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# United Arab Emirates

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## Focus on United Arab Emirates

**Capital:** Abu Dhabi

**Population:** 2,700,000 (88% male foreign workers)

**Size:** 32,000 sq. mi. (82,800 sq. km.)

**Location:** southeastern side of the Persian Gulf and a small portion of the Arabian Peninsula on the Indian Ocean; bordered by Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar

**Climate:** hot and dry in desert regions, high humidity along the coast, and somewhat less extreme in the mountains; temperatures from 82 to 120 degrees Fahrenheit in summer and from 54 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit in winter.

**Monetary Unit:** dirham

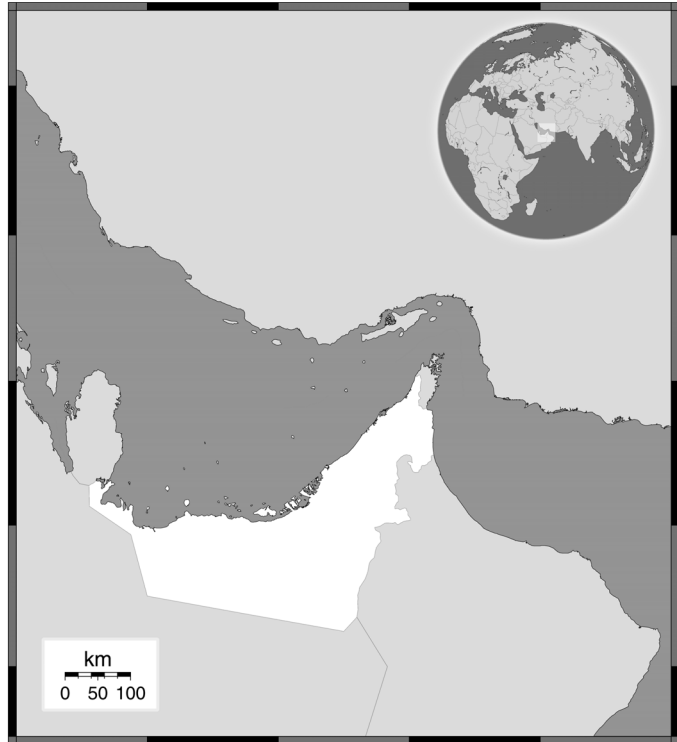
**Urban/Rural Life:** 85% urban, 15% rural

**Religion:** Islam. Most Emiratis are Sunni Muslims; of the foreign Arab population, 60% are Sunni Muslims, 20% are Shia Muslims. The remainder are primarily Hindu and Christian.

**Languages:** Arabic (official). English is widely spoken, particularly in government, business, and universities. Other languages include Urdu and Hindi.

**Ethnicity:** primarily Arab

**Government:** federation of seven emirates, with the president chosen by a supreme council



## Personal Snapshot

I was a little nervous the first time I taught Arab students, because of my own preconceived notions of what Arab culture was like. Two students in the first class I taught were from the United Arab Emirates. I quickly learned that Emiratis are often delightful, respectful, and humorous in class and that they take well to an interactive, dynamic style of teaching. Since my first

experience, I have realized that most Arab students, particularly Emiratis, are cosmopolitan and educated and that they often adjust quickly to life in the West. I think anyone who enjoys teaching, who brings a bit of personality into the class, and who brings a little cultural sensitivity and curiosity to the class will enjoy having Emiratis as students.



### Cultural Closeup

- The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is one of several countries, known collectively as the Persian Gulf States, that were formed as modern nation-states after the Allies defeated Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire in World War I. The Arab states were artificially carved out of the Ottoman Empire by the British and French, and governments were established around the ancient tribal social system that had been in place for thousands of years. In essence, each Persian Gulf state is ruled by a family or clan.
- The president of the UAE is selected by the emirs of the country's seven emirates, or states. Powers are divided between the collective emirates and the state. There are no political parties. Politics tends to revolve around tribal loyalties, with technocrats and those with commercial interests playing a lesser role.
- The Persian Gulf was a trading center in ancient times as far back as the rise of Mesopotamia. In the Middle Ages, Arab traders established regular contacts with China, India, the east coast of Africa, and eventually European trade nations. Contact with the outside world was maintained along the coasts of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Because of trade and rapidly transmitted knowledge, cities and civilization flourished in maritime areas.
- Bedouins, the nomadic direct ancestors of the Arabs, maintained a more insular culture away from the coasts and did not have means to develop elaborate social systems and sedentary civilization. Hence, there is a duality in generalizing about Arab culture. It has seen ebbs and flows of openness to the outside world, contrasted against ancient ways that have changed little over time.
- Islam is the predominant cultural factor in the UAE. Islam is a way of life that permeates all aspects of society, and the notion of secularism is a foreign concept to Gulf society.
- With the discovery of vast petroleum deposits around the Persian Gulf in the early and middle 20th century, the Gulf States, including the UAE (formerly known as the Trucial States), began rapid development of their infrastructures and economies. At the same time, rapid urbanization took place along with an explosion in population, requiring even more development to support the population. In fact, the Gulf States have undergone *hyperdevelopment* in the sense that the growth has occurred amid a lack

of the technological, educational, and managerial experience and material needed to conduct this development independent of foreign assistance. With the aid of oil and gas revenues, the UAE imports materials, workers, and foreign experts to help comanage its development. This explains the high number of foreign nationals living in the UAE. Because the petroleum revenues generate extremely large amounts of capital, development in these countries is taking place several generations faster than it has in less affluent countries, creating a collision of sorts between modern and ancient societies.

- The UAE and Kuwait are the most developed states in the Persian Gulf and enjoy an excellent standard of living. The current per capita income in the UAE is approximately U.S.\$17,500.
- Emiratis are generally friendly and easygoing. Most Westerners who live and work in the UAE report that they enjoy a comfortable life with a good standard of living, plenty of time for recreation, and cordial relations with local Arabs.



### A Closer Look

#### POLICY

- The country's state educational policy is to develop a native population capable of eventually taking over management of the country's growth, economy, and infrastructure. Because of the rapid nature of growth in the UAE to date, this goal has yet to be met.

#### TEACHING STYLE

- Teachers are friendly and supportive of students, but a definite social wall is maintained between student and teacher, due to the elevated stature of teachers in Emirati society.
- The most common teaching style in the UAE is a teacher-fronted approach. While the teacher is lecturing, students must not interrupt. Students may ask questions of the teacher but must raise their hands and be recognized first.
- Lessons must not conflict with Islamic rules. For example, science lessons must not question the existence of God, and biology lessons must avoid addressing the female anatomy in any way that may be construed as pornographic.
- Teachers are expected to be in charge; in Emirate society, this means that they must always be prepared for their lessons.
- While most instruction is delivered via lecture, multimedia technology is available and has been introduced and used increasingly in UAE schools.



## Educational Panorama

### UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Level/Age	Hours/Calendar	Curriculum	Required	Class Size	Exams	Grades	Classroom Setup	Homework
Preschool, ages 3–6	Sept.–May, 8:00 A.M.–2:00 P.M. Sun.–Thurs.	Arabic preliteracy, basic counting, religion, socialization; English preliteracy in private schools	No	15	Oral interviews in which the teacher asks the child specific questions	Given in terms of a percent.	Excellent facilities. Students sit at round tables in groups. There is one teacher per class.	Writing numbers and letters plus exercises in recognizing and matching vocabulary with pictures
Elementary, grades 1–6, ages 6–12	Same as above	English, Arabic, mathematics, history, geography, general science, religion, computers, sports, music	Yes	20–25	Monthly, midterm, and final exams	Percentage grades. Better than 50% is required to pass.	No desks, but chairs and a table; no shortage of materials or substandard equipment; one teacher per class in a traditional setup; abundance of multi-media equipment.	Homework follows the curriculum but does not tax students' free time. There are individual projects in some classes.
Middle, grades 7–9, ages 12–15	Same as above	Same as above	Yes	20–25	Same as above	Same as above, but students are regularly ranked against each other.	Same as above	Nightly homework focuses most heavily on math and sciences.
High, grades 10–12, ages 15–18	Same as above	1st year: core courses in physics, chemistry, biology, geology, advanced mathematics, psychology and behavior. In the 2d year, students choose a focus from these core courses and make concentrations in preparation for university majors according to their interests.	Yes	20–25	Same as above	Same as above	Same as above	Group semester projects; heavier homework load, especially in math, chemistry, physics
University, age 18+	Sept.–May; classes staggered, but no classes after 5:00 P.M.	1st year: core subjects according to the type of majors that the university offers (industrial/engineering, teacher training, business). In the 2d year, a major is chosen and appropriate classes are taken.	No	Varies widely	Standards differ according to university and professor.	65% required to pass	Similar to classrooms in U.S. universities; buildings very modern and in good repair	Increased number and difficulty of projects, especially in the sciences and engineering

### LEARNING STYLE

- Group work is generally not assigned in Emirati schools, although the Western teachers who staff schools in large numbers have begun to change this tradition.
- Students are accustomed to teacher-fronted lessons in which their role is to absorb and retain information.
- Classmates expect assistance from their friends during class exercises and tests. The notion against cheating on homework or exams is not fully operational in Arab culture. It is considered acceptable to ask other students for an answer, although this is not the rule on major exams.

### INSTRUCTIONAL SETTING

- School facilities are state-of-the-art and in excellent repair.
- Boys/men and girls/women go to different schools in the UAE as elsewhere in the Gulf States.

### ACTIVITIES

- Students may participate after class in a variety of activities, such as science competitions and sporting events.
- Teachers may arrange for school or class field trips to government facilities, libraries, and museums and sometimes to different regions of the country.

### DISCIPLINE AND CLASS MANAGEMENT

- Teachers are highly respected in Arab culture. They are expected to uphold a certain atmosphere of rigor and command, to fulfill the role of authority, and to maintain respect.
- Corporal punishment administered by the teacher is no longer allowed. Instead, discipline problems are referred to the principal and parents.

### TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

- Students are very respectful of their teachers. A student does not fraternize with a teacher outside of school or in any manner that puts the teacher on an equal footing with the student.
- Students in elementary school stand when the teacher enters the classroom.
- Giving gifts to the teacher is acceptable and not outside the bounds of normal behavior.

### STUDENT-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

- The relationship between and among students is friendly and close. Many students live near each other in the same neighborhoods or may even be related to one another.

- It is unusual, if not inappropriate, for women to have men friends, and vice versa. Men and women are separated by gender in many aspects of life in the UAE, and it is important for young people to follow the different social norms of their gender peers.



## Protocol

### NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR

- It is generally considered impolite for people to show the soles of their feet to others.
- Men may and frequently do have physical contact with other men, and women may be in close physical contact with other women, but touching between the sexes is not acceptable, even between husband and wife in public.
- Male teachers should maintain physical distance and never touch a female student.
- It is considered rude to give an Arab anything with the left hand.

### IMAGES

- Idols are not allowed in Islam.
- During *Ramadan*, Muslims fast during daylight hours. Non-Muslims must be respectful of this and not eat in public. They should also dress conservatively during this period.
- Unlike in Saudi Arabia, there are some freedoms for non-Muslims in the UAE, such as the opportunity to buy alcohol and pork, though a license must be obtained for this. These items should not, however, be consumed in public. Emirati society tends to be sensitive to and considerate of the cultural differences that exist as the result of the large resident foreign population, but the same sensitivity and respect is expected to be shown toward Islam.
- The role of women in Emirati society is rapidly expanding. One generation ago, women's activities were very restricted, not entirely unlike in Saudi Arabia. But university graduation rates now favor women by a two-to-one margin. In the Ministry of Health, women represent 82 percent of the employees and officers.

### FORMS OF ADDRESS

- Students address their teacher simply as "Teacher."
- Teachers address their students by first name.

## DRESS

- Male students usually wear a *thobe*, the long traditional robe often associated with the image of Arabs.
- Women dress conservatively, either in a traditional *abaya* (black cloak) and *hijaab* (head scarf) or in conservative Western clothes with their heads covered. Western women are required to conform to this standard as well.
- Male teachers should wear either shirt and a tie (no jacket is required) or a button-down, tucked-in shirt, with slacks and nice leather shoes.

## POLITE/IMPOLITE TOPICS AND BEHAVIORS

- Speaking critically of Islam is the height of rudeness in Emirati culture.
- Polite and positive topics of discussion include family, sports, and travel.
- One should only inquire about a female member of an Emirati's family if one is close to the family and already knows that female family member.
- Discussing politics, drugs, and the state of Israel will offend Emiratis.
- Any topic even remotely related to sex or sexuality is strictly prohibited inside the classroom.
- It is forbidden to eat with your left hand when you are a guest in someone's home.

## GIFT GIVING

- It is not uncommon for students to give gifts—such as small trinkets, fruit, imported foods, and flowers—to teachers. Teachers may want to take extra care to avoid the perception that the gift is being accepted in exchange for grade favors.
- Gift giving is often reciprocal in Emirati society. Accepting a gift may obligate the receiver to present a gift to the giver in the future.



## Problem/Solution

### PROBLEM

My student from the UAE is an excellent speaker, but his spelling is seriously substandard, and his sophistication of expression is far behind that of my other students. Is this a cultural or schooling issue, or should I explore the possibility that this student has a learning disorder? How might I improve his performance in written English?

### SOLUTION

More than likely, your student has no intellectual deficiency. It is not uncommon at all for Arabic speakers to have problems with written English that students from other linguistic backgrounds don't manifest. Because

Arabic uses a different script from English and is written from right to left, not left to right, it takes Arabic-speaking students more time and practice to attain the same level of development in written English as their classmates who have been familiar with the Roman script since childhood. In addition, short vowels in Arabic are not written, so an Emirate's spelling in English may appear as abbreviations. One way to help Arabic-speaking students improve their spelling and writing skills, aside from explaining and practicing the rules either in class or through individual conferencing, is to encourage them to read for pleasure in English and to do it extensively and frequently.

#### PROBLEM

I have noticed that even though my Arab students seem to like me and my class, they sometimes look at each other's papers when taking a test. They have told me that they are "just checking," but I feel hurt that they would cheat right in front of me. What can I do to curtail this behavior?

#### SOLUTION

To these students, this practice is not cheating. It is an expected and accepted means of cooperation and collaboration. They probably feel that they are helping each other. Nevertheless, you may try two things. First, increase the level of formality in class, and make more obvious your demand for respect. This is what your students are accustomed to, and if you show a little ire and spine, they will probably fall into line. Second, when you give a test, move the desks far apart so that the students cannot view their classmates' work.

#### PROBLEM

I have several female Emirati students whose clothing covers their bodies, their heads, and even their faces. As a result, during conversational activities and when doing checks on oral comprehension, I cannot hear their voices very well, nor can I pick up on the usual visual cues that tell me whether a student is confused, interested, and so on. What should I do?

#### SOLUTION

Definitely do not ask them to remove their veils, and do not complain or make jokes about the problem. Instead, simply ask these students to speak more loudly and to try to enunciate all the sounds in their speech.



### My Observations