

10 Things You Need to Know About Pakistan

PLUS

Don't Make These Common Mistakes!



Farhana Qazi

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“If you know Pakistan, think again.”

(Slackistan film)



Introduction

Pakistan is a nation in crisis. The most dangerous country in the world. A failed state. Or is it? What you don't know about Pakistan is that the young Muslim country is changing. The youth are determined and dedicated. People across Pakistan are committed to forging a stronger national identity, even when ethnic, tribal and religious loyalties stand in the way. Today, Pakistanis are leading their country in a new direction.

To be fair, some things inside Pakistan *don't* change. I should know. I have been traveling to Pakistan my entire life. Born in the cultural center of Lahore, I came to the American southwest as a child and was raised in the heart of Texas (that is, Austin). But Pakistan never escaped me. For more than thirty years I have been dating Pakistan. Each time, I visit a new city. I meet a new person. I try a new dish. And most of all, I make new friends—all in an effort to understand Pakistan beneath the layers of thugs, drugs, and terrorism.

This ebook is an easy-to-read cultural guide that will help you understand the people of Pakistan. You will know when you can speak openly and when you should stay silent. You will learn the tools of cultural engagement. You will learn all this in an hour or less.

Ten Rules of Engagement



Rule **1**: Know whom you will be meeting.

This sounds simple, but it's often overlooked. In any official meeting, it is important to know something about your counterpart. (These days, almost anyone can be found on Google or a Pakistani blog—if he/she is famous, then you will find citations a person has made in newspaper articles that are worth noting.) Of course, there are surprises and you may not always have the luxury of having a complete biography of your counterpart. No worries, so long as you know the person's rank, position, or in Pakistani-speak, "status."

Are you meeting a Pakistani military officer? (If so, is he a Major or General? That's a big difference.) Are you meeting an artist who chooses nude subjects? (That can tell you a lot about the his/her ideology and/or lifestyle) Are you meeting a wealthy industrialist or a humble shopkeeper's wife?

“Status defines Pakistanis. Everyone knows his/her position in society, and you should too.”

Status can be linked to a family name, religious identity, educational background, or wealth. Whatever it is, Pakistanis know how they are viewed (or judged) by others in their country.



Farhana Qazi with Pakistani police officers and the Deputy Secretary General of the Punjab Assembly, Chairperson Amir Habib (in a business suit). Photo taken in Lahore, Pakistan.

Rule 2:

Know the founding father of Pakistan.

And at least one more historical fact.

As a child, I learned the founding fathers of the United States. In school, I was taught the significance of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. I became immersed in the history of the Civil War and watched *Gone with the Wind* many times.

The same holds true for Pakistan. *Everyone* knows the Father of the Nation, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, commonly known as the “Quaid-i-Azam,” which is an honorific title. Most Pakistanis also know that their leader died a year after the country gained independence from the British in August 1947, also the same month and year that the Union of India was created.

Most Pakistanis view Jinnah as a liberal who advocated human rights, women’s rights and minority rights. One of his most famous quotes, which Jinnah declared in the Constituent Assembly, is this:

“*You are free; you are free to go to your temples; you are free to go to your mosque or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the State.*”

Many observers have said that Jinnah’s vision for Pakistan sounds similar to a separation of church and state.

When he was alive, the outspoken journalist, Ardeshee Cowasjee (who was a Parsi, not a Muslim) gave me a picture of Jinnah, whom he knew personally. In the color photograph, Jinnah sports a classic perfectly pressed three-piece suit, with a cigar dangling from his mouth, as he kneels to pet his dog.



Muhammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan

Some Pakistanis conveniently forget that Jinnah did not practice Islam. He liked to drink whiskey. He liked his bacon and eggs and dogs—in Islam, pork is forbidden and many Muslims do not own (or touch) a dog because it is considered unclean.

Today, many Pakistanis debate Jinnah's vision—this is something you can talk about and is a great way to start a conversation with a Pakistani. Almost everyone has an opinion about their founding father. And you might also add to your historical cheat-sheet the following three points:

- 1.** *Pakistan fought three major wars (and has had numerous border skirmishes to the present) with India, which have mostly been over Kashmir, a disputed valley that is always on the edge of conflict;*
- 2.** *Pakistan changed its name officially to "Pakistan: The Land of the Pure" in 1956, nine years after independence;*
- 3.** *Pakistan is the second largest Muslim country in the world. (Indonesia is first.)*

Rule 3: Know the difference between a Sunni, a Shia and a Sufi.



This is the hard part. Religion and sectarian identities can be messy and complex. To help us understand who's who, we often place people into neat categories. The reality is that boxes don't work, and religious identities often blend together. Therefore, let's stick to the basics.

A Sunni is one of the two main branches of Islam, commonly described as "orthodox." Followers believe in the revelations that were passed by Angel Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad in the heart of Arabia (modern Saudi Arabia) fourteen hundred years ago. A Sunni is one who adheres to Islam's holy book, the Quran, and the Prophet's traditions and sayings compiled in the *Hadith*. Sunnis also accept the first four Caliphs or leaders as rightful successors of Prophet Muhammad. Sunnis are the majority sect in Pakistan.

A Shia belongs to the second largest sect of Islam. Believers regard Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, as the legitimate successor of Islam and the first imam (religious ruler). Followers reject the first three caliphs because they did not originate from Prophet Muhammad's family. They also follow the Quran and *Hadith*.

A Sufi is a Muslim mystic. To connect with God, followers use music and dance to reach a state of ecstasy. In Turkey, dervishes spin out-of-control in a form of meditation. In a Sufi gathering in Virginia, I witnessed men and women chanting and beating drums. Some stood up and twirled their long, black hair. Others raised their hands in exultation. Hashish

can be used to reach this spiritual state. The unique feature of this practice is the concept of *pirs*, which are akin to saints. In my birth city, Lahore is referred to as the City of Datta, named after the Sufi saint Hazrat Ali Hajveri, who was originally from Afghanistan. The locals told me that Hajveri is celebrated for converting thousands of Hindus.

“*Sunnis and Shias belong to a sect. Sufis adhere to a unique practice.*”

Therefore, one can be a Sunni or a Shia Muslim and follow the Sufi path because Sufism has had a long and enduring influence on Islam in South Asia. Many Pakistanis participate in Sufi rituals and celebrations even though they may not consider themselves to be adherents of Sufism.



A father and son who adhere to Sunni Islam from northern Pakistan.

Rule 4: Know Pakistan's political landscape.

Don't discuss politics by taking sides with one political party over another. In Pakistan, politics is personal. *Very* personal. Pakistanis are emotional about their country's present and future. Therefore, showing preference for one political leader or party over another can create animosity, at best, and destroy a relationship, at worst. That does not mean avoid the subject. After all, politics (and religion) are popular subjects. You can ask more general questions: *How do you view your country's leader(s)?* In an election year, you might ask, *Who do you think will win? Who will you vote for?*

So long as you keep your questions broad, you can engage in a healthy dialogue of Pakistan's alphabet-soup politics.



A political campaign poster for the Pakistan People's Party.

Rule 5: Know when to discuss U.S. and Pakistan relations.

Much has been said and written about America's alliance with Pakistan. Media commentators frequently define the alliance as "frienemies," and CNN's Fareed Zakaria has boldly classified the two countries as "friends without benefits." As an American in Pakistan, it is tempting to discuss U.S.-Pakistan relations. It's perfectly normal to engage in this touchy topic, but not on the first meeting. This is *not* a topic for casual conversation. You should know that many Pakistanis are sensitive about a U.S. footprint in the region (i.e., Afghanistan) and American policies, such as the drone strikes. Pakistanis are also aware of America's previous support to their Generals.

Discussing all this with a Pakistani is fair game. Just be prepared for an honest (read brutal) assessment from your counterpart. Remember that the partnership of the U.S. and Pakistan is like a tidal wave. It ebbs and flows. It is in a constant state of flux.

“*And while Pakistanis love most-things-American, they may not like all U.S. government policies or officials in their country.*”



Rule 6: Know the major ethnic groups.

You are not expected to know the difference between a Pathan (or Pashtun, the same group but different pronunciation), Punjabi, Baluchi, or Sindhi—and you may not care. However,

you should know that these four major groups have a province that reflects their ethnicity. For example, Baluchis mostly reside in Baluchistan, and Punjabis are named after the province of Punjab, and so on. The exception is the Pathans, who are located in the Khyber-Pakhtunkwa Province (KPK).

Over time, ethnic groups (including families, tribes and clans) have migrated. Today, in the capital city of Islamabad, all four groups are present. And Karachi, the financial city, has the largest Pathan diaspora in the world. Therefore, Pathans are the second largest ethnic group—Punjabis are the first. These are important details you may want to know, since ethnic identities play a strong role in governance, politics and other socio-economic dynamics in Pakistan.



Punjabi boys

Rule 7: Know where to meet Pakistanis.

Talking to Pakistanis is easy and can be fun. They are curious about the American people—they want to know how we live, what we do, where we work, what movies we watch, and most of all, what *we* think of *them*. They want an American point of view. This is possible only when you take the first step. Pakistanis want to engage you. They want to know who you are. But they are waiting for you to start the conversation. *But how?*

Choose a café with masala chai where Westerners and Pakistanis meet. In Islamabad, Khosar Market is “the” place to meet friendly, English-speaking Pakistanis. At Gloria Jeans Coffee, where music shifts from Amr Diab to Beyonce, and a cup of cappuccino is the cost of a drink at Starbucks, you will find young men and women sitting together, speaking a mix of Urdu, Punjabi and English. You could ask to join them, and I don’t think they would mind. Here, you will find Pakistanis who may have traveled or studied abroad and may understand your world view.



Other likely places to strike up a conversation include hotels and guest houses, where you will find friendly staff eager to learn about America, a country most have never visited. If you happen to stay with a Pakistani family, then you have a better chance of getting-to-know the locals.

You could also choose to talk to shopkeepers at an open bazaar or a Dubai-style shopping center with high-end shops and glass windows. In any store, ancient or modern, you will find a shop owner or worker eager to serve you, if you are buying.

“*With small talk and storytelling—Pakistanis love stories—you have the start of a possible friendship. Pakistanis value relationships, so the more you meet, the more you will know.*”

Keep in mind that some cities and towns are more suspicious of Americans and Westerners in general. For example, in Abbottabad (or Bin Laden town), it will be more difficult, if not impossible, for you to interact with the locals. However, this town is worth a visit for its breathtaking views of snow-clad mountains and Shimla Hills. You also have to be cautious on the streets of Karachi, known for ethnic violence and political gangs. Even the city’s elitist housing, such as Defense and Clifton, can be dangerous if you are alone. In larger urban or isolated rural areas of Pakistan, having a local guide is the best way to stay safe and to experience the country. Finally, as is true of most crime-ridden cities, leave your valuables at home—gold and gems draw too much attention. Anything flashy could make you objectionable, and a target.

Rule 8: Know how & when to engage a Pakistani woman.



As an American woman inside Pakistan, I am reminded of my gender. I am also reminded of my religious identity, and both make me painfully aware that men and women have rules of engagement in this Muslim country. What does that mean?

Most of Pakistan is conservative. There are exceptions, such as the liberals of Karachi who are commonly referred to as the “burger crowd.” There is little to no separation of gender in left-wing, hippie-chic groups, or among families that have a more fluid interaction—that is, male cousins can talk to (and sometimes dance with) female cousins. In some families, dating and going-out-for-a-night are allowed, but this is not the norm.

In an honor- and shame-based society, Pakistani women guard their modesty. In simple terms, men protect their women, which can limit a Pakistani Muslim woman’s interaction with a foreign male, Muslim or not.

You may ask, how do you meet a Muslim woman if you are an American man? First, be ready to answer (to yourself and others) why you will interact with a Pakistani woman. Is this a casual meeting? Do you have business to discuss? Or do you want to flirt? An American male engaging a Pakistani woman can make her feel awkward and anxious, especially if she is unaware of your intention. It is helpful to let her know what

you wish to gain from speaking to her. Remember, in Pakistan, saying hello—or in this case, *Assalam-u-alaykum* (the standard Islamic greeting)—can be construed as flirtatious.

However, if you are an American woman, meeting a Pakistani woman can lead to a long-lasting friendship. You could talk about a range of topics—almost every Pakistani woman loves fashion and her children, if she has them. She also loves her profession. Every time I visit Pakistan, I meet with women who enjoy being in a position of power. She could be an Ambassador, a professor, a midwife, a social worker, a filmmaker, an actress, and more. You may find that you have a lot in common with a Pakistani female. As is true of women worldwide, Pakistani women are fighting for equal rights with men—a struggle we're familiar with in America.

Rule 9:

Know Pakistani music and literature.

Media is a powerful tool in which ideas and opinions influence the way we think. In America, Oprah shapes the way people view their relationships and helps viewers choose which books to read, and Dr. Mehmet Oz helps American loyalists take care of their bodies. In Pakistan, you can capture pop culture through media outlets. So, the first thing I do is turn on the television and buy a local newspaper and a few magazines.

In Pakistan, I become familiar with the latest soap-opera-like dramas, reality shows, and American copycat programs, such as “Dancing with the Stars” and “American Idol”. (In Pakistan, they are “Nachle” and “Pakistan Idol.”) And I try to watch an Indian movie or two—at three hours each, I’m lucky to see just one—as well as find the latest Hollywood movie. On my latest trip, I watched “Jack Reach” with lead actor and director, Tom Cruise, at Rawalpindi’s Cineplex movie theater. By knowing what is seen in Pakistan, I have a general sense of what appeals to Pakistanis. And culture always makes for great conversation. You might ask your Pakistani friend: *What’s the latest movie? What do you recommend?* Or, if you’re watching “Pakistan Idol,” *Who do you think might win?*

For a deeper appreciation of Pakistan’s rich literary history, you may want to consider browsing through English-translated works of celebrated South Asian poets such as Mirza Ghalib and Dr. Allama Iqbal, Pakistan’s national poet and philosopher.

Today, there is also a long list of emerging Pakistani writers, including Ali Sethi, Moni Mohsin, Maha Khan Phillips, and

Mohsin Hamid, to name a few. You may want to know one or two authors / books. I laughed out loud when I read *The Diary of a Social Butterfly*, and my fellow instructor Hollifield said Hamid's *Mothsmoke* was a page-turner.

Music has a universal appeal. My American friend Todd Shea, who runs a medical NGO and has been living in Pakistan for nearly ten years, plays the guitar. He has performed Urdu and English songs on stage with other Pakistani musicians, including Atif Aslam. You may want to know Aslam, who has performed best-selling hits in Indian Bollywood movies. He is a modern icon.



Atif Aslam sings for the children of northern Pakistan.

For Sufi music, you should know Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali, who was introduced to the West by Peter Gabriel. Men aside, Noor Jehan's melodious voice and poetic songs captured the hearts of people in Pakistan *and* India. She is a legend in both countries.

Rule 10:

Know Pakistani cuisine and be willing to try it.

In classes I teach, there is a day held at the Afghan Restaurant in Virginia. At lunchtime, we sit on plush cranberry-colored cushions and watch the server place large dishes filled with meat and vegetables on a *dastarkhan*, a Persian word that means a spread of food. In Urdu, it means passion and can refer to a celebration of love and life. The afternoon feast also includes *naan*, the tasty unleavened bread, which is baked in a tandoor clay-oven. When students ask if Pakistani food is similar to Afghan food, I am quick to offer a resounding “no.”

The most obvious difference is that Afghan food lacks the spice and heat of Pakistani cuisine. There is no masala. No curry. No flaming red peppers. No pale yellow turmeric powder. No nutty flavored cumin seed. And no hint of *gharam masala*, a blend of ground spice which includes cinnamon, coriander and cardamom seeds, bay leaf, black and white peppercorns, and my favorite, anise.



I tell students, “Pakistani cuisine is closer to northern Indian food,” and I know there is at least one Indian restaurant in every major American city.

“*In cultures around the world, food brings people together. Sharing a meal, or breaking bread, is a festival of family and friendship.*”

My mother used food to bond with her children. I remember the smell of curry as it penetrated the house and our clothes on the way to school. Today, I cook with the spices mama used. I mix masala to create culinary gifts, such as cherry-red tandoori chicken marinated with butter, thyme and sage—adding an American touch of herbs is inevitable since I grew up with vegetable gardens in the South.

Sharing food with a Pakistani is the best way to connect and share a sensory experience. A blog posted in Pakistan’s *Express Tribune* by Gordon Sumaski, who fell in love with a woman from Pakistan, was struck by the food when he visited the country. He writes:

“There is nothing in this world that can come close to the comfort provided by *haleem*, *nihari* and a warm, buttery piece of naan. The spices and herbs used in Pakistani food are unique, authentic and jump-start the day reflecting Pakistan’s vibrant culture. Not to mention all sinuses are completely cleared when those green chilies hit the back of the throat.”

Go ahead. Try a spice. Try a dish you never thought you’d have. To impress a Pakistani, you might choose a delicacy, such as goat brain, goat feet, or barbecued *kilayji* (goat liver).

Bonus Rule:**Know when (and how) to say good-bye.**

Have you ever been to a party or business meeting that made you wish you were somewhere else? You were bored. You just didn't want to be there. And now you don't know how to leave. In America, you can politely excuse yourself or find a reason to go. In Pakistan, there are greater expectations to be present, especially if invited to participate in an event, personal or professional. You might be viewed as insensitive or rude if you choose to leave hastily, unless you have an emergency, of course. *So, what do you do?*

Saying good-bye in Pakistan is a protocol. There should be a rule book on "farewell etiquettes." I remember a lecture I was invited to give at a premier Islamabad-based think tank. The lecture was thirty minutes. The question-and-answer session lasted an hour. And then, a round of chai and cake translated into another hour of formal talk about U.S. strategy in the region. A simple afternoon lecture turned into an evening social hour, which included a photograph session on the front lawn of the institute and more one-on-one getting-to-know-the-speaker chitchats. I was stuck. I felt my voice crack. I needed hot water and lemon to hydrate myself and no more cups of steamed-milk-sugar-tea. I had to find a way to politely exit and end the political diatribe. "I think I am falling sick," I said. "I hope you will forgive me. Please give me permission to go." I felt I was asking for medical leave. Luckily, the host agreed and everyone said good-bye, which lasted another half hour as everyone hugged or shook hands, depending on the gender.

You will have to use your judgment on this one. Common sense is not always universal. Remember most Pakistanis don't have a sense of time. When they are invited to a gathering,

expect rounds of conversation and chai, even after a meal.

“Expect to engage until you can engage no more. Expect to be the center of attention, if you are the only American. That means you need to leave your stopwatch at home. Therefore, saying good-bye is a delicate affair.”

When you do decide to leave, for whatever reason, make sure you say good-bye to every person in the room. A wave will not do. You will either have to shake each person's hand or politely nod your head. It is common courtesy to acknowledge the people you meet.

And please provide a valid reason for being the first to leave. You can say *“I have to go to a business meeting.”* (Most Pakistanis think Americans are always working anyway, so you can conveniently say you have pressing work, even at odd hours in the night.) But you may not want to say you have to leave to see another friend, so as not to offend your Pakistani host. Remember Pakistanis value relationships, and you want to be sure to maintain the one you have.



Farhana Qazi poses with fashion designer and owner of Meenakar boutique, Faaiza Amjad (left) and her mother before saying good-bye at a wedding party. Photo taken in Lahore, Pakistan.

Don't Make These Common Mistakes

Five More Cultural Cues

- 1. Don't tell a Pakistani Muslim that he/she is related to an Arab.** In South Asia, some Muslims have borrowed and incorporated traditions from Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.
- 2. Don't confuse sects with movements.** The two major sects are Sunni and Shia Islam. Others are movements, namely, Deobandi and Barelvi. The first group adopts a strict or literal interpretation of Islam, while Barelvis are commonly called "peace-loving Muslims."
- 3. Don't judge a Pakistani woman by what she wears.** It's too easy to assume that a woman in a sleeveless dress is modern, progressive, liberal, or a non-Muslim. It could be that she loves fashion. Period.
- 4. Don't talk about sex, at least not openly.** This is a taboo subject for most Pakistanis.
- 5. Don't drink or ask for alcohol in public.** Some Pakistanis *do* drink and they will invite you to have a drink only if they are comfortable with you.

Contact Information:

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Call, a rock band in Lahore. Released album “Jilawatan” in late 2005; won the “Tune of the Month” award by BBC Asia.

Hadiqa Kiyani (female pop star who sings in Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto, English and Arabic). Two notable songs are “Sohniya” (Punjabi) and “Janaan” (Pashto) – on youtube.

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (deceased legendary qawwali singer, noted in the Guinness Book of World Records).

Salman Ahmad (former guitarist for the band Junoon; author of *Rock and Roll Jihad* {New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010} and an instructor in New York).

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About the Author



Ms. Farhana Qazi is a global scholar on conflicts in the Islamic world. Her travels to South Asia—which includes Pakistan and the disputed region of Kashmir—as well as to other Islamic countries in the Arab world, to assess patterns of conflict, have made her an internationally-recognized expert. Based on her knowledge of events in the Islamic world, Ms. Qazi advises U.S. policymakers, appears regularly in the media, and is a frequent speaker at U.S. government events and international conferences. Her work and opinions have been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, CNN, BBC, Al-Jazeera, FOX News, NPR, and *Newsweek*. She is the recipient of the 21st Century Leader Award, presented to her by The National Committee on American Foreign Policy. Currently, she is a Senior Lecturer for the U.S. military.

