# Why Bilingual UAE Websites Need Right-to-Left Layout from the Ground Up

For any business operating in the UAE, a website that speaks both Arabic and English is no longer optional. The country's population is a mix of Arabic-speaking locals and a large expatriate community that communicates primarily in English. A bilingual site is the obvious solution. But bilingual does not just mean adding a translation toggle. It means building a layout that respects the reading direction of each language. Arabic reads from right to left, while English flows from left to right. Getting this right from the start matters more than many realise.

## What Is Right-to-Left Layout and Why Is It Hard?

A right-to-left layout, often abbreviated as RTL, is a design that mirrors the visual flow of a left-to-right interface. In an RTL layout, the main content starts on the right side of the page. The logo sits on the right, the menu aligns to the right, and text reads from right to left. This is not just about flipping a switch. Many modern website builders and content management systems are built with left-to-right as the default. Getting a clean RTL version often requires custom development work.



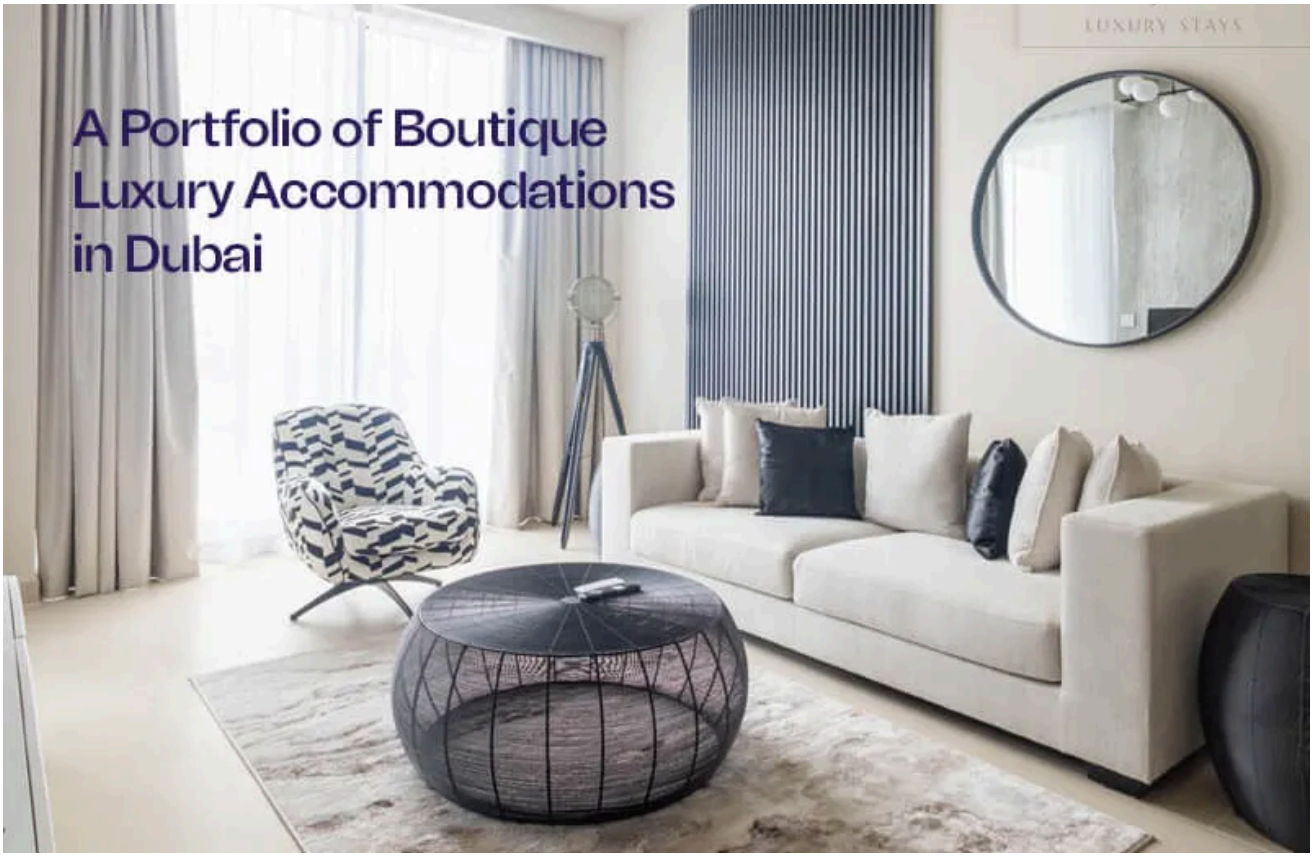

The real challenge comes when you need both directions on the same site. A language switcher must flip the entire layout, not just the text. That includes headers, sidebars, buttons, forms, and even image placement. For example, an arrow pointing to the next page should point right in an English layout but left in an Arabic one. Neglecting these details creates a confusing experience where the user feels like the site is fighting against their natural reading habit.

## Why Bilingual Sites in the UAE Are a Special Case

The UAE market demands a seamless experience in both languages. A visitor landing on an English page expects a standard left-to-right interface. When they switch to Arabic, the whole page should reorganise itself to read right-to-left. This is not just about aesthetics. It affects usability, accessibility, and how trustworthy the site feels. A poorly implemented RTL layout can make a business look careless or unfamiliar with the local culture.

Many UAE businesses serve both Arabic-speaking customers and English-speaking residents. A bilingual site that handles RTL poorly might alienate one group or the other. For example, if the Arabic version of a site keeps the menu on the left side, an Arabic-speaking user must

move their eye from the rightmost point to the far left to find navigation. That extra cognitive load adds up over time and can lead to higher bounce rates.




## How RTL Support Works in Practice

Good RTL support starts with how the site is coded. Modern web standards use the CSS property direction: rtl and the HTML attribute dir="rtl" to tell the browser how to render content. These take care of basic text alignment and the flow of inline elements. But the real work is in the layout itself. Flexbox and grid systems need to be configured to flip their axes. Form fields, search bars, and dropdown menus must reorder themselves. Even the order of table columns may need to reverse.

Arabic typography adds another layer. Arabic script is cursive and letters change shape depending on their position in a word. Fonts that look clean in English may not have proper Arabic glyphs or may render Arabic text too small or too large. Text expansion is a common issue: an English sentence that fits in a button might stretch by twenty or thirty percent when translated into Arabic. Designers must allow for this so buttons do not break or overflow their containers.

### What to Check When Reviewing an RTL Implementation

If you are working with a web design team or reviewing a bilingual site yourself, here are the key points to look at:

- **Menu and navigation order:** The first item in the menu should appear on the right in the Arabic version. The logo should also shift to the right side.
- **Form fields and labels:** In an Arabic form, labels should align to the right of the input field, and the input cursor should start on the right.
- **Image and icon direction:** Icons that indicate direction, like arrows for next and previous, must be mirrored. An image that shows a timeline should flow from right to left.
- **Text alignment in mixed content:** If a paragraph contains both Arabic and English words, the browser should handle the bidirectional text correctly without breaking the flow.
- **Language switcher placement:** The switcher itself should stay in a consistent location, but the text inside it should reflect the current language. For example, the button might read "English" on the Arabic version.

## Beyond Layout: Content Localisation and Cultural Context

RTL layout is one part of a larger effort called content localisation. Localisation means adapting the content and design to fit a particular culture, not just translating the words. In the UAE, this includes using the correct dialect of Arabic for your audience, choosing imagery that feels familiar and appropriate, and considering local customs around colours and symbols. A site that simply translates English text into Arabic without adjusting the layout will feel foreign to Arabic speakers.

Cultural context also affects how information is organised. Arabic readers often prefer a more formal and detailed presentation compared to the concise, action-oriented style common in English web writing. The same page may need a different tone and length in each language to feel natural. This is not about making the Arabic version longer for the sake of it, but about matching the expectations of the audience.




## Technical Considerations for Bilingual SEO

Search engines need to know which version of a page to show to which user. This is where hreflang tags come in. These are small pieces of code in the page header that tell Google and other search engines that the English page and the Arabic page are equivalent versions of each other. Without these tags, a search engine might treat them as separate content or even as duplicate content, which hurts rankings.

Another technical detail is the URL structure. Some sites use a subdirectory like /en/ and /ar/ to separate language versions. Others use subdomains or separate domains. Each approach has trade-offs for maintenance and SEO. The important thing is that the language switcher on the site changes the hreflang tags and the URL consistently, so the user and the search engine both end up in the right place.

For businesses in the UAE, a bilingual site that handles RTL well is a practical advantage. It makes the site more usable for a larger audience, which can improve engagement and conversion rates. It also signals that the business understands the local market. A site that looks like an afterthought in Arabic will not inspire confidence.

When choosing a web design partner for a bilingual project, ask about their experience with RTL layouts and Arabic typography. Look at examples of their previous work in both languages. A good agency will have a process for testing the RTL version on different devices and

browsers. They should also be able to explain how they handle text expansion and bidirectional text. This is not a feature you want to fix after launch.



One resource worth reviewing is dubaiwebcity.com, which focuses on bilingual websites for the UAE market. The site provides insight into how professional RTL design is approached in the region. Seeing real examples of RTL implementation can help you understand what is possible and what common pitfalls look like. The team behind dubaiwebcity.com understands the nuances of building for both Arabic and English audiences, which is exactly the kind of expertise a bilingual project needs.

Ultimately, RTL support is not a nice-to-have. It is a fundamental part of creating a respectful and effective web presence in the UAE. A site that treats Arabic as a second-class language will be treated as a second-class option by users. Getting the layout right from the start saves time, money, and frustration later. It also builds trust with every visitor, regardless of the language they choose.