

Cultural Information - Syria

Answers to your intercultural questions from a Canadian and a local point of view.

Cultural Information - Conversations

Question:

I am meeting someone for the first time and I want to make a good impression. What would be good discussion topics?

Local Perspective:

Canadians are very welcomed and well respected in Syria.

When you meet a Syrian for the first time, whether man or woman, it is important to shake hands and/or introduce yourself. It should come as no surprise if a Syrian asks you personal questions, and this is a part of creating a personal relation. Be friendly and try to communicate by answering.

The working environment in Syria is generally relaxed. Humour is acceptable as long as extreme political views are not involved. Tea and coffee will be served often throughout the day. Declining politely is not considered rude.

Canadian Perspective:

I have noticed that people in Syria are very proud of their hometown, particularly if they are from an isolated region, which by some happy coincidence you have visited or heard about from others.

The person with whom you are speaking will quickly try to learn more about your personal circumstances—whether you are married, have children and brothers and sisters, if your parents are still alive, etc.

Avoid talking about social or professional success; in Syria, these are intimately linked with the political regime in power and personal or family connections with that regime. This is why Syrians place a lot of importance on family and religious life and ritual. They are also very proud of any education they received abroad.

In Syria, it goes without saying that you should not discuss peoples' political opinions and it is very impolite to test the level of confidence have in the current regime of the people you are speaking with. Syrians also do not appreciate dirty jokes and they make fun of people from the city of Homs and their funny anecdotes.

Cultural Information - Communication Styles

Question:

What do I need to know about verbal and non-verbal communications?

Local Perspective:

For Canadian men: Women with a head cover (hijab) are seen regularly in Syria. Some shake hands with men, others will not. The best way to deal with such a situation is to greet those women by putting your hand on your chest and say "Good morning" or "hello". If the woman extends her hand, then you may shake it. Women can shake hands with women without awkwardness.

If you are sitting in front of a Syrian, do not cross your legs with the sole of your shoe facing him/her (it is insulting).

Syrians stand close to each other and may hug or clasp hands. People of the same gender sometimes walk hand in hand. They may also touch you on the shoulder. This does not indicate homosexual tendencies.

Keep eye contact when communicating.

Canadian Perspective:

Syrians are very warm people. There is no set distance that you need to maintain in relation to the person with whom you are speaking unless in situations that are formal or follow a specific protocol. On the contrary, Syrians will be quick to approach you and touch you. In fact, I think that Canadians should be forewarned not to take this the wrong way! If you are a man, it is normal that male colleagues who respect you will hold your hand for an extended period of time in public or even kiss you.

Even if these demonstrations of affection are quite acceptable between men, it is very poorly viewed and even out of place to kiss a friend's wife on the cheeks. You should keep a certain distance between yourself and colleagues or friends of the opposite sex in order to avoid any misunderstandings in public. Syrians are very concerned about their public image.

They use a lot of gestures (virtually all the time) when speaking. They are very expressive and it is considered altogether normal for us to act in the same way: in fact, they expect it. When people raise their voices, it does not mean that they are angry. It is very common to speak louder during a conversation and this change in tone of voice should not be misinterpreted.

I noticed that you can usually rely on what people say and if Syrians give you their word, they will follow up on it. Otherwise, they will find all sorts of weird ways to avoid giving it to you.

Cultural Information - Display of Emotion

Question:

Are public displays of affection, anger or other emotions acceptable?

Local Perspective:

Syrians are very vocal and speak loudly, using hand gestures and facial expressions.

Canadian Perspective:

It is very common. Moreover, I would say that for a Syrian it is difficult to understand our Western attitude, dictated by courtesy and decorum, of not raising one's voice in public and appearing impartial or neutral. They are very emotional and may even go to extremes. They exaggerate their anger, but not their sentiments about friendships. Syrians are very proud of their country and are extremely sociable, but particularly when you work in their country.

Cultural Information - Dress, Punctuality & Formality

Question:

What should I know about the workplace environment (deadlines, dress, formality, etc.)?

Local Perspective:

Working with a Syrian in general is an enjoyable experience. In the private sector, shops, and markets, working hours start from 8/9am to early afternoon. They close until 4pm and open again until 9/10pm or later. Government hours start at 8am until late hours.

Formal dress is more acceptable than casual.

At first introduction to a colleague, it is proper to address him or her by "Mr." or "Mrs." Until you know them well. Then you may address them by their first name. For supervisors, it is more proper to address them by title or "Mr./Mrs." unless told otherwise. Westerners may be accustomed to cursing during informal conversations. Avoid such language completely.

Timeliness is becoming more and more essential in Syria, especially if you are dealing with government offices and projects. In daily life, however, a 15 to 30 minute delay for

an appointment may occur. Deadlines and punctuality are flexible in Syria, except when dealing with the government, yet adherence to these time frames is appreciated.

Canadian Perspective:

The manner in which you dress does not carry huge importance for Syrians, particularly if you are a foreigner. In any case, they will expect that the fabrics, colours, styles and types of your clothing will be different from theirs.

They are always very polite and even more so with foreigners. However, this politeness is warm-hearted and they readily combine their official title (e.g., Dr., Professor) with their first names. Even if they use their family name, they will never say it in a formal way. I would be on my guard if I were to meet a Syrian who always acted very formally.

Their vision of time is different from that of Canadians. They do not know urgencies or at least they manage them differently—waits and delays are part of their culture. Any project that has been planned far in advance makes them wary because so many things may happen that will render any schedule obsolete. People do not offer any apology for being late as this is part of the culture. On the other hand, they realize that punctuality is important to our culture and will, therefore, try to comply with this requirement that they have difficulties understanding.

They are not absent a lot because going to work is more of a social activity than an economic one. This is especially true in the Syrian public service where people are paid even less.

Cultural Information - Preferred Managerial Qualities

Question:

What qualities are most highly regarded in a local superior/manager? How will I know how my staff view me?

Local Perspective:

Knowledge and leadership are highly regarded in a local supervisor or manager, but he/she would expect a Canadian to give and share ideas. Creativity is acceptable if consulted upon through the proper channels.

Syria is in a process of changes on all levels of government and private sector. You may therefore be faced with some challenges. It is recommended to let your voice be heard by your supervisor even if you have to go around your direct managers.

Your staff will test you for your leadership abilities. Building a friendly relationship with your staff will help you gain their confidence. It is important to get to know them personally. Syrians like you to show concern about their personal lives.

Canadian Perspective:

The way a superior looks as well as the kind of interpersonal relations they have with their junior employees are important. However, Syrians do not seem to place a lot of importance on the education, skills, and diligence of their superiors. Managers should show their human sides and take the time to speak with their employees.

As everyone knows about everything that happens in Syria, you will quickly learn what people think of you. People will make references to these opinions and they will not be direct.

Cultural Information - Hierarchy and Decision-making

Question:

In the workplace, how are decisions taken and by whom? Is it acceptable to go to my immediate supervisor for answers or feedback?

Local Perspective:

In Syrian culture, decisions are made from top to bottom, although sometimes meetings will be held to generate new ideas and this is happening now due to the changes on all levels of infrastructure. It is also very acceptable to go to your immediate supervisor for answers and feedback.

Canadian Perspective:

Syrians do not make group decisions. On the contrary, decisions are made by an individual in charge who assumes all the consequences. They prefer one person—the boss—to take on all responsibility.

Feedback does not exist. Decisions are made and executed. If the result is not satisfactory, people criticize the person who made the decision and try to replace them with someone else.

Cultural Information - Religion, Class, Ethnicity, & Gender

Question:

Briefly describe the local culture's attitudes regarding the following: Gender, Class, Religion and Ethnicity. What impact would the above attitudes have on the workplace?

Local Perspective:

Gender: In Syria, men and women have equal access to the labour market at all levels of the workplace, including high positions in public and private sector and they receive equal pay. There are many women in Syria's parliament (30 in 2003, including 3 ministers). However, there are also exceptions to this rule due to a fundamentalist religious movement pervasive in the Middle East, including Syria, that has appeared as an anti-Western statement rather than a deep religious belief.

Religion: 75 % of Syrians are Muslims, 13 % are Christian and 12 % are of different religious sects. Although Syria is a Muslim country, Islamic law does not govern it. People are free to practice their beliefs as long as it does not interfere with public life and the security of others. Syrians are more connected with their Arab heritage rather than their religion and historical religious sites of both religions (mosques, churches, and other monuments) are spread all over the Syrian landscape, Muslim and Christian. Religion does not affect the workplace in any way in Syria.

Class: Officially, classes do not exist in Syria. Privileges to influential families and titleholders were cancelled in 1948, after the declaration of independence and the introduction of the new Constitution. All Syrians were declared equal to each other in every right. (Nevertheless, due to the new economic openness of the Syrian economy, a new upper class is emerging).

Ethnicity: Ethnicity in Syria is clear and 90% of Syrians are Arabs. Other ethnic groups include Kurds, Armenians and Assyrians. These other groups carry Syrian nationality and are Syrian citizens, although they have their distinct cultures that they incorporate into their Syrian identities at every level of daily life: politically, culturally and economically. This works positively towards other ethnic groups that work or live in Syria. For example, in Arabic culture, visitors and foreigners should be treated equally as honoured guests in Syria.

In summary, gender, religion, class or race should have no impact on your work in Syria.

Canadian Perspective:

Gender: According to what I was able to observe in the Syrian public service, gender equality in the workplace does not exist even though some women hold rather high-level administrative jobs. In private industry and the countryside, they do not participate in decision-making and are very hard workers. In every day life women are confined to traditional tasks and this holds true even if the couple is highly educated. Appearances can be deceiving. Always take into account the role of the family (which is enormous in Syria), which helps maintain this unequal relationship between the sexes and related gender roles. I have witnessed situations where single women refused to work in places where men were present as they feared that they might be the object of malicious pranks or accused of having malicious intentions. You can still regularly see young women (and some who are not so young) being accompanied by a chaperone such as a brother, even in Damascus.

Religion: Even if the Muslim religion is the main one in Syria, other religions are greatly respected and especially the Christians practice a number of faiths (e.g., Orthodox, Maronite and Roman Catholic). Many Christians hold good administrative positions and in Syria I never once saw people protesting against others' rights to religious practice. This kind of tolerance is very real. However, inter-faith marriages are rare.

Class: Social classes are very defined and dictate your future in Syrian society. There is a lot of prestige connected to belonging to a class or clan (such as the Alaouites) and it helps keep you maintain your place and get ahead in life. A person who is successful socially in Syria always needs a hand from their family and friends and authorization from those who are more powerful. Social movement is very controlled and I think that this term is appropriate because even the political elite keep the population under close surveillance. In my experience, the only people who get rich are those who, for example, get the go ahead from the men of the party in power which makes the political class, specifically the Baath party, the most powerful in Syria. There is definitely a more open market since the early 1990s, but you can still feel these kinds of government restrictions.

Ethnicity: Another determining factor for climbing the social ladder in Syria. Some ethnic groups are poorly viewed (such as the Kurds) while others are envied (such as the Alouites—which the President and ruling class belong to).

Obvious conflicts may develop between your employees if you have not paid attention to the fact that peoples' religion, social class, ethnicity, and gender may not be compatible. This is even more challenging to manage since Syrians will not necessarily make or admit to a link between these factors and conflicts or difficult situations.

Cultural Information - Relationship-building

Question:

How important is it to establish a personal relationship with a colleague or client before getting to business?

Local Perspective:

Personal relationships with your colleagues or clients are essential to a solid and clear understanding of any kind of business in Syria. Knowing each other builds confidence and relaxes the other person and that is part of the Syrian culture in any situation, including formal business. If a Syrian visits you, ask him what he would like to drink, make him feel at home, because that is the way he will treat you if you visit him. Socialize with each other before entering into business discussions.

Canadian Perspective:

These personal relations are at the heart of all business contracts in Syria. First of all, trust must be established and even if you are in business, credibility in Syria is tied to

personal qualities rather than financial aptitudes. You should spend a lot of time at social events. Sending information by mail is considered to be impersonal and distant; you may not get a response. Contracts are done verbally.

When speaking about a file, do not jump directly to the question at hand. There is always an introduction, which has nothing whatsoever to do with the topic to be discussed and generally deals with personal or insignificant matters. By the way, never speak about the weather in Syria (it is always nice outside and the temperature is consistent) or about the person's health.

Cultural Information - Privileges and Favouritism

Question:

Would a colleague or employee expect special privileges or considerations given our personal relationship or friendship

Local Perspective:

Personal relations and friendship have deep cultural roots with Syrians and this might bring you to a situation where helping an employee or colleague may surface. If the circumstances are ripe, do it. If not, do not jeopardize your job, but explain it and be frank about it. If you succeed in helping a Syrian, he will be indebted to you for life. I would recommend granting a privileged treatment to a close friend if there is an opening for a job and your friend is qualified, or granting a Visa, if all is perfectly legal. If you can't help, it is important to show that you have tried your best and they will understand.

Canadian Perspective:

Syrians always expect privileges: this is the way the country works. More than money, the most sought-after privilege for an employee is the hiring of his or her family members as they can brag about it to their family or friends. Special considerations are also appreciated such as a title that clearly describes your role (which is not too demanding). Obviously, you need to dole out these privileges with great care as the situation may backfire on you if there is no logic to back up how you award them and everyone will start asking you for them.

Cultural Information - Conflicts in the Workplace

Question:

I have a work-related problem with a colleague. Do I confront him or her directly? Privately or publicly?

Local Perspective:

Work related problems occur in any job and at different levels of employment. To deal with those issues, it is very important to confront your Syrian colleague privately and try to solve the problem diplomatically but firmly... be polite. If you offend a Syrian, you will notice a change of attitude immediately; for example a very formal attitude, hardly greeting you; no direct eye contact. In general, if you offend a Syrian he will confront you jokingly about it at first but if it occurs repeatedly, then you will notice the behaviour described above.

Canadian Perspective:

I would not be inclined to use a direct method even if it was done in private. You will hurt their pride. They will not want to let down the people with whom they work either. Instead, I would allude to the problem and suggest things in such a way that they will correct the problem themselves.

Cultural Information - Motivating Local Colleagues

Question:

What motivates my local colleagues to perform well on the job?

Local Perspective:

To be able to motivate your local colleagues successfully, according to Arab culture, one must show good leadership skills and be able to show knowledge in his or her field. Syrians acknowledge the fact that Canadian bosses are trained in specific and detailed approaches to problem-solving, so the key to motivate your colleagues is: 1. Firm, but kind leadership; 2. Knowledge; and 3. Understanding Syrian culture. Money is also a very important issue, of course. If you have the ability to give a raise, do not hesitate to do so.

Canadian Perspective:

Most notably good working conditions. More than anything, a good reward is having a sense of responsibility and control. In Syrian culture, the chain of command is very important.

Cultural Information - Recommended Books, Films & Foods

Question:

To help me learn more about the local culture(s), please recommend: books, films, television shows, foods and web sites.

Local Perspective:

Learning and understanding the Syrian culture is a short and friendly road to a rich, complex historical destination.

Read *Cadogan Guide to Syria and Lebanon*, by Michael Haag. A British historian said every intellectual has two homelands: his own and Syria.

Sites you can visit: www.syraac.com or www.dairatiah.com.

Canadian Perspective:

Before going to Syria, I think that Canadians should try to go to a Syrian cultural centre (in Montreal, for example, where there is a very large Syrian community) and attend cultural events organized by Syrian immigrants in Canada. You can also meet Syrians who are used and well acclimatized to our culture and who will give you a ton of suggestions at these events. There is even a Syrian restaurant in Montreal.

Cultural Information - In-country Activities

Question:

When in this country, I want to learn more about the culture(s) and people. What activities can you recommend?

Local Perspective:

You will be working with some of the friendliest people you will ever contact in your lifetime.

Syria is the cradle of civilization where you will encounter a warm but dignified courtesy. You will often be invited into homes and be offered coffee or tea and told "welcome to YOUR home". This may be convention, but underlying it are kindness and a curiosity that are genuine and you soon relax into its mood. You will definitely be invited to a Syrian home for a meal. Try not to refuse.

Most of the Syrian cities like Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Latakia, Tartus, Deir Alzor, and Hasaka have a unique cultural statement of their own to offer. The Syrian Broadcasting System (television/radio) offers a wide variety about all Syrian provinces and cities. Restaurants and cafes exist by the hundreds in all the Syrian cities. Most of them are outdoors due to the Mediterranean climate.

The cultural movement in Syria is characterized by its different activities. There are fairs, concerts, and dance festivals that are performed at historical theatres like Bosra and Palmyra and also at modern theatres located throughout Syria. A word of caution: do not try to visit historical Mosques while prayers are in progress.

There are also exhibitions, cinemas, theatre festivals, and fairs such as: The International Flower Fair (May), Palmyra Festival, Bosra Festival (October), Suwayda Wine Festival (July), Aleppo Cotton Festival (July). In addition, there are several sporting events like swimming, The Terry Fox run (organized by the Canadian embassy), football (soccer), and horse races.

Foods in Syria are characterized by tasty flavours such as tabouli, fattoush, which contain several kinds of vegetables. Also offered are a wide variety of meats such as shish kabobs, kafta, kibeh, etc.

Canadian Perspective:

It may seem surprising, but visiting foreign cultural centres (i.e. French or German) can be quite valuable because you will find a lot of Syrians there who are quite familiar with our culture and language since Syrians who work in these centres are generally multilingual. They can direct you to places (e.g., art galleries, art shows, theatres, authentic restaurants, museums, historic homes, vacation spots, pilgrimage sites, etc) where you can learn more about Syrian culture.

Cultural Information - National Heroes

Question:

Who are this country's national heroes?

Local Perspective:

National Heroes: Salah al Din: A Kurdish-born commander that united Egypt and Syria, and liberated Jerusalem from the crusaders in the year 1188–1190 AD. As well, Ibrahim Hanano, Youssef Al Azmah, and Sultan Basha Al-Atrash. All fought to liberate Syria from the French Colonialism.

Also, there is the late President, Hafez Al Assad, who fought the Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights.

Canadian Perspective:

Saladin because he drove out the Crusaders. By the way, Syrians are not aggressive or hostile toward Westerners. They are quite peaceful.

Syrians consider themselves to be the descendants of Arameans; moreover, in Syria there are still two villages where people still speak the language in which Christ is said to have given his sermons.

Cultural Information - Shared Historical Events with Canada

Question:

Are there shared historical events between this country and Canada that could affect work or social relations?

Local Perspective:

There are two historical events that are shared between Canada and Syria; one of them is a yearly visit to a monument of a Canadian pilot who fell in battle. The second is Terry Fox Drive that takes place yearly in Syria.

Canadian Perspective:

I do not know of any. As a Canadian in Syria, I always was always warmly welcomed. It was also an advantage to be a Francophone since Syrians have a good memory of the French rule and culture. Canadian Francophones are always well received in Syria since many Syrians have an extended family member who has emigrated or lived for a while in Canada. I think that our two countries are in a good position to develop very positive relations, fundamentally although not exclusively because of political and economic opportunities.

Cultural Information - Stereotypes

Question:

What stereotypes do Canadians have about the local culture that might be harmful to effective relations?

Local Perspective:

Canadian Peacekeepers have been active in their peaceful missions on the Syrian/Israeli borders for more than 30 years and that has given Canadians a special status in the heart of all Syrians. Canada has a respected image as a peace loving country. Syrians have not stereotyped them in a negative way. Canadians are famous in Syria for their politeness and vigorous shopping in the Suks of Damascus.

Canadian Perspective:

Many Canadians think that they should be wary of Syrians because they are untrustworthy. Yet, in Syria trust is something sacred. However, more than anything you need to get them to respect you.

Cultural Information - About the Cultural Interpreters

Local Interpreter:

Your cultural interpreter was raised in the city of Homs, in the central west of Syria, until the age of 20. He moved to Beirut, Lebanon, to continue his education and graduated as sociologist from the Lebanese University and as architect from the American University of Beirut. He immigrated to Canada in 1976 and in 1985 formed a construction company in Syria, of which he is still a partner. He is currently an architectural and social development consultant and travels frequently to Lebanon and Syria. He is also a cultural consultant on Syria and the Middle East. He lives with his wife and oldest son in Ottawa.

Canadian Interpreter:

Your cultural interpreter was born to Québécois parents. He is the eldest of five children and grew up in Baie-Comeau, a small country village. In 1969, he went to study at the University of Laval in Quebec City. He continued his studies abroad (France, Italy, Cyprus, and England) participating in archaeological digs in Italy and Cyprus. He later lived in London while he completed his doctoral degree. He first went to Syria in 1985 where he still goes on archaeological digs or undertakes research projects every year. He has taught Near Eastern archaeology at the Université Laval for the past 22 years; he is married and has three children.

Disclaimer

Country Insights - Intercultural Issues are intended to provide snapshots of the overall social and cultural norms as well as the workplace environment that a Canadian might face working in a specific country. For each country, two perspectives are provided: one by a Canadian and the other by a person born in the selected country. By comparing the "local point of view" with the "Canadian point of view", you will begin to form a picture of that country's culture. We encourage you to continue your research using a variety of other sources and to use [Triangulation](#) as an evaluation process. Although cultural informants were asked to draw on as broad a base of experience as possible in formulating their answers, these should be understood as one perspective that reflects the particular context and life experiences of that person; they are not intended to be a comment on any particular group or society.

You may disagree with or object to the content of some responses. This is to be expected given the complexity of the subject and the problems associated with speaking generally about an entire country and its people. We would encourage you to share your experiences; your contributions will help to make Country Insights a richer environment for learning.

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