, making from the Kingdom an important player on the international stage.

To know its people understand and to understand its culture, it is very important to know some facts about Saudi Arabia:

The official name: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, العربية المملكة السعودية, *Al Mamlakah Al Arabiyah As Saudiyah*, named after the ruling dynasty of the country, House of Saud.

The National Holiday: the Unification of the Kingdom, on 23rd of September 1932.

Language: Arabic

Religion: Islam, the entire population is Muslim; the only non-Muslim in the country are the foreigners who work in the field of diplomacy or for Saudi companies. In the KSA there are no churches, temples, synagogues or other religious institutions, therefore the other people who are not Muslims, they practice their religion in their homes without any interdiction.

"Saudi Arabia is a modern nation that adheres to Islam, honors its Arab heritage and tradition, and presses vigorously forward in the service

of Islam while securing the welfare of its people.”(Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, 2017, web p. Islam)

The word “Islam” means purity, peace and obedience to Allah – the Creator of the universe. The teachings of Islam for all the Muslims are: to be tolerant, to be good, to be right, to understand and to establish fraternity with all people.

Islam does not tolerate the shedding of innocent blood, the prejudice or the discriminatory actions. “If you do stretch your hand against to kill me, I shall never stretch my hand against to kill you: for I fear Allah, the Lord of the ‘*Âlamîn* (mankind, all that exists)”. (Holy Qur’an, Sûrah 5. Al-Mâ’idah, 28, p. 147)

Capital: Riyadh, with a population of 6 million.

Population: 28 160 273, according to the UN data from 2015, the immigrants make up more than 30% of the total population.²

Constitution: It was issued by Royal decree in March 1992 and identifies the nature of the state, its goals and responsibilities for the relationship between the ruler and the citizens, and it is based on the Holy Qur’an and Sunnah – the words, acts and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Judicial System: the Judicial Services administer the *Shariah*, the bases of the legal system, providing the necessary legal services for civil and criminal cases through the courts, with the notification that several codes have been introduced and the commercial disputes are handled by special committees.

Administrative Regions: the country is divided in 13 provinces, *mintaqah*, (fig. 4.2) ruled by a governor, a Prince from the Royal Family³ but this thing it is not necessarily.

The discovery of oil in the 1938 transformed Saudi Arabia from a purely trade-based economy to one of the largest exporters of petroleum in the world. This economic revolution paved the way for a greater industrial base and opened up the country to the business world.

Today, Saudi Arabia is one of the fastest developing countries in the world.

² Data collected from the CIA Internet resource, web link in the Bibliography section.

³ Data collected from Saudi Info Portal, web link in the Bibliography section.

Saudi Arabian Hospitality

The welcoming attitude of the Saudi people is the first thing which impresses a visitor and the sense of the word "hospitality" is an inherent feature of the Saudi tradition. A foreigner who will enter a camp can remain as a guest for more than three days before someone asks his name or the purpose of the visit and also he will be protected three days after his departure – this form of hospitality is called "the bond of salt".

The hospitality begins with the greetings:

As'salaam Alaikum – Peace be with you! And the reply is *Wa alaikum As'salaam* – And peace be with you too!

Ahlan wasahlan – Welcome! With the reply *Ahlan feek* – Welcome to you!

It is very important that the visitors should learn these basic greetings whereas they will show courtesy and respect which will be highly appreciated by their Saudi hosts.

Besides a structured series of verbal greetings exchanges, the Saudi people greet each other with kisses. This can differ from a region to another region; foreigners usually find it fascinating to watch this ritual but the most often seen is one kiss on the right cheek followed by two kisses on the left.

Saudi people show a great respect to the elderly people and they kiss the right hand and the forehead and usually the eldest person initiates the first greeting.

The kiss on the right shoulder is for the King or for a prince, meaning a high form of respect.

Saudi men and women traditionally don't shake hands with each other but they often make exception concerning foreigners. To avoid the embarrassment, usually the Saudi people simply shake hands with the foreigners by locking the thumb and holding the fingers straight out. For example, if a Romanian man meets a Saudi woman, he should allow her to make the first move to shake hands and mostly she will prefer to greet him with a slight head inclination.

Usually small talks follow the welcome gestures and these are expected both in business and socially. The foreigner who doesn't show indulgence to this custom may appear impatient and disrespectful to the Saudi people.

In Saudi Arabia nothing symbolizes the tradition of the hospitality and generosity, more than the coffee ritual, the way how the coffee is

served, a gesture that represents a warm welcome. The ritual of the preparation of the coffee has remained unchanged for centuries and even in modern offices and many homes, where the method has been modified through modern machines to meet the requirements of a modern lifestyle, the ceremony remains recognizably intact.

Every business meeting starts with this ritual, even if the business is not in the country of origin but in a Saudi Arabia company's offices. The coffee, *qahwa* with an aromatic flavor of spices like cardamom and saffron, is served from a *dallah* a traditional pot and the symbol of Saudi hospitality, having on the spout, *leefah*, a bouquet of dried palm fibers, an ancient method of filtration to prevent the grounds and the spices entering the cups. It is served in very small bowls without handles and filled only a half to prevent the burn. Even if you don't drink coffee, if you want to start right, the courtesy is to accept one cup as an acknowledgment of hospitality, accept and return the cup with the right hand. *Qahwa* is usually served with *tamr*, dates, the miraculous fruit of the Kingdom, full of vitamins and energy, therefore a good start for doing business.

Saudi Arabian Dress Code

When you travel for business in Saudi Arabia, as a foreigner you will be amazed by the uniformity of men and women clothing. This represents the Saudi identity and an integral feature of the Arabian personality. Men wear on the head, a *ghutrah*, a white cotton cover like a shawl or a *shamagh*, a shawl with red and white squares linked together, both kept on the top with an *igaaal*, a black cord doubled around the shawl.

These head covers serve as protection from the sun and in the case of sand storms help to cover the nose and the mouth. It is very important to remember that it is very impolite to ask a Saudi man to remove it or to ask about its colors.

King Abdul Aziz, the Founder, and some high Saudi officials, wore a more sophisticated *igaaal*, with three cord tiers, tied together with a gold string. King Faisal Ibn Abdul Aziz Al Saud was the last Saudi King who wore the *igaaal* in this manner. The current ruler of SA, the Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, wears a simple *igaaal*, black, doubled.

Saudi men wear a traditional *thobe*, a long garment, some made of very expensive cotton and some from inexpensive polyester, with buttons at the neck, looking like a long shirt, usually white color in summer and

darker colors in winter. On the top of the *thobe*, the men wear a *bisht*, an elegant coat, very thin, black or brown color with a golden stitch on the edges for official meetings or full of beautiful mixed colors for other special occasions. This *bisht* can also be worn by women also on special occasions. The *thobes*, simple at first sight help to keep the body cool in summer, by drawing the air in from the bottom and allowing it to circulate effectively.

Concerning the women, in public, they should cover their hair with *tarha*, a black scarf and they should wear an *abbaya* above their clothes, a very thin coat made of silk or a synthetic material. In Islam only women are allowed to wear silk and gold jewelry. Leaving the religious requirement, the wearing of the *abbaya* represents first of all a sign of modesty. If a Romanian business woman travels to Saudi Arabia she should wear an *abbaya* but she is not obliged to cover her head.

As we recently saw on the television, the female gender officials are not obliged to wear traditional *abbaya* or *tarha*, it's at their choice. For example, Mrs. Angela Merkel, the first woman chancellor in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, during her visit in Saudi Arabia, this year, 2017, she met King Salman wearing a turquoise jacket and grey pants and the list can continue with the USA former first lady, Mrs. Michelle Obama, Mrs. Theresa May, the British Prime Minister and Mrs. Hillary Clinton, the USA former Secretary of State.

The Nature of Negotiation – Bargaining

The skill of bargaining is inherent in the Arabic personality. The instinct to negotiate every business opportunity is a stimulating daily feature in Saudi Arabia. Even if it is a high power deal or a small bartering in the market, the circumstances and the techniques require tenacity, finesse and of course a right attitude.

A Saudi person greets the process of bargaining with enthusiasm and as a chance to match cleverness. The negotiation is like a game they play to win, showing proficiency and grace, usually followed by reaching an agreement with a win-win situation.

During the opening gestures of greetings, a good negotiator should establish eye contact in an effort to estimate his business opponent, which is using the same technique, searching for signs of weakness. For Saudi people a clever negotiation is an agreeable pastime and often they prolong the time. It is not appropriate to begin any bargaining or business discussion without first completing the ritual of greetings and social

dialogue – this depends on the circumstances and how well the business partners know each other.

Business negotiations can take days or weeks; therefore buy an open airplane ticket. The foreigners who aren't familiar with these long procedures feel frustrated and lose their patience, they are losing the deal instead to learn to adapt. Closing a deal in a specific time is less effective in the long run than succeeding with a tolerant attitude and appreciation for the normal traditional time allocated for the long negotiations.

What is very important to know is that at a company level negotiation, the price is not discussed on the first visit.

The Saudi people are tough negotiators, they are experts in commercial psychology and the time experience taught them to be suspicious.

The foreign companies, who want to enter into business negotiation in Saudi Arabia, usually they need to prove that they offer superior quality of their products or services in order to justify the prices which may seem exaggerate. Unavoidable concessions must be granted and the price is an obvious starting point, therefore you should allow a wicket but be careful not to inflate the initial price otherwise your client will question the true value. If you cannot afford to restructure the price, than try to reduce the size of the package of products or services offered. This will low the costs without compromising the integrity. Take care and recognize when the negotiations are going nowhere. The Saudi people consider a direct rejection impolite and inhospitable and they will support several meetings and each time they will offer a polite delay on decisions. This is a first sign that the negotiations are going in a wrong direction. If you insist you will soon realize that you are wasting everyone's time, without your Saudi partner having said no.

The Saudi businessmen don't like to rush the introductory conversation and they don't like to be pressured in business decisions. In Saudi Arabia the verbal and the write agreements have the same value, therefore don't make a promise if you cannot keep it.

Business Attitude

Concerning discretion, the Saudi people will never discuss important business in front of, or with people with whom they don't have anything in common or to share. When you ask a Saudi person what is his occupation, he may not reveal a specific job or business. He will give a vague description like, *in the business sector* or *in the government sector*.

Someone who works in the government may be a minister or he could be a simple technician.

Therefore the business cards will simplify everything. The business cards should be printed in English on one side and in Arabic on the other side. Almost all the documents presented, presentations, brochures are in English but it will be a courtesy if you will present in both languages. You should have a trust person who knows Arabic very well to check the translation very carefully. When the meeting finishes the visitors are shown an honor if their Saudi partners walk them to the door and also the Saudi businessmen will appreciate if they are treated the same.

Concerning the business hours, usually the day starts at 08:00 am and ends at 5:00 pm but most of the Saudi Arabian companies work a split shift and take a break of several hours in the afternoon and they return in the late afternoon or early evening for a couple of hours. This depends on the different climate of the regions, for example in the Eastern province the work day starts at 07:00 am and they work without a break until 4:00 pm. The exception is the biggest supermarkets which are opened 24hrs and most of them open at 09:30 am but close during the prayer.

We should also know that the business week in Saudi Arabia is from Saturday until Wednesday and that the Saudi people are guided by the Hijri calendar, for example the day of 5th April 2017G is the correspondent of the day of 8th Rajab 1438H.

During the Ramadan month, which doesn't have equivalent with an European month because every year it is moving with one month ahead, for example last year in 2016, Ramadan started on 6th June and ended on 5th July, this year 2017, Ramadan started on 27th May and will end on 24th June.

Ramadan is the month of fasting for all the Muslims all over the world which is mandatory for all adult Muslims, except the people who are travelling, the pregnant women, the sick people and the elderly. The fasting starts from the dawn to sunset; during this period it is forbidden to eat, to drink, to smoke, to have intimate relations, to insult, to lie, to avoid bad thoughts, in other words, to show piety and humility.

As a foreigner you should know that in the month of Ramadan offices hour are from 10:00am to 2:00 pm but it is better to check before the hours of company where you're likely to make business. Due to the demands of fasting, the important decisions are delayed until after *Eid Al Fitr*, the celebration of the end of Ramadan. During *Eid al Fitr* the offices

remain closed for at least one week, and the government offices and other companies, maximum two weeks.

The most popular time for business trips is from October to June, except when one of these months is Ramadan, because the temperature doesn't reach unbearable levels. In May the temperature in Riyadh, at 1:00 pm, is 42° Celsius.

Women in Business

Accordingly to Geert Hofstede study, Saudi Arabia is a male dominated society. The position of women in Saudi Arabian society is usually understood from a wrong point of view and this is because of the media ignorance. "It is certainly true that Muslim and Western views of the role of the women show sharp cultural differences, but the stereotype of Muslim women as uneducated and with no rights and no opportunities is a caricature born of ignorance and malevolence." (Al Farsy, 2001, p. 252)

Nowadays women are accepted in business and not only because they constitute more than a half of the SA society, but also because they are a strong force behind the future development of the Kingdom.

In 2011, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (1924-2015) gave to the Saudi women the right to vote and to run in the municipal council elections and in 2013, King Abdullah issued a royal decree with the purpose to raise the status of the Saudi women, making them a partner in the development programs.

His Majesty restructured the *Al Shoura* Council, the Government, and HM named 30 women in the Council, for the first time in the history of the KSA, with a percentage of 20% of the Council members, a number of 30 women, with the rights to draft and to forward legislation to the monarch. According to The World Post, "there is a higher percentage of women serving in the Saudi Arabian Shura council than in the U.S. Congress." (Manning and Markovitz, 2016, web article).

Most of these wonderful Saudi women hold Ph.D. degrees, high positions in hospitals, universities and civil societies.

This year, 2017, The Custodian of the two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud has issued a Royal order which gives the permission to the Saudi women to travel outside the country without the permission of their *mahram*, the guardian, usually a male relative, father or brother.

"Saudi women are taking on increasingly prominent professional roles, and they are striving to become active members in building their

country. They hold the will, motivation, determination, and ambition to exert a positive influence on society” states Dr. Mona Salahuddin Al Munajjed, writer and one of CEO Middle East most influential women.⁴ She wrote the book “Saudi Women: A Celebration of Success”, because she believes that “women have to struggle twice as hard as men to reach the top. They also represent a valuable yet untapped source of energy for the economy of the region. The successful development of society will depend on both men and women as they must both participate in national activities.”⁵

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⁴ Extract from the web article *A celebration of Saudi women: 'We have to struggle twice as hard as men to reach the top'* source quoted in the Bibliography section.

⁵ Ibid

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