

Language and culture guide

Arabic

Language experts agree that language learning is most effective when language and culture are linked. *The Polyglots* apps aim to spark children's interest in language and culture through play. This guide provides some general information about Arabic language and Arab cultures that may be of interest to you and may extend children's learning.

About the Arab region

The Arab region includes 22 countries and territories in North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and the eastern Mediterranean coast. It is home to 450 to 480 million people (in comparison, just under 28 million people live in Australia). The region is linked by a common language – Arabic.

Countries and territories in the region include Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

Early childhood education in the Arab region

The Arab region encompasses many different countries and territories, each with different policies and levels of wealth. Early childhood education varies across the region. For example, in 2010, less than 5 per cent of children in Yemen and Mauritania attended early childhood education. In the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, more than 80 per cent of children attended.¹

Did you know?

Iran and Turkey are not part of the Arab region.

Language

There are many different dialects of Arabic. The language spoken in *The Polyglots* apps is called Modern Standard Arabic. This is the most commonly understood language across the Arab region, and is the language used in books, newspapers and media (including children's cartoons). All of the dialects of Arabic share a common writing system, which has an alphabet of 28 letters and is read from right to left.

Pronouncing Arabic

In the support materials for the Early Learning Languages Australia (ELLA) program, Arabic script has been transcribed using the Roman alphabet. This is guidance only. For correct pronunciation, listen carefully to the words as they are spoken in the app or in the sound library in the app toolkit on the ELLA website.

Did you know?

Arabic is the third most commonly spoken language in Australia after English and Mandarin.

Culture

The Arab region is huge and diverse and has many different peoples, cultures, religions and traditions. A large majority of people in the Arab region are Muslim. Christianity is also a significant religion in the region.

Politeness and customs

- The left hand is considered unclean. It is rude to eat with your left hand or to use your left hand to pass someone food or drink.
- The polite way to beckon someone is with your right hand. Hold your palm down and make a scratching motion with your fingers.
- In some parts of the Arab region, you can say thank you by placing your right hand against your chest and bowing your head slightly with your eyes closed.
- Take off your shoes when going into someone's house.
- It is rude to show the soles of your feet or shoes. When sitting, point your feet down or put them flat on the floor.
- In some parts of the Arab region, it is not polite to open a gift in front of the person who gave it to you. You can open it later, at home.

¹ 'Education starts early: Progress, challenges and opportunities: Regional Report for Arab states', UNESCO, 2023

Culture in *The Polyglots* apps

As children play with the apps, they can discover fun and intriguing Arab cultural references such as a camel, a pomegranate, an Aladdin-style lamp and a mosaic tile. You can learn more about the cultural references in the app toolkit.

Interesting topics

Animals

The animals of the Arab region include:

- Arabian horses
- camels
- caracals or desert lynxes (wild cats with long black ears)
- crocodiles
- donkeys
- elephants
- hippopotamuses
- horned vipers (venomous snakes with tiny horns above their eyes)
- jackals (animals in the same family as wolves and dogs)
- sand cats
- scorpions.

Arts

- Calligraphy: the Arab world has a long tradition of using beautifully presented Arabic script to celebrate the Qur'an and to decorate buildings and objects.
- Carpets: Arabian carpets are made from wool, silk, cotton and sometimes camel and goat hair.
- Zellige: mosaic tiles are a feature of Moroccan buildings. They are colourful and geometrical.

Food

- Food varies greatly across the Arab world.
- Across the Arab region, dates are eaten with and without fillings as snacks.
- Sweet mint tea is enjoyed in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. It is made with green tea, mint leaves and sugar.
- Lahoh is a flat pancake-like bread eaten in Djibouti, Somalia and Yemen. It can be eaten at breakfast with honey and ghee (clarified butter) or at lunchtime and dinnertime with a main meal.
- Tabbouleh is a salad made with parsley, mint, tomatoes and onions. Variations are eaten in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.





Interesting topics

Games

- In Syria, children play hajla, a game similar to hopscotch.
- In Tunisia, there is a game called tlagha, in which players compete to score points by knocking a small stick with a large stick in and out of a circle.
- In Oman, Al Hawalees is a game played by adults. It can be played on the ground with stones or on a board with pieces. The goal is to remove all of your opponent's stones from the game.

Places

- The Sahara desert extends across Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia. After the Arctic and Antarctica, it is the largest desert in the world.
- South-west of Doha in Qatar, there is a desert where sand dunes 'sing' when the wind blows.
- The Dead Sea is a border between Jordan and Israel. The sea is very salty and people float easily in it. In fact, people's bodies are so buoyant in the water that it can be difficult to touch the ground.
- Babil in Iraq is home to the ruins of the ancient city of Babylon.
- The city of Petra in Jordan is partly carved into the side of a mountain. Much of the stone is pink.
- Off the coast of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, artificial islands have been created, each in the shape of a different country of the world.
- Egypt's famous pyramids are the tombs of ancient pharaohs. They were built 4,000 to 5,000 years ago. Sudan also has pyramids, somewhat smaller than those in Egypt.

Geography

Like Australia, much of the Arab region is desert. There are also large areas that are grassy, around the Tigris, Euphrates, Jordan and Nile rivers. The majority of people in the region live in those areas.

Note: This document contains content that has been gathered through independent research and consultation with subject matter experts. The figures and information included in this document should be reviewed for accuracy over time.



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