

# Saudi-American Forum

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SAF Essay #7

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## **Being a Woman in Saudi Arabia: A Personal Perspective**

**By Sally Al-Turki**

### **Introduction**

#### *A Role Model for Women Anywhere*

I have had the privilege of being a colleague of Mrs. Al-Turki for twenty years and have known and been a friend of her husband, Khalid Al-Turki, even longer.

Sally and Khalid are many things, chief amongst which they are role models, to large numbers of people. To the legions of their admirers, they are among Saudi Arabia's most dedicated pioneers in the field of education. For most National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations' leadership delegations that have visited Saudi Arabia, no program is considered complete without a half day at the school they created and administer to the present.

As by far the largest number of participants in the National Council delegations are educators, it is sufficient to state that, without exception, none have come away from meeting Sally Al-Turki without saying that they know of few, if any, comparable institutions in the United States with a record that surpasses Dar Ahliyya, the school that she, her husband, and Fawzi Jamal, help to administer, in preparing the country's youth for higher education.

For many, Sally Al-Turki is as good and relevant a role model as any of what a person of vision, hard work, and creativity can do with their life. She is a living example of the adage that, with dedication, fortitude, and perseverance, it is possible for most mortals to bud, bloom, and blossom wherever they are planted. Teacher, planner, innovator, publisher, educational outreach specialist, indefatigable seeker of better and more effective ways to educate, train, and develop the leadership skills of youth, wife and mother - Sally Al-Turki is many people's person for all seasons.

The Saudi American Forum is pleased to publish her statement on what it is like to be a woman in Saudi Arabia.

John Duke Anthony  
President, National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations

## **An American Woman in Saudi Arabia**

Eternal God, You are the one God to be worshiped by all, the one called Allah by your Muslim Children, descendants of Abraham as we are. You have called forth people of faith in every time and place. Give us grace to hear your truth in the teachings of Muhammad, the prophet, and show your love as disciples of Jesus Christ, that Christians and Muslims together may serve you in faith and friendship. Amen

- from the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship

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## **Being a Woman in Saudi Arabia**

Dr. Sarah B. Al-Turki

Al Khobar, Saudi Arabia

Dear Friends,

So many friends in the US have asked me to write something about what it is like to be a woman in Saudi Arabia. That is a big question that cannot be answered in a word. Let me start, however, by saying that I have lived here now for almost thirty-two years and I don't think I could possibly be happier than I have been throughout this time. I feel completely fulfilled as a woman, as a professional, as a member of society, and as a person who is contributing to the development of that society. My relations with my husband, my extended Saudi family and with so many Saudi friends are warm and deep; I do truly love and feel loved and accepted by so many people that I have come to know over these thirty-two years.

So, when I write to you about my feelings about the place and its people, I am writing from a context of love and mutual respect with my adopted family and society. That may be difficult to understand for people in the United States. How could a small town Ohio girl feel so at home in such a foreign place? But I do. My relationship with Saudi Arabia does not in any way diminish me as a person or as a woman or even as an American. It simply enriches and expands my understanding and my appreciation for the diversity of life.

Is life in Saudi Arabia different from that in the US? Of course, it is very different. Do I ever feel annoyed or frustrated by the limitations? Absolutely! Are there things I would like to see changed? Very definitely! But there are also things that I would like to see remain the same. For example, the strength of the family, the depth of friendship, the sense that one is never alone but can always find someone to help in times of need. As a mother, I was very happy that my children were not overwhelmed with images and movies that glorify sex and violence as a way of life - of course this is changing now as American media (Baywatch, Temptation Island, Robocop) has begun to dominate the airwaves all over the world. As a woman, I appreciate the fact that female bodies are not the instruments of marketing as they are in the US, plastered on every wall and screen. I have also felt secure because of the extremely low level of drug use and crime that we have known in Saudi Arabia. This is also changing, unfortunately, as foreign drug mafias have begun making inroads into the country and young people, caught between the old and the new, fall prey to their enchantments. But Saudi society acknowledges this evil and is searching for ways to combat it. There are many committees and organizations founded by Saudi

men and women who are working to figure out how to introduce change while still retaining those good parts that so enrich Saudi Arabian traditions.

Let me tell you a little about what I am doing so you can see some of the kinds of work that is taking place. As you know, my husband and I founded what has become a well-known and respected Saudi Arabian school (Pre-K - 12 with more than 1700 students). I am the full time head of the girls' section with more than 800 students. In addition, I am co-director of a publishing company for books in Arabic to train educators and a center for offering training and consulting to other schools that are also trying to develop and modernize. I am also a founding member of a center for preparation of early childhood teachers. We prepare the teachers, develop and publish teaching materials, and send consultants out to offer training at other pre-schools all over Saudi Arabia. These activities comprise the main part of my work.

But there are other activities that I consider to be very important. For twenty-eight years, I have been a member of a women's philanthropic organization that has been trying to help women of all levels of society develop themselves. We also raise money and commit our time to assist needy families, children with handicaps, children whose fathers have died and others. For the past six years, I have also been a member of the founding board of another group of women who are trying to establish a new center for needy women and families. This center will offer a wide variety of services including a shelter for abused women or those whose husbands are in jail. It will also offer training to help women prepare themselves to find jobs as well as guidance and support for those who want to open their own small businesses.

Last winter, Saudi Arabia signed the United Nations Convention to eliminate discrimination against women. Will changes come quickly? No. Will they be written about in American newspapers? No. Will they take forms that are easily understood by Americans? Sometimes yes and sometimes no. Things in Saudi Arabia happen very quietly, particularly in social matters. They also happen slowly - much too slowly for American taste and even for the taste of many Saudis. But they do happen without the social upheaval and civil wars that have taken place in so many other places that have, in the end, benefited no one. My study of the process of change in schools all over the world has taught me that no change happens without continuous struggle and frustration and it is always more complicated and takes far longer than we expect. In Saudi Arabia too, the process of change is slow and also quiet -- but it is continuous.

In light of what we have all read about Afghanistan, I feel I should add a note contrasting the two countries. There have been many articles that have tried to make the case that the situation of women in Saudi Arabia is the same as in Afghanistan under the Taliban. If we are to believe the reports we have read about Afghanistan, however, it is really quite different. My description of my activities above - not unusual for educated, involved women here -- should be enough to clarify that. Saudi girls are going to school and to universities, and getting jobs in many places as teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, etc. They are also writing in newspapers, managing their own businesses, controlling their own money, forming committees, and working to improve life generally and particularly for women and children.

One of the biggest areas of expansion these days is in the field of business. You may recall that the first wife of the Prophet Mohammed was a businesswoman and he was her employee before

he became her husband. Many more women are opening their own businesses these days and there are now branches of the Chamber of Commerce specifically to respond to the needs of women in the three main cities. In one small example, our family business has just hired a Saudi woman to be in charge of marketing for our art gallery, hoping that she will be able to tune into the growing interest in art among Saudis, both men and women, artists and collectors. In summary, Saudi Arabia has a lot to work on but it cannot be compared at all to Afghanistan under the Taliban.

Over the years, Saudis have been basically very positive towards American government and the American people. The long-term relationship between the two countries has been beneficial to both sides. Thousands of Saudi men and women have studied at U.S. universities and continue to have very warm feelings about the country and its people. Thousands of Americans have lived most of their working lives here; we have second and third generations of Americans who have come back to work in Saudi Arabia because of the good experiences they have had here.

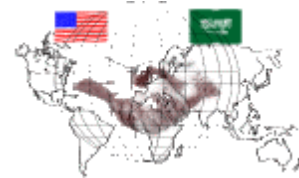
The vast majority of Saudis were shocked and saddened by the terrible events of 11 September, which were absolutely contrary to the principles of Islam. Especially horrifying for everyone here was the loss of innocent lives. Saudis are sorely grieved about the loss of innocent lives everywhere - in the US and in all the other countries, including Palestine, where it is happening on a daily basis.

As you can see, my life and that of my friends is very different from that portrayed in the American press. How sad that so little is understood in the US about the Arab world. I hope and pray that the day will come soon when Americans will come to have a clearer understanding of their brothers and sisters in the Arab world and that U.S. foreign policy will become more consistent with the principles of the America that I know and love.

Warmest regards,  
Sally

### **ABOUT THE SAUDI-AMERICAN FORUM**

The Saudi-American Forum is an information service designed to provide you timely information -- background and current issues - - impacting the Saudi-U.S. relationship.



The Forum is a resource for Americans who value the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia and who want to act in response to erroneous and misleading depictions of the relationship in the media and elsewhere. The Forum is a vehicle for stakeholders in the Saudi-U.S. relationship to contribute their experiences and their ideas and opinions on the issues of the day.

The Saudi-American Forum is a FREE service provided to the public by the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations. The Forum consists of a web site and an email information service.

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You can contribute your ideas and feedback to the Forum through use of the "Feedback" form on the website or through direct email to the Forum at: [info@SaudiAmericanForum.net](mailto:info@SaudiAmericanForum.net)

*Thank you for your support of the Saudi-U.S. relationship and the  
Saudi-American Forum.*