

"We get down to business too quickly"

The cultural trainer **Sylvia Ortlieb** prepares German business people for the Arab world. A conversation



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KULTURAUUSTAUSCH: You prepare business people for the Arab world with Intercultural Training. What mental images do the participants have regarding the Orient?

Sylvia Ortlieb: Often there are quite extreme images. The suppression of women comes first, then the fear of being cheated. There is a great deal of generalising regarding the problem of Islamism whereby three hundred million Arabs are lumped together as one, often with accusations of unpredictability, irrationality and dishonesty. Positive images are: warmth, cordiality, a colourful life, the scents and especially hospitality towards strangers.

KULTURAUUSTAUSCH: And what do Germans believe about how Arabs perceive them?

Ortlieb: Many Germans fear as know-it-alls. But they tend to have altogether more positive ideas as well, like punctuality, thorough work practises, diligence, intelligence, reliability and quality.

KULTURAUUSTAUSCH: And what is the Arab view of the Germans in reality?

Ortlieb: The Germans are viewed as being naive concerning the conflict in the Middle East; pushy, able to get their way; as egoistic, sometimes arrogant; as know-alls; and possibly greedy in business. The positive aspects are reliability, punctuality, love of order and excellent quality of work. The discrepancy between how they see themselves and the perspective from the outside is much greater on the part of the Arabs. Arabs are shocked by the negative image Germans have of the Orient, and also disappointed that the cultural achievements of the Orient are little appreciated.

KULTURAUUSTAUSCH: Where does this negative image come from?

Ortlieb: This is the arrogance of the West. Either the Orient is totally glorified, or looked upon from on high. The United Emirates is the one exception. The Orient seems to end just before the border of Dubai.

KULTURAUUSTAUSCH: What are the major difficulties with direct contact in terms of day-to-day business?

Ortlieb: How little time Germans take getting to know their business partners is totally incomprehensible for Arab colleagues on Euro-Arab projects; Germans come straight to the point. Arab culture is more relationship orientated. Great emphasis is put on creating the right chemistry and hence a good deal of time is spent establishing harmonious relations. The issue of "keeping face" and "loss of face" is a downright minefield: Germans are quick to criticise and Arabs most sensitive, they tend to withdraw; a relationship may suffer permanent damage. Arabs expect that the other's honour be upheld.

KULTURAUUSTAUSCH: What cultural mistakes do Arabs make in Germany due to lack of knowledge?

Ortlieb: A great taboo is the glorification of National Socialism, something Arabs do not always take into account. Quite the reverse: Some regard Hitler as a great man who was able to solve problems relatively easily. Other than that, the no-go areas are essentially subjective in our heterogeneous society. Insulting the Pope and criticism of religion are for instance problematic for Catholics. Arabs are aware of this and therefore they are very careful with reference to religion.

KULTURAUUSTAUSCH: What things must a woman take heed of in the Orient?

Ortlieb: Dress code, of course. To wear a Hijab in Tunis is wholly inappropriate whereas it is obligatory in Iran. Eye contact can be problem, especially if one does not know that this could be understood as an enticement and thus be offensive. For women, deportment takes practise. I often use this illustration: One should not appear hesitant like a young bride, but staid and proud like an Arab mother-in-law. A woman who is culturally adept will experience great respect as a woman and entrepreneur, and will gain high standing in the Orient.

About the interviewee

Sylvia Ortlieb lives in Munich and is head of the business advisory company "[Orient-Occident](#)". She is an Ethnologist and Oriental Scholar and coaches in Intercultural Competence for concerns building business networks in the Orient.