

# CULTURAL INSIGHTS SAUDI ARABIA



A culture crash course every other month, sent right to your inbox!

## QUICK FACTS

### Cultural Duality

Saudi Arabia has been going through rapid modernization, with traditional norms remaining strong in many sectors. Saudi Vision 2030 reform, announced on 25 April 2016, focuses on increased diversification economically, socially, and culturally and creates quite a variability in behaviors by industry and company. Particularly such reform-linked industries as tech, startups, and international JV's are adopting more collaborative and sometimes more direct styles. In general, more formal deference is expected in established firms, while faster, more direct norms prevail in startups.

### Group Orientation and Cooperation

Saudi society is strongly collectivist, with identity shaped by family, tribal affiliations, and extended social networks. **Wasta**, the use of trusted personal connections, often plays an important role in facilitating business outcomes. Within organizations, cooperation is highly valued, and loyalty to the group (whether family, company, or community) guides professional interactions. While employees may share their perspectives, decision-making authority typically resides with senior leadership, reflecting the cultural importance of unity and cohesion.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy known for its rich culture and as the homeland of Islam's holiest sites, Mecca and Medina
- Estimates suggest there are over 15 million expats living and working in Saudi Arabia, making up about 45% of the total population of the country
- Business registrations in Saudi Arabia rose 48% year-on-year in Q1 2025, showing a sharp rise in entrepreneurship and business activity

### BE AWARE!



In Saudi Arabia, avoid discussing religion, politics, or the royal family in business or public settings- these topics are considered highly sensitive.

## ON THE MAP: RIYADH, SAUDI ARABIA



Riyadh, the capital and largest city of Saudi Arabia, is home to an estimated 7.95 million people in 2025 and serves as the nation's political and economic center.

### Hierarchy & Authority

Saudi business culture tends to strongly value hierarchy, and patterns of rank and status are observed in all social and business situations. Speaking directly to top decision makers and securing their trust is often essential. Protocols and formalities are generally adhered to, especially at first meetings. However, under Vision 2030 reforms, many organizations and sectors tied to the reform agenda are bringing in more collaborative practices, though traditional hierarchies remain influential.

### Relationship Orientation

Personal relationships (often mediated by introductions, trust, and wasta) play an important role. Who you know is more important than what you know. Building trust before closing deals or proceeding with formal contracts is common. Business interactions often begin with warm social conversation. It may take time before meetings shift to the core topic, as patience is valued. While traditional business communication tends to be formal, Saudis highly value respect, trust, and courtesy.

### Need for Certainty

Generally, Saudis tend to be risk-averse. Rules for appropriate behavior are known and should not be broken. However, there is also a shift toward more risk tolerance in business with surging registrations, women entrepreneurs growing, regulatory system reforms, and digital transformation.

### Fluid Time

In Saudi Arabia, professionals are expected to arrive punctually, yet the flow of meetings often reflects a more flexible approach. Agendas may serve as a guide rather than a rigid framework, and conversations can evolve organically to address emerging priorities. While deadlines carry weight, deliverables that are thorough and carefully executed are often valued more highly than those produced with speed alone, reflecting the cultural emphasis on diligence, accuracy, and respect for process.



## COMMUNICATION IN SAUDI ARABIA



## Indirect and High Context



Saudi communication is typically high-context, where meaning is conveyed as much through tone, body language, and shared understanding as through words themselves. Business discussions often begin with extended social conversation to build rapport and trust before addressing core issues. Direct criticism is generally avoided in favor of more diplomatic or private feedback. Subtle cues, pauses, and implied meanings carry weight. Demonstrating courtesy, patience, and an awareness of local customs helps establish credibility.

## Formal



Business communication in Saudi Arabia is characterized by formality to convey respect and professionalism. Initial interactions typically involve courteous greetings, the use of titles, and recognition of social status. Open confrontation is generally avoided in order to preserve harmony and mutual respect. Written correspondence and official meetings often follow established protocols, yet conversations may become warmer and more personal once trust is established. Balancing formal respect with genuine rapport is key to developing effective and lasting business relationships.

## Emotionally Expressive



In Saudi Arabia, communication often carries a strong emotional dimension. It is expressed in ways shaped by cultural norms of respect and dignity. Warmth, hospitality, and sincerity are conveyed through tone of voice, emphasis, and attentive listening. Expressiveness is frequently used to reinforce commitment and personal connection, particularly when discussing important matters. At the same time, emotional intensity is balanced with restraint, ensuring that interactions remain respectful and aligned with the value placed on harmony and mutual trust.

## THE DETAILS SAUDI ARABIA CULTURAL PROFILE

