



There are few religious strictures in the Qur'an or the Hadith about male dress in Arab cultures. One of the few aspects of dress for the Arab man that does have to comply with scripture is the absolute need to cover the 'awrah', the area between a man's navel and his knee. In practice this generally means boxer-like shorts, perhaps with loose-fitting long white pants over them. The traditional style, the national dress of the UAE, is based on the practicalities of the nomadic desert lifestyle, with simple, comfortable garments that can easily adapt to cope with hot, dusty days and cold wintery nights.

On the head is worn a headscarf called a keffiyeh. This originally doubled as a sunshade and a dust filter. In the UAE it is usually but not always white; there is no significance to the colour, though a check pattern usually indicates that the wearer has completed the Hajj. A black and white check pattern is often associated with Palestine and worn as a gesture of solidarity. Some Arab men will wear a red and white check in winter months, the white in the summer.

'Shemagh' generally means a keffiyeh with a checked pattern, 'gutrah' is a plain white keffiyeh.

On top of the keffiyeh may be worn an agal (or igal), the black rope originally used as an allpurpose camel whip or hobble. The long tassels on the headgear are a relatively recent addition and stop the agal from slipping off when you bend forward. Under it is the tagiyah, a white skullcap usually made from fine wool or cotton that is knitted, crocheted, or plain cloth.

The dishdasha (sometimes called a thawb or – especially in the UAE – a kandura) is a loosefitting long shirt, always with long sleeves. Again it's often but not necessarily white – some Arab men wear a white dishdasha in summer and colours in winter, typically muted browns, greys, and blues. Dark blue is sometimes seen, black is rarely encountered because that colour is reserved for women in the Hadith.

The dishdasha never covers the feet, and it usually has a decorative tassel at the front which reputedly was once perfumed and used as a kind of nosegay.

A dishdasha can have a mandarin-type stand-up collar, but many are collarless; and designer versions may have pointed or even button-down collars. Basic versions have buttonless sleeves, some are buttoned sleeves, others have French cuffs to be worn with cufflinks – there is a prohibition on pure gold or pure silver, but combinations of precious metals and stones can be worn.

For formal occasions (or in very cold weather) a bisht might be worn over the dishdasha. This is a sleeved cloak; the winter version is made of thick wool, the other is a lightweight equivalent in cotton or manmade fibres. The latter will normally be worn only for events like weddings, official occasions, other celebrations, and maybe during Friday lectures in the mosque. It comes in different colours but the formal ones are normally black or beige. Under the dishdasha the Arab man will usually wear a tee-shirt or vest, and shorts or a length of cloth wound round the waist like a sarong.

[caption] The traditional Shemagh
also known as a keffiyeh

[Originally published in Abu Dhabi Week vol 2 issue 15]