

Doing Business in Tunisia | Tunisian Social and Business Culture

A Tunisian Culture Overview

Fact File

- **Official name** – Tunisian Republic
- **Population** – 10,486,339 (July 2008 est.)
- **Languages** -Arabic and French
- **Currency** – Tunisian Dinar (TND)
- **Capital city** – Tunis
- **GDP** – purchasing power parity \$81.88 billion (2008 est.)
- **GDP Per Capita** – purchasing power parity \$7,900 (2008 est.) *



Overview

Although geographically part of the African continent, Tunisia has a lot of cultural similarities with Middle Eastern and Mediterranean countries. Most Tunisian people adhere to Islam; however, Tunisia is one of the most liberal Muslim countries and has a secular government. As a former protectorate of France, Tunisian people speak both Arabic and French. Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956 and has since worked hard to improve its society and economy. Understanding Tunisian culture is essential for anyone doing business in Tunisia.

Tunisia - Key Concepts and Values

Islam – Even though Tunisia is almost entirely Islamic, religious freedom is a constitutional right. People generally don't enquire about another individual's religious beliefs. Tunisia is one of the most tolerant and liberal Islamic countries. This is also visible in business. For example, Friday is a working day in contrast to many other Islamic countries.

Family – In Tunisia, the family unit has a high value. The interests of the nuclear, as well as the extended family, have a higher value than the interests of a single individual. As such, favouritism and nepotism are common in Tunisia.

Hospitality – Tunisians, as with other Muslims, pride themselves on being good hosts. Expect to be invited to dinner to your Tunisian colleague's house. If so, bring a gift as a sign of appreciation and take off your shoes when entering the home to avoid disrespect.

Indirect Communication – Tunisian people have an indirect way of communicating. In general, confrontations and arguments are avoided where possible and keeping the peace is a high priority.

Tunisian Economy

Tunisia's economy is very diverse. Agriculture, mining, tourism and manufacturing are important sectors in contrast to other countries of the African continent which heavily rely on oil production and export. Even though the Tunisian government controls economic affairs,

an increasing privatisation can be observed throughout the last decade. Through a simplification of the tax structure, the Tunisian economy becomes more attractive for foreign business. As one of the wealthiest countries of the African continent, Tunisia has a high standard of living and is striving towards more development and economic growth in the near future. This makes Tunisia an attractive place for foreign business, but understanding its social and business culture is essential first.

Tunisian Business Part 1 - Working in Tunisia (Pre-departure)

- **Working practices in Tunisia**
 - It's necessary to make appointments before doing business in Tunisia. These should be scheduled in advance and confirmed, either in writing or by telephone.
 - Punctuality is essential in Tunisian business culture. Being punctual reflects your attitude to work and reliability. Also, deadlines are seen as fixed and you should always do your best to meet them.
 - Although a Muslim country, in Tunisia business is closed on Sundays instead of Fridays. Business generally starts at 8am and finishes at 6pm. Working hours are shortened during the summer months, especially in August.
- **Structure and hierarchy in Tunisian companies**
 - Business structures in Tunisia tend to be hierarchical so the most senior manager makes the final decision. Business in Tunisia has quite a lot of bureaucracy which you will have to deal with, so try to get some advice from people who are familiar with the culture before going.
 - Privilege and favouritism are common practice in Tunisian business. Be aware of the fact that giving and receiving favours is deeply rooted in Tunisian society.
- **Working relationships in Tunisia**
 - Establishing personal relationships with co-workers in Tunisian business is important. Having an interpersonal relationship with your Tunisian counterparts is essential for long lasting and successful business partnerships.
 - In case of a conflict with one of your co-workers, avoid confrontation in public as this is seen as highly offensive. If possible, avoid a confrontation altogether.

Tunisian Business Part 2 - Doing Business in Tunisia

- **Business practices in Tunisia**
 - Business dress in Tunisia is formal. For men, suits and tie are appropriate. Women should dress modestly, even though Tunisia is quite a liberal Muslim country.
 - In Tunisia, French forms of Address are commonly used. "Monsieur" and the last name for men or "Madame" followed by the last name for women are the usual forms of address. Professional titles like "Dr" or "Professor", should be used.
 - Before starting to do business in Tunisia, it is common practice to get to know your counterparts on a personal level. Time is spent for that matter over tea. To strengthen and maintain a good business relationship, meeting your Tunisian co-workers face to

face and keeping personal contact as well is crucial.

Tunisian Business Etiquette (Do's and Don'ts)

- ✓ DO be aware that most Tunisian businesspeople speak Arabic or French. Therefore, an experienced translator is advised when you don't speak those languages.
- ✓ DO exchange business cards after being introduced to your business contacts for the first time. Always accept them using the right hand or both hands.
- ✓ DO bring a small gift when invited to somebody's home. This is a sign of gratitude and will be appreciated.
- ✗ DON'T schedule business meetings during the holy month of Ramadan. Ramadan is a major Islamic tradition that includes fasting for an entire month. Although foreigners are not required to fast, it is considered impolite to eat or drink in front of others during this time.
- ✗ DON'T point your foot at something or show an extended middle finger. These gestures might cause offense.
- ✗ DON'T be surprised if an agreement made within a meeting is not fulfilled afterwards. Tunisians avoid open confrontations and therefore might rather say "yes" to something they cannot keep than lose face.

Tunisia Culture Quiz - True or False

1. Equal rights for women are guaranteed by the constitution in Tunisia.
2. Shaking hands is not a common practice in Tunisian business culture.
3. The informal French form of address "tu" can be used in business settings.
4. It is quite likely that you will see young Tunisians dressed in traditional Tunisian gowns and dresses.
5. You can always bring your partner when you are invited for dinner.

Tunisia Culture Quiz - Answers

1. True.
2. False. Shaking hands is a common greeting form.
3. False. Normally, the formal "vous" is used unless you are very close to somebody.
4. False. The younger generations rarely dress in the traditional gowns.
5. False. It is advisable to always check beforehand.

* Source: CIA World Factbook 2007

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