

# Implications and Opportunities for Alumni Engagement in the Middle East and North Africa

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## Summary -

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a land of opportunity, but remains a mystery to most outside the Middle East and North Africa. The Kingdom's *Vision 2030* outlines a dynamic future for young, educated Saudi Arabians in new, emerging and non-oil related economies including start-ups, innovation and tech. There's never been a more exciting time to be connected to alumni in Saudi Arabia and regionally, with the Kingdom opening up to international visitors, creating new jobs for young people educated abroad, and developing greater tolerance for digital media giving international universities regular, easy access to their alumni.

Saudi Arabia is the largest economy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), with 50% of the Kingdom's population of 27 million under 25 years of age. Most of these young Saudis are full-time students at universities within the Kingdom, or on government scholarships abroad. Universities internationally have benefited from Saudi Arabian government scholarships with students enrolled in programs for five or more years, resulting in an entire generation of Saudis who have returned home as global citizens and proud alumni of international alma maters. In 2017, 200,000 Saudi Arabian students were enrolled in overseas universities across North America, in the United Kingdom and Europe.

Despite the large numbers of internationally educated Saudi Arabians, and the immense loyalty these alum feel to their alma maters for a transformational student and life experience, there is a reluctance from many advancement professionals to travel to the region where face-to-face interactions are essential in establishing trust and building relationships. Further, many of these institutions continue to operate a one-size-fits-all engagement program that culturally and geographically preclude participation.

This paper discusses implications for advancement professionals in developing engagement strategies for alumni who live within the MENA region.

## Introduction -

The MENA region comprises 21 countries and has a combined population of over 400 million, 60% of which are under the age of 25. Many of these young people are currently studying in, or have graduated from, international universities. For example, Saudi Arabia has had up to 90,000 students travelling annually to complete undergraduate and graduate programs at international universities, with scholarship programs offered by Saudi Aramco or the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP). Saudi Arabian enrollment in US universities through KASP increased from 3,000 students in 2005 to 60,000 in 2015!

International institutions developing an advancement strategy for Saudi Arabia and other countries within the region have much to think about. For example, the strategy cannot be a cut and paste comprising programs, events and communications from outside the region. What works for your alumni in Europe or North America might be offensive to alumni in the MENA; and within the region engagement in a city like Dubai, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), will need much modification for it to work in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (a country where alcohol is banned and segregation of men and women commonplace).

## Keys to Success Engaging Alumni in the Middle East and North Africa –

This paper only briefly highlights some of the areas advancement professionals need to consider in developing an engagement strategy for countries within the MENA, with far greater research and decision making required by an institution committed to investing in the region.

## **Geographic and Cultural Distinctiveness**

The Middle East is a term generally used to refer to the area located between the Asian and African continents. The countries in this region share a lot including, for many, demographics, language and religion. While Arab countries are predominantly Muslim, there are also large Christian minorities, particularly in Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt.

Iran, not an Arab country, Israel and Turkey might also be within your regional distinction. Whichever countries you select, segmentation and a separate voice is important given the countries within the MENA are similar but different.

In summary, a one-size-fits-all advancement strategy that assumes all your alumni speak Arabic and are Muslim is not recommended for long-term success.

## **Relationship Building and Visiting the Region**

Advancement is all about building and managing relationships, and face-to-face engagement with alumni in the MENA is essential. The Arab culture is beautiful, and one filled with generous and warm hospitable people. It is not uncommon to find Arab families rushing to help total strangers, or invite foreigners to their homes for tea or a meal. Your regional alumni may have been known to you as a student, and when you visit their home countries their hospitality will be immense!

Regional business meetings are based on a formula of engaging in small talk on a personal level before the purpose of the visit is brought up, which is all part of a cultural desire to understand you on a personal level before discussing business. There is far less divide between personal and professional life in the Arab world, and personal contact and face-to-face communication is key.

Like any meeting the advancement professional undertakes with prospects, donors and alumni, these are all about relationship building and developing trust. Small talk is incredibly important. You must be ready to answer questions about travel, your home, your experience of the country or region you're visiting, your health, and the health of your family. It is a good idea to have a few anecdotes ready to entertain with, and to ask (many of) these questions back.

Honoring the family is one of the most important aspects of Arab culture and society, and those within the region place their family before anything. As mentioned, it is usual and expected to ask after the health of an Arab's family, and perhaps some general questions about his/her children, but avoid asking specifically after female members of the family, as this can cause offence in more conservative countries of the region notably in Saudi Arabia. Appropriate questions include "How many children do you have?" and "Where do they study?"

Business cards are used in the Arab world, though not in the same way you'd exchange cards in Asia. While you may give your host or alumnus a business card, they will often not exchange their own. Make sure to get yours printed in both Arabic and English. It is important to remember that Arabic is read from right to left meaning reader's eyes are automatically drawn to the right side of the card, making it the ideal place to add your institutional logo.

As in Asia, age is linked to seniority. In general the wishes and opinions of someone older are adhered to, and the oldest person in the room is likely to be leading the discussion.

## **Regional Segmentation and Engagement**

Be aware that your alumni communities, particularly in the Arab Gulf States of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar, are heavily populated with large numbers of professional expatriates from South Asia, Europe, North America, the United Kingdom, Australia and South Africa.

This means that in the Gulf States, particularly the UAE, many businesses operate almost entirely on a Western basis. However, if your meetings are with local universities or government, you are likely to be interacting with Gulf nationals. Be aware of, and plan for, this noticeable cultural and linguistic diversity.

As an advancement professional, events are important to our engagement. In some countries of the MENA, Saudi Arabia in particular, organizing the style of event you'd host in Europe or North America is challenging and not recommended. Most evident in some parts of the region is the need to respect different living and socializing areas for men and women, as women do not eat or socialize in the same room as men.

### **Regional Dress**

Other differences across the region to be aware of include dress. This is important for pictorial representation of students or alumni from the region. Alumni, especially in the Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are likely to wear traditional dress when they return from their alma maters to their home countries. Dress for men usually consists of a long white robe known as a thobe (in Saudi Arabia) or dishdasher (in the UAE), and a red and white checked headdress (in Saudi Arabia) called a keffiyeh, or white headdress (in the UAE) called a ghutra. The exact style and color of this dress will vary from country to country, and region to region, with distinct contrast in Oman. Most women in the Gulf dress in the traditional black robe called an abaya and will wear a headscarf called a hijab (in most of the region) or shiela (in the UAE). Elsewhere, across the Levant (Lebanon for example) and North Africa, business dress varies greatly. Some will dress traditionally, and others will dress in the suits or general attire you come across anywhere else in the world.

Many Arab societies are very concerned with outward appearances as evidence of social status, and good quality clothes reflect a comfortable or powerful position in society. It is recommended that you pay attention to the quality and appearance of your own clothes when you visit the region in order to make a good impression.

### **Obtaining Commitment and the Concept of Time**

A frustration for many international advancement practitioners visiting or planning an event in the region is the Arab concept of time! Simply, punctuality cannot be expected. Most events will not start on time, and scheduling for university activities in the region needs to be done so flexibly. Do not be surprised if guests to an event are up to half an hour late, sometimes later.

Planning and organization in the region is more last minute than in other parts of the world, and this is frustrating! Try not to organize a meeting or event too far in advance, and be sure to always confirm by telephone or email a few days beforehand.

Meetings tend to be structured very differently in the Arab world, and agendas are lacking. Interruptions are common, even during a private meeting. Those you're meeting with or presenting to will look at their smartphone, and may take phone calls or speak loudly with others. Be prepared for this and try not to get frustrated or take offence as it is not a sign of disrespect.

### **Digital Communication for Engaging Alumni**

Before you embark on a digital media campaign to engage alumni, do your homework. Tread with caution in your communications and publications, and ensure your marketing and communication materials are designed specifically for the MENA region. Steer clear of expressing your judgments and opinions about gender, politics or culture in any communications.

In the last five years there has been increased usage of digital media, with far more tolerance from government and government censors in ensuring access of individuals to social media. However, conservatism and caution is recommended in your design and delivery of images and content. Also, always remember to always ask permission to take photos (or print images) of women!

Online censorship is often a concern for those looking to engage audiences in the MENA, and the openness of the internet varies from country to country. Saudi Arabia and Egypt use filtering systems to block controversial content, while other countries including Lebanon are more open. Outright blocking of globally popular sites is rare – Facebook, Twitter and Google are banned in Iran, but many people in the country still access the sites through VPNs.

YouTube is popular, and Instagram usage has increased, with the platform now hosting over 60 million users in the region. Twitter and Snapchat are used on a smaller scale, but still have a substantial audience. Additionally, WhatsApp is hugely popular across a number of MENA countries, and could be an important outreach tool for your engagement.

**Words You Need to Know**

The word **wasta** is all important in engaging with the MENA. Wasta can mean influence and generally follows the expression, “It’s not what you know but who you know”. In the region, this is a widely exploited system and is viewed as normal in the course of business and daily life. A system of borrowed and returned favors is also prevalent. If you are asked a favor by an alumnus, endeavor to fulfil it or at least give the impression you tried your best. Never refuse outright to do something. Even if you are not able to do what he/she needs or wants, your effort and enthusiasm will be remembered, appreciated, and repaid in time.

**Inshallah**, literally, is “God willing”, and is a common reply used by nearly all Muslims. Its essence is closely tied to Islamic teachings with Muslims believing that humans have no control over what might happen in the future. As it relates to your alumni attending a regional alumni event, Inshallah, they will show up!

For advancement professionals seeking to develop philanthropic relationships within the region, the word **zakah** is one to be familiar with. Meaning *purification* and *alms*, it is an important principle within Islam interpreted as everything belongs to God and wealth is held by human beings in trust. Possessions are purified by setting aside a proportion for those in need and for society in general.

**Planning Your Visit – Things to Be Aware Of**

Avoid scheduling your visit during Ramadan, which is the holy month when Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. Business hours are reduced and it is wise to avoid doing business or organizing meetings and events during this month. Owing to the lunar calendar, the exact dates of Ramadan vary annually.

One of the most overlooked details about the region is the different work week. Friday is the holy day in Islam, and prayers are held at noon. Therefore, the weekend in most Middle Eastern countries falls on Friday and Saturday, although there are some exceptions.

As a general guide:

Country	Friday/Saturday	Saturday/Sunday
Egypt	√	
Jordan	√	
Kuwait	√	
Lebanon		√

Oman	√	
Qatar	√	
Saudi Arabia	√	
Bahrain	√	
UAE	√	

**Prayer Times**

Subtly, you should take prayer times into consideration when scheduling meetings or planning events particularly in Saudi Arabia. Muslims pray five times a day, with prayer times announced by the call to prayer from local mosques (or more recently, sounding as an alarm from a mobile phone). Not all will go to the mosque to pray, many preferring to pray in the office where there are separate prayer rooms for men and women. Timings of prayer are:

1. Al-Fajr – Dawn, before sunrise
2. Al-Zuhr – Midday, after the sun has reached its highest point in the sky
3. Al-‘Asr – Late afternoon
4. Al-Maghrib – Just after sunset
5. Al-‘Isha – Between sunset and midnight

**A Note on (and for) Women**

Women should not be discouraged from representing their international university or school in the MENA, though there are important considerations. Handshakes are the typical form of physical greeting in the Middle East, and are softer and last longer than in the West. If you’re meeting another woman, wait for her to greet you – usually she will offer multiple kisses on the cheeks and/or offer her hand for you to shake. If a woman is meeting a man from the region, the male’s hand is *usually* offered. However, some conservative Muslim men will not touch a female who isn’t family (it is always wise to wait). As a man greeting an Arab woman, wait for her to extend her hand as conservative women may choose to not shake hands with men.

The exact dress code for women depends greatly on the country. Women should cover arms at least to the elbow, legs to the ankles, and avoid displaying any cleavage. As a non-Muslim woman conducting business in Saudi Arabia, an abaya over clothing is most appropriate though a hijab is not required (unless it is your personal choice). In Iran you don’t have a choice as all women must cover their hair without exception, and an abaya is essential.

**Conclusion -**

As referenced throughout this paper, to deeply engage with individuals across the region a targeted strategy for engaging prospects, donors and alumni is required. While religion, language and many cultural practices are similar throughout the region, they are not the same. Your segmentation of country or alumni community in the MENA needs careful thought so you can target your messaging, develop your content and plan your events appropriately. Implications for engaging alumni within the MENA include segregation of men and women (in some countries) which presents challenges for events, and censorship in the region requires caution in the use of certain images and content in your communications.

However, none of these challenges should deter an institution from establishing advancement programs for the MENA region. The benefits of developing partnerships with loyal alumni far outweigh the perceived challenges.

## References

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