

Practicing Law in the Arab Middle East

By KC Bradley

In this post 9/11 era, many Americans think they have some idea of what the Arab Middle East is like. For years we have seen pictures of veiled women and angry young men, and heard reports of terrorist attacks and human rights abuse. Based on the reports that dominate our news media, one would think that the Middle East is a very dangerous place to visit, let alone to live and work, especially for an American woman. Yet the reality is very, very different. I know because I spent nine years in the Middle East, working as an international finance lawyer and raising a young family during the course of three separate assignments – one year with a bank in Kuwait (1989-1990); 5½ years with Clifford Chance in Bahrain (1992-1997); and two years with White & Case in Bahrain (2001-2002).

The question that I am most frequently asked about my years in the Middle East is the obvious one: What was it like to work in the Middle East as a woman? I have to confess that this question annoys me almost as much as the other obvious one: How can you do the work that you do, put in the long hours, and raise a family? Both questions imply that I had to have some superhuman capabilities to survive in my career, and, of course, they are clear evidence of the gender bias of the person posing the question, whether male or female. They are also based on a very mistaken view of what the Arab Middle East is like.

The purpose of this article is to present a different view of the Middle East – a view that is given here from the perspective of a Western white woman professional (a perspective which itself carries its own bias). It looks at the cultural differences between the Middle East and the U.S., what it is like to live and work in the Middle East as an American woman professional, and the benefits and costs of living and working there.

The Cultural Differences

Clearly, the Arab culture is different from ours. Islam dominates the Arab way of life and their view of the world, much in the same way that Christianity dominates the American way of life and our world view. In order to comprehend fully the culture of the Arab Middle East, one needs to have some understanding of Islam and the extensive influence it has on society.

The most obvious differences are evident from the moment one arrives in any of the countries constituting the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)¹ in the form of dress, behavior and language. Because Islam requires that one act and dress conservatively in public, the first thing that one notices is the dress. The majority of Arab men wear a long-sleeved one-piece dress that covers the

whole body, called a *dishdashah* or *thoub* along with 3-piece head cover. Arab women dress in a variety of ways. The most conservative women will be covered from head to toe, including their hair and face and sometimes even their hands, when they are outside of the home or in the company of men outside of their immediate family. Others will wear only an *abayah* which covers them from the shoulders down to their feet, and they may or may not wear a head scarf, called a *hejab*, to cover their hair. Those who are less conservative may wear conservative Western clothes, with or without a *hejab*.

Islam also requires that one behave conservatively. Displays of affection between the sexes are almost non-existent, but men often walk hand-in-hand in public. I still recall arriving at the airport in Kuwait City and seeing my husband approach me. The first thing that he said to me, in warning, was, “You can’t kiss or hug me here.” Despite this taboo, however, one sometimes sees a husband and wife holding hands while walking through the *souk* or the shopping mall in the more liberal GCC countries.

One of the biggest cultural differences that we perceive, from our Western perspective, is in relation to the treatment of women. Interestingly, the position of women in Islamic countries differs dramatically from one country to the next. In the more liberal countries, such as Bahrain, women have far more freedom than we realize. Although there are individual stories of abuse within families, women in these countries generally have broad access to education and careers and a number are successful in business. In Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, women have far fewer rights. They are required to cover themselves when they are outside of the house, they cannot drive automobiles, and they have more limited access to education and careers. Even in Saudi Arabia, however, you will find a liberal undercurrent. One of the most interesting sights for me was observing a Saudi family as they crossed the Causeway from Saudi Arabia to Bahrain. As soon as they passed through Saudi immigration and customs, a woman passenger got out of the car, removed her *abaya* and got behind the wheel of the car to drive the rest of the way into Bahrain. Saudi Arabia also has a number of very successful business women, although they conduct their business in inconspicuous ways.

Just as the dress of Arab women varies from country to country, town to town and family to family, the customs associated with business women varies also. Business women from families who follow a conservative form of Islam may still adhere closely to conservative Islamic values, whereas others dress and behave in business much in the same way as Western women. For example, a conservative woman will not shake hands with a man, and may wave her hand in dismissal if a Western male ignorant of her customs attempts to do so. On the other

¹ The GCC was constituted in 1981 by the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Oman, countries that are linked by deep religious, cultural and family ties, in order to effect cooperation and unification among them.

hand, there are other Arab women who freely shake hands with men, although they will not go so far as to allow a man to greet them in typical English fashion with kisses on the cheek. Men doing business in the Middle East are therefore well advised not to offer to shake the hand of an Arab woman unless she extends her hand in greeting first.

Another cultural gap, which is often missed when speaking about cultural differences between the Middle East and the U.S., is the impact of the Arabic language, the language of the Koran. As English is widely used for business purposes,² it is not necessary for most visitors to the GCC to learn Arabic. However, by failing to do so, we fail to appreciate the importance of poetry, passion and aesthetics in the Arab world, and therefore find it difficult to empathize with them in our business dealings and in our politics. To our ears and minds, much of what they say is vague and excessive; to their ears and minds they are speaking poetically and metaphorically. To their ears and minds, much of what we say is crude, legalistic and ugly; to our ears and minds, we are simply getting to the point.

One does not have to be in any of the GCC Countries for very long before one gets a further appreciation of the impact of Islam on the society. Muslims observe five formal prayers each day, spaced evenly throughout the day so that followers are constantly reminded of their connection to God. To be reminded of prayer, the *adhan*, a call to prayer, is broadcast from the many mosques scattered throughout a town or city. Many public buildings have prayer rooms for Muslims to pray in private, although it is not unusual to see a banker praying in his office or a laborer praying in the middle of a construction site. When my very Catholic Italian mother first heard the *adhan* on her visit to Bahrain, she asked me who was singing. When I told her it was the call to prayer, she said that Islam must be a very powerful religion if it calls its people to have a conversation with God five times a day!

Islam, as it is practiced in much of the Islamic world, is also a very tolerant religion. In fact, in many of the Gulf countries (with the notable exception of Saudi Arabia), other religions can be practiced freely. In Bahrain, for example, there is a synagogue as well as very active Catholic and Episcopal churches and schools, and there is frequent dialogue between the heads of the mosques, synagogues and churches. In fact, in a memorial that I helped to organize for the victims of 9/11, several imams participated in the service, which was attended by a number of prominent Bahrainis and other Arab Muslims.

Finally, one must understand that Islam places a very strong emphasis on ethics and expected social behaviors such as generosity, respect and solidarity. These customs and social duties infiltrate their daily lives and affect the way they handle business dealings. Of particular note, is the avoidance of confrontation and conflict and the concept of "saving face."

Dignity and respect are key aspects of the Arab culture, which encourages people to act humbly and with

sensitivity to a person's dignity, especially when that person's dignity and self respect is endangered. The use of compromise, patience and self-control are means by which these qualities are maintained. Arabian culture utilizes the concept of "face" to solve conflicts, to avoid embarrassing another and to minimize another's discomfort or harm their dignity. High pressure sales tactics are therefore largely ineffective in the Arab world. They not only place the targeted customer in an uncomfortable position, but also gain for the salesperson a rather unpleasant reputation.

Navigating the Middle East Business World as a Professional American Woman

Now, back to the obvious question: What was it like to work in the Middle East as a woman? I have a confession to make. When I am asked this question by a middle age American man, I generally respond by saying that it was far easier to work with Middle Eastern men than with American men in the 1980's. When I moved to the Middle East in 1989, the term "politically correct" had not yet been coined, there were reports in the press of at least one law firm that encouraged its female summer associates to participate in wet t-shirt contests, and the only "negative" comment that I had received on a performance review was, "She puts her family before her career."

As a Western white woman, I was not held to a standard defined by gender in the Middle East. Rather, I was held to the standard of a foreigner, which required merely that I be sensitive to the culture of the region. The fact that my husband was Arabic³ was also of great benefit as it conferred on me a degree of dignity accorded to the wives of Arab men.

So, to answer the question, it was surprisingly simple to work in the Middle East. I was good at my job and was able to build close and trusting relationships with my clients. In fact, within 15 months after starting with Clifford Chance in Bahrain, the male partner who was then managing the office turned management control over to me when he returned to London, on the basis that I had better relationships with our clients than he did.



The author shown at a reception in Bahrain with other Clifford Chance partners, an under-secretary of the Ministry of Works, Power and Water and the former Minister of Labor and Social Affairs.

Many people ask me if I had to wear an *abaya* or cover my hair. I did not, although if I had lived or worked in parts of Saudi Arabia, I would have had to wear an *abaya* on the street. In the rest of the GCC, however,

² One of the reasons that English is so widely used in the Middle East is that a large portion of the population is foreign. Since the advent of oil wealth, the Middle East has taken advantage of cheap labor from a variety of different countries, most notably, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the Philippines, and English is the language that is used to communicate among this diverse population.

³ My husband was born in Algeria and, even though he is actually more European than Arabic, he was considered by the Gulf Arabs to be quite fierce, because the Algerians won their battle for independence from France in 1962 following a long and bitter war.

conservative Western business attire is entirely appropriate. Out of respect for the culture of my host country, I ensured that my skirts were not too short and that I did not walk on the street or attend meetings with a sleeveless blouse. Other than that, I made no additional accommodation.

Most of my clients in the Middle East, consisting of men from Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, the U.A.E., Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Japan, Europe and the U.S., actually liked dealing with a woman! They soon discovered that my softer, gentler approach was far more compatible with the Arab way of doing business than the aggressive, sometimes bullying, approach of many of the American lawyers and businessmen with whom they had had prior dealings. Intuitively, I understood the concept of “face” and was able to negotiate in a way that respected the dignity of all parties. And, since I am a poet at heart, I understood communication with the Arabs, even though I never took the opportunity to learn their language.

Yes, I had a few Arab clients with long flowing beards and a fundamentalist view of Islam who would refuse to shake my hand (because it was *haram*, forbidden, to touch a woman other than one’s wife). They nevertheless appreciated my expertise and easily listened to my advice.

Yes, there were Saudi clients who visited me from time to time in Bahrain and who would attempt to stare at me, secretly, as I ran a meeting. When I would look up and catch them, they would smile and look shyly away. But their staring was not offensive. I was just such a novelty for them.

Yes, I was excluded from prime marketing opportunities, at the “*dewaniah*” or “*majlis*,” which is a room in an Arabic home or, as the case may be, a palace reserved for male visitors only, where much of the business of the Arab world is conducted. But, this was not a huge disadvantage to me because, in truth, few Western men were invited to these in any event.

Yes, even outside the *dewaniah*, informal marketing was difficult because it is not appropriate for a woman to invite an Arab man to lunch or dinner, and so, I always had to have a male colleague with me.

Yes, I came into contact with a few Arab men who treated me in a condescending manner, and perhaps I lost a few transactions because potential clients would not consider working with a woman. On one occasion, I walked out of a negotiation with a Sudanese lawyer who insisted on calling me “My dear” in a condescending tone – and I was supported in doing so by my bearded fundamentalist client who refused to shake my hand!

On the other hand, I stood out and, because I was good at my job, I earned a solid reputation in the community.⁴ Many of the Arab bankers were amused that, as a woman,

⁴ Based on my reputation, I was recruited to go back to Bahrain in 2000 when White & Case decided to open an office there. They told me that, when they were doing their due diligence, everyone mentioned my name.

I could structure and negotiate Islamic financing transactions (financing transactions that avoid the prohibition against interest under *Shari’a* law, a law that relegates women to second-class status).

I was generally one of only a handful of women at the large marketing receptions regularly hosted by the banks for their clients. I was even invited to the Emir’s *majlis* on two separate occasions – once when I visited him as a member of the board of the American Business Association (formerly know as the American Men’s Association) and once when I was invited to the dinner for George Bush, Sr. At the latter event, I was truly the *only* woman in a group of sheikhs, ministers and senior members of the American business community. As I walked down the long rows of cushioned arm chairs to take my place, I heard the chatter of the men as they filled each other in on who I was.

I was again the *only* woman at the signing of a \$500 million financing for the Sultanate of Oman, in connection with which I had represented the 40 some banks participating in the syndicate. Upon arriving in Oman for this financing, I was paged from the plane, whisked off the tarmac by a limousine, and taken to the VIP lounge with the Bahraini general manager of the agent bank while my passport was being processed. I was then taken to the Al Bustan Palace Hotel in another limousine, although in this case, I had to travel alone because it was not proper for me to travel in the limousine with the men.



The author assisting with a ceremonial loan signing in Bahrain.

Strangely, the gender bias that I found most difficult to deal with in the Middle East came primarily from the expatriate community. Among the expatriate community, I was an oddity. There were very few expatriate women in the entire country who worked at the senior executive level or, for that matter, worked outside of the home at all. I can only speculate that the reason for this is that there is a self-selection process that occurs with regard to positions in the Middle East. They are generally considered attractive to expatriate men whose wives do not have professional careers of their own. I would therefore receive comments from neighbors (both men and women) who, when they found me at home in the middle of the day with the children, would say something like, “Oh, you’re home for a change.” Generally, when I met an expatriate woman for the first time at a social gathering, one of the first questions she would ask was

who my husband worked for, as if that is how Western women in the Middle East were defined.

On one occasion, while in the school yard to pick up my daughter, a close friend of mine introduced me to an English woman and told her that I was going to dinner that evening at the Emir's Palace with George Bush, Sr. and other dignitaries. The woman looked at me and asked very sweetly who my husband worked for. I answered her, but then proceeded to say that my husband was not actually going to the dinner because he had not been invited!

And then there were the ubiquitous cocktail and dinner parties hosted by bankers in their homes. In a country like Bahrain, with a population of only 600,000, half of which are service workers from Asia, the dinner party is the way in which many people network and socialize. I was invited to these parties frequently because of my connection to the banking community, and I sometimes hosted them myself. They could be as large as 40 or 50 people, from a variety of different backgrounds – Arabs from within and outside of the GCC, Asians, Europeans and Americans. Most of the guests would attend with their spouses. These events could be difficult for me because, in typical Middle Eastern fashion, the men would gather on one side of the room talking about business and the women would gather on the other talking about children. I often found myself in the middle, and I recall one occasion when a Western banker looked at me and asked, "So, what side of the room do you belong on?"

The Costs and the Benefits

Working in the Middle East was, for me, a great adventure. Not only did I enjoy what many consider to be a sexy international career, transacting business at the highest levels of government and commerce, I also had the opportunity to get to know a warm and gracious people. I must also confess that I was spoiled. I had a very easy lifestyle, especially when compared to the fast pace of life in the U.S. I lived in a very large house with a very large garden. I had servants, gardeners and drivers to tend to my every need. And I socialized with senior executives from a variety of different countries, as well as with members of the diplomatic and American military communities (dinner parties at the homes of the American ambassador and the Commander of the U.S. Fifth Fleet were regular occasions).

In addition to the ease of life, I had the opportunity to travel extensively, enjoy fantastic holidays in exotic places, and develop business and personal relationships with people across the globe. Now, when I want to travel to London, Paris, Frankfurt, Rome, Casablanca, Tunis, Cairo, Amman, India, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, Manila or Tokyo, I need only to pick up the phone and ask for recommendations because I have friends and acquaintances in all these locations.

But the greatest benefits, in my view, were the benefits that accrued to my children. Although they attended the American School in Bahrain, a Department of Defense School run primarily for the U.S. military and diplomatic

families that are based there, over half of their classmates were from other countries. Some of my son's best friends for many years were from Egypt and Denmark; my daughter's best friends were from Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Greece and Denmark. They did not have exposure to the variety of activities that children in the U.S. have, but they also did not have exposure to drugs, profanity or violence.

My children also were exposed, during their formative years, to diverse cultures and ways of thinking and, as a result, they have an understanding of world affairs that is far more expansive and sophisticated than their friends in the U.S. They also had regular exposure to senior executives, ambassadors and admirals and, as a result, can now talk to anyone about a wide variety of topics – which my son does regularly!

Were there costs to my experience? Of course there were, just as there are in connection with any choice that we make. I was fortunate to have lived a very privileged life in the Middle East, but there was the constant knowledge that most of the migrant workers were living in poverty and substantial parts of the local population did not have rights equivalent to the members of the ruling families, whether as a result of gender, family background or religious sect.

There was also the political tension that resulted from differing politics – between the U.S. and the Arab World – which resulted in increased threat alerts for the American community, the placing of armed Marine guards in the American school, and on a few occasions the closing down of the American school because of terrorist threats. Following the U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks, the tension increased substantially, resulting in anti-American demonstrations in the streets and at the U.S. and other embassies. Fortunately, these demonstrations were directed primarily at the U.S. government, and at the Arab governments that sometimes implicitly supported the U.S. position, not at individual Americans. And, notwithstanding the political tension, individual relationships were not substantially impacted.

There was also the fact that living and working in small countries like Bahrain and Kuwait is like living in a fish bowl. The benefit of working in these countries is that, if you are good at your work, you stand out and your reputation spreads easily. The disadvantage of this is that you must carry your professional identity with you wherever you go. I found that I had to be always "on" – during trips to the supermarket, while watching the children's Little League games, in the gym, at the beach, while attending a Valentine's Ball. Because Bahrain is so small, it was difficult for me to leave the house without running into a client. And because the business and social world are so inter-mingled in the Arab world, most of my clients found it entirely appropriate to talk about business when we met.

I also found that, from a professional point-of-view, I was not able to further develop my skills. Transactions started to repeat themselves, and there was nothing more for me to learn.

As I was talking over my thoughts about moving on with the American general counsel of one of the local banks, he looked at me strangely and said, “KC, Here you are a big fish in a small pond. Why would you want to go elsewhere where you will be a small fish in a big pond?” I told him that I did not care very much about being a “big fish”, but the “small pond” was starting to bother me!

And so, after spending an initial 5½ years in Bahrain, I moved on – to another adventure – in Moscow! But that is another story for another time.

KC Bradley practiced law for 18 years under her married name, Kathleen Chouai. In addition to working in Kuwait and Bahrain, she worked for Clifford Chance in London, Moscow and Washington, D.C. Her primary practice areas were international and project finance.



In 2003, KC decided to embark on returning to the U.S. from the Middle East, she formed KC Bradley Associates, a company which offers coaching and consulting services to lawyers and law firms in the areas of leadership, career and professional development, diversity, cross-cultural communication, recruitment and retention. In addition, she assists her Arab clients from time to time in connection with their transactions in the U.S.

KC received her law degree, magna cum laude, from the University of Pittsburgh School of Law in 1984. She is certified as a leadership coach by Georgetown University's prestigious Leadership Coaching Program. She is also currently in the process of obtaining her Doctorate in Executive Leadership at George Washington University.

KC lives in the Washington, D.C. metro area with her three children, who are now 21, 16 and 6. Her eldest son is studying Communications and Economics at Denison University and wants to work in the international arena. Her 16-year-old daughter has already decided that she wants to study international affairs in college.

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