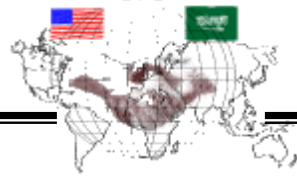


# Saudi-American Forum

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SAF Item of Interest

November 3, 2003

## **Perspectives on Developments in US-Saudi Relations: A Saudi Woman Speaks On The Issues**

### **Editor's Note:**

Samar Fatany, a radio talk show host from Jeddah, recently visited the United States and participated in discussions of US-Saudi relations in several forums. The Saudi-American Forum is pleased to present transcripts of her talks with a Boston radio station and as a panelist at the 12th Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference in Washington.

Mrs. Fatany is Senior Announcer and Radio Journalist in the English Service at Radio Jeddah, where she prepares and presents cultural, religious, and news programs, covers local and international conferences and trade exhibitions, conducts interviews with official delegations and dignitaries visiting the Kingdom, and covers major events and activities of foreign embassies and consulates in the Kingdom.

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**[Boston - September 20, 2003]**

**Host:** We're talking with Samar Hussein Fatany. She is a radio talk host in Saudi Arabia. You're going to love this conversation so let's get right to it. Talk about being a working woman in Saudi Arabia. Our image here is that doesn't happen except in rare cases. Are you privileged? Is that why you get to be a professional woman in Saudi Arabia?

**Samar Fatany:** No, I think it's more having to do with qualifications. I mean, if you're qualified and you have the proper experience, I don't think you have a problem in finding a job. Our problem is that we do not.. Our students or our graduates don't have the proper skills or the qualifications to be integrated into the work force. People are reluctant to employ, you know, young graduates who don't have the experience, who don't have the proper skills or their education is not up to the standard. That's our problem.

**Host:** But it sounds like you're proposing a circular argument. How does a woman become qualified? Does she have the same educational opportunities as a man?

**Samar Fatany:** Yes, but our problem is our graduates from Saudi Arabia don't have the proper

qualifications. In other words their education is not what it should be.

**Host:** Does one have to be affluent then to be educated overseas in order to compete for jobs in Saudi Arabia?

**Samar Fatany:** Definitely. It would be a problem for women because there aren't so many jobs. The opportunities are very limited. So, the competition is very big and to compete you need to have better qualifications. I guess it's the same problem all over the world. The only thing is it's even more so because in Saudi Arabia the educational system needs to be upgraded.

**Host:** Are efforts underway to improve the quality of education and the educational options inside of Saudi Arabia?

**Samar Fatany:** There's a lot that's being done. There are so many training centers that are opening up. There are four more universities that have opened. There are also training centers to give young graduates better skills to be able to be better acquainted once they're integrated into the work force. Computer centers are being set up everywhere. English language programs are also encouraged.

**Host:** We're talking with Samar Hussein Fatany who's a senior announcer at Radio Jeddah. She's a radio talk host in Saudi Arabia and Samar my impression of Saudi Arabia is that there's sort of a ruling class and then a lower class but not a middle class. Is that accurate?

**Samar Fatany:** There is definitely a middle class, yes. There's definitely a middle class. The majority of, you know.. Well, maybe there's upper middle class and there's lower middle class but then you have the towns and the provinces and that's where, you know, you find the poverty, not in the cities.

**Host:** Well, you're very well traveled. When you travel to the United States and other places around the world and see how the average person lives here, how does that match up against the average Saudi?

**Samar Fatany:** Well, it's a different culture altogether, you know. Saudis, we're still living in the extended family lifestyle. 60% of our population are under the age of 20.

**Host:** This is a shocking statistic. I just can't get over that.

**Samar Fatany:** It is a fact and 50% are women. So the lifestyle and what people are involved in are more to do.. are very family oriented. They're busy with taking care of the family, family duties. People are, you know.. It's like anywhere else in the world. They're involved with their daily life so there's no.. People are not discussing politics all day. You know what I mean? And we don't have that political maturity, yet, to demand democracy or all that goes with it.

**Host:** Is that political maturity coming soon?

**Samar Fatany:** Definitely, all this.. The younger generation, all these 20 year olds and the

young graduates that have come back from the United States, that's why it's very important to have the proper guidance or the proper channeling of the way things go, the direction of the young, how they think, and what services you provide for them.

**Host:** How will your government respond to the kind of challenge you are talking about? Is it equipped to respond to this kind of challenge?

**Samar Fatany:** We have the consultative council and there's also now the national debate that is involving all sectors of the community. People are becoming more vocal in demanding reforms. There's an urgency for it. The press has opened up. There are so many ways and means for the public to discuss what is needed for the community and for the society. There were 100 intellectuals who have written to Prince Abdullah asking for reforms. They were received and a lot of the demands and discussions were taken into consideration and already there are a lot of reforms taking place in the economic regulations to help the economy and to help the business community. They are encouraging women to go into business and opening business opportunities for women.

**Host:** Is there capital available? How does a woman open a business?

**Samar Fatany:** Oh, yes. There are so many family businesses with women heirs and a lot of their money is just lying in banks and you find that a lot of the bankers and a lot of the business people and even the government are encouraging these women to invest and not to have their money lying just idly in the banks.

**Host:** We're talking with Samar Hussein Fatany. She's a senior announcer at Radio Jeddah.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

**Host:** And we're talking with Samar about the state of affairs in Saudi Arabia in general and specifically the state of women in Saudi Arabia. Samar, Americans view Saudi women as being victims. Do Saudi women view themselves this way?

**Samar Fatany:** Not at all. Women don't view themselves as victims. They are not abused and they're not oppressed. You know our family values are really something that protects the women. I think women.. the woman in the family is the most respected person. Culturally, traditionally and even religiously the woman is considered to be sacred. You know, in Islam, there's a saying that paradise is under the feet of a woman.

**Host:** You make it sound, Samar, as if there are no challenges, there are no problems for women with equality for women within Saudi Arabia is this what you mean to portray?

**Samar Fatany:** We need to address the status of women, the empowerment of women, putting her in leadership positions. Allowing her to be involved in the decision making process and all that. That's what we're working on at the moment. It doesn't mean that she's oppressed or abused, you see.

**Host:** But when Americans hear stories like the girls in the school who were, who perished in the fire because they weren't allowed to exit because they weren't dressed properly..

**Samar Fatany:** It's just incompetence. They didn't realize the danger that they were putting them in. They didn't realize they could die. It's just out of sheer stupidity and incompetence and ignorance.

**Host:** September 11th seems not to have had as much impact on Saudi Arabia, both the people and the government as did..

**Samar Fatany:** The 12th of May bombing of Riyadh? Definitely, of course. We felt that this is serious. I mean it's not a matter of people saying they don't exist. It was the complete evidence that terrorists do exist.

**Host:** Were some Saudi's pleased with the Americans getting a slap in the face on September 11th?

**Samar Fatany:** I really get pained and disturbed when I hear that. That is absolutely not true. The idea that Saudis hate Americans, it is so painful to hear that. You know it's.. America is the number one destination for all Saudi families to travel to. It is the dream of every Saudi graduate to study in the United States. It is where we bring our people for medical treatment. It is where we love to come because we were treated so well when we used to come here. We felt very hurt. We were upset that this happened because, of course, it's an embarrassment for us that Saudis are involved.. I can understand your anger and your rage after giving us this best treatment, to act in this way. I wish to God those Saudis were not involved, but they were criminals. You cannot apply collective guilt on a whole nation or a whole country for a few criminals that were involved. It's not fair.

**[COMMERCIAL BREAK]**

**Host:** Let's wrap up our segment, our fascinating interview with radio talk host from Saudi Arabia, Samar Hussein Fatany. Has the Saudi government turned a blind eye to dangerous elements in the religious community? Is there a problem with religion in Saudi Arabia supporting terrorism?

**Samar Fatany:** You want to refer to the Wahhabis and that they're a radical form of Islam. Wahhabis are not a radical form of Islam. Wahhabis are not bin Ladens. They are, they represent traditional Islam, just as you have here the traditional Christians who view anyone who's not a good Christian as a sinner. That sort of thing, but they're not militant and they're not radicals. If they're against the American way of life or the American lifestyle of the women who are not modestly dressed or so on, they view me the same way as anyone else. It's got nothing to do with you being an American or a Saudi or any other nationality. It's the idea that they want traditional Islam. It's not a radical form of Islam.

**Host:** You would argue then that there's a radical element within that's giving the whole a bad name.

**Samar Fatany:** Of course, yes, there are but they're a minority and at the moment they're being dealt with. There are so many of them that have been fired and they're not allowed to preach in Mosques anymore and there are others who have been re-indoctrinated. I mean, going back to school and going back to the teachings of moderate Islam. We are for the war on terror. There is no dispute over that, but we can not apply the policies of collective guilt and accuse people right and left. This way we will definitely not win. We need to be tolerant. We need to use wisdom and patience and the right way to do it is not to accuse people who are innocent -- then we are all going to be losers.

**Host:** What would you say, Samar, is the biggest misunderstanding that Americans have about Saudis? What is it you'd like them to know?

**Samar Fatany:** The biggest problem is the views of the Arab population or the Muslim population towards American policies. American policies are very different from the American people. I don't think most of the American are not very political. Most of them, I don't think they know their geography or where Saudi Arabia is located. So they have nothing to do with the policies of the government and we realize that.

**Host:** You're saying that the Saudi people are angry at the United States for its governments policies. Why is that? What policies have angered them?

**Samar Fatany:** The blind support for the Likud. Their blind support for settlers who are evicting families from their homes and stealing land and the humility and the deprivation and the occupation of the Palestinian people. Definitely, we all feel for that.

**Host:** It seems that virtually all anger towards the United States coming out of the Middle East has its roots in our policy towards Israel. Would you agree?

**Samar Fatany:** Exactly, because the United States is the only supporter of the Likud government. There's no other government in the whole world that supports that. The only supporter of the Likud is the United States.

**Host:** But it's more than just the Likud government, isn't it? It's anger towards Israel in general.

**Samar Fatany:** Well, Israel, if they had another kind of government, maybe there would be a chance for the Palestinians and the Israelis to live in peace. There's the Peace Now movement. There's the peace initiative of Crown Prince Abdullah and the Arab league to recognize Israel as a state and to have a Palestinian state but the Likud government refuses to give a Palestinian state and that's the whole problem.

**Host:** In your opinion has the Arab world turned the corner with regard to the acceptance of the Jewish state?

**Samar Fatany:** Yes. That's been going on for a long time. It's not only today. I mean, the Intifada, why did the Intifada happen? It happened because the complete refusal of allowing a Palestinian state and it was just going on and on, false promises, lies, procrastination, delays,

and the suffering continued. The suffering continued until you got the madness of suicide bombers. It's complete madness.

**Host:** We've been talking with Samar Hussein Fatany here. She is a senior announcer at Radio Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. She is a radio talk show host and it's been fascinating talking with her.

## 12TH ANNUAL ARAB-US POLICYMAKERS CONFERENCE

**Washington, DC  
September 7-8, 2003**

**Samar El-Fatany:** Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It really is a great pleasure for me to be here with you today. Before I begin, I would like to extend my condolences on behalf of the people of Saudi Arabia on the upcoming anniversary of the September 11th tragedy.

I'm here this morning because I feel it's very important to present an accurate portrayal of Islam and Saudi Arabia today in order to curtail the severe damage to people-to-people ties between Americans and Saudi Arabians resulting in the aftermath of the September 11th tragedy. In Saudi Arabia, we believe that the United States is unnecessarily making enemies in Saudi Arabia and losing influence in the Middle East and the Muslim world at large. Threats and inflammatory rhetoric do not stop terrorism. They enhance it and increase its influence.

No one country can counter international terrorism by itself. We all support the war on terror. There is no dispute over that. But we need to work together in order to discuss what exactly is damaging people-to-people ties between Saudi Arabians and Americans today.

It's a perception in Saudi Arabia that there is a smear campaign orchestrated in part by the U.S. media against our religion and country to create a conflict that is politically motivated. We're attacked with allegations that are malicious and unjust. Allow me to address four major allegations that are a source of tension back home.

I begin with the allegation that Saudi Arabia is a land that harbors terrorists and supports an evil extremist ideology in the world today. We're being attacked in your media for our religion, which means peace, and a religion that rejects terrorism. We are being accused of harboring terrorists, whose main aim is to overthrow our government. We strongly reject these allegations, and we will continue to cooperate with the law enforcement agencies and with international organizations to confront and probe the causes behind terrorism.

Saudi security forces and citizens are united in exposing and arresting those who terrorize innocent people and promote extremist ideologies that are alien to our true faith. Religious scholars and responsible citizens, as well as concerned mothers in Saudi Arabia are very determined to guide the unenlightened youth on the moderation of Islam and its teachings

To target Saudi Arabia alone and forget all other extremist ideologies that exist in the world

today is unjust. Extremist ideologies are international phenomena. For example, the right-wing Likud maintains an extremist ideology. The Likud in Israel has hijacked the Jewish people with their extremist ideology.

Instead of supporting peace or the peace initiative of Crown Prince Abdullah and the recognition of Israel by the Arab League, or the Peace Now movement and the land for peace policy in Palestine, they have turned against their religion and worked against their people's interests for the sake of an extremist ideology. The Likud has made Israel the most hated country in the Muslim world, unfortunately, and continues to make things worse, despite international advice.

The U.S. money that supports Likud settlements and assassinations does not give credibility to the U.S. objective of bringing peace and prosperity to the region and reinforces the perception in the Arab and Muslim world of a U.S. administration that works only for the interest of the Likud and therefore will find no cooperation or sympathies from the Arab man and woman on the street.

The extremists in the Muslim world have resorted to violence to retaliate partly against the injustices and frustration that they feel and partly by following false leaders like Osama bin Laden. They too have turned against their religion and against their people by pursuing a dangerous and deadly path. They continue to threaten world peace.

Another example of extremism is the neo-conservatives of America, who in alliance with the extremists from the religious right dominate the U.S. administration, and their allies are carrying out a malicious media campaign against the Muslim world today. According to the Anti-Discrimination Committee, there exists a negative U.S. stance towards Muslims and Arabs on the educational level following the September 11th events. American education curricula depict Muslims as terrorists, rapists and oppressors of women and believers of the holy war.

The curricula portray Arabs as camel riders and sand slaves. The Arab man is depicted as an oil sheik who's wealthy, extravagant and wants to buy the United States with his money. But this only augments the deep anti-Arab bias that has existed in your movies and your media for decades.

We strongly denounce this distortion of the image of Islam and Muslims. This harmful stereotyping of 1.25 billion Muslims in the world and of Arabs in general, whether Christians or Muslims, will only escalate tensions and add fuel to the fire. To put an end to the state of terror, we need tolerance and goodwill. Although President Bush after the September 11th attacks had said that Islam was not his target, sadly the U.S. media has not heeded his call and continues to antagonize the Muslim world, sometimes based on ignorance but more often specifically malicious. These smear campaigns against Islam by the neo-conservatives are working against the American people by spoiling the image of America that was once the most respected nation and the dream of every citizen of the world.

It is a perception in the Arab world that there are certain elements in this administration and their neo-con fellow travelers, who are bent on driving a wedge between the United States and

Saudi Arabia. They belittle our stewardship of extensive oil interests and demean the sixty-year political relationship between the two countries, through Op-eds and with congressional hearings which are recycled into Op-eds - discarding decades of mutual interest established by wise leadership.

Today, the United States and Saudi Arabia are confronted with a dangerous threat, a threat that the radicals of both sides helped create to combat the Red Army in Afghanistan. It was a huge mistake not to confront them earlier. We both chose to ignore them in order to avoid confrontations and thus underestimated their power. It would be a grave mistake to allow their power to overtake us now. Solely taking the military path and discarding decades of the culture of legal solutions will only gain the United States worldwide animosity. The United States should allow the moderates to use their wisdom and patience in order to overcome the menace of terrorism. Let us not make peace and human rights be the casualty in the war on terror.

Another U.S. allegation against Saudi Arabia is that Saudi money intended for needy Palestinians reaches militants. This is not true. Saudi financial assistance is used to build houses, support poor students and buy relief supplies. The Kingdom has helped build 600 housing units in the Gaza and the West Bank for people who had lost their homes in Israeli attacks.

Saudi Arabia is helping Palestinian students pursue their education, which is what all relief and international organizations do. If some donations of the Saudi people go to militants in Palestine, it is not through us. But remember, there are many churches and synagogues in the United States that have been funding settlers in Palestine. Why are they not accused of harboring militants that are stealing land and evicting families from their homes?

Yet another allegation is that Saudi Arabia is not doing enough to rein in terrorists. On the contrary, the Saudi government and people are united in fighting terrorism. Families of suspects willingly cooperate to hand over their children to the authorities. Individuals, who are either linked with the bombing in Riyadh or accused of any suspected terrorist activities, are encouraged by their families to give themselves up. Crown Prince Abdullah has threatened sympathizers. We are in a state of shock and disbelief. Our crime rate is low, and in spite of our diversity, we are united as a nation. We will capitalize on this, and we will not allow the war on terror to jeopardize this reality.

The radicals who support or sympathize with terrorists are a minority, and they are being dealt with. However, we will not follow policies of applying collective guilt and threatening people right and left or accusing the innocent and thereby losing our supporters and gaining only resistance from all. Saudi citizens are faced with a huge responsibility to stem terrorism and resist the threat of extremist ideology that has infiltrated into a minority of misguided individuals in our society. Families, schools and mosques, as well as the country's moderates and intellectuals, are united in a campaign to expose these alien beliefs of militancy and violence and show the truth.

Moreover, there is a strong media movement in Saudi Arabia that is supporting national dialogue, managing web sites, conducting awareness campaigns, and holding conferences in an

effort to reject extremists who are using religion for their selfish political gains.

Finally, I wish to address allegations about abducted children of American mothers and Saudi fathers held against their will in Saudi Arabia. There are over 350,000 cases of child abductions in the United States per year. I'm told that there are over 1,100 American children being wrongfully kept in foreign countries. The overwhelming majority of cases are in Germany, Austria, Mexico, England and Canada.

To put this in perspective, less than one percent of them involve Saudi parents. Unfortunately for the children, child custody matters are notoriously complex from a legal standpoint. Nonetheless, we in Saudi Arabia are working hard to resolve these heartbreaking situations, realizing that there are two sides to each story.

Saudi Arabia today is witnessing an awakening of the silent majority. It is a process that is unstoppable now. However, it needs to be channeled and nurtured. It will be a lost opportunity not to support it or to work against it. The United States is calling for democratic reforms in the GCC countries and the Arab world today. We know we have a lot to do on this score in Saudi Arabia. What can you do to help us? Allow me to share a few suggestions.

In order to further these political reforms in Saudi Arabia in particular, the United States needs to restore American credibility among the Saudi citizens, who see many of the U.S. foreign policies and aggressive rhetoric as a threat to their sovereignty and integrity.

In order to further these political reforms in Saudi Arabia, the United States needs to reinforce cultural cooperation, respect the right to practice cultural diversity on a national level and encourage dialogue among civilizations, rather than pursue the clash of civilizations that does not serve anyone's national interests.

In order to further reforms in Saudi Arabia, the United States needs to confront people who think that they alone are right and everyone else is wrong, and they alone have solutions to all problems. The blame for much of this situation lies with the silent majority and the liberal intellectuals who allow these extremists to wield such an influence on our two worlds.

In order to further reforms in Saudi Arabia, the U.S. media needs to play a proper role in disseminating accurate knowledge to their people and to discourage the defamation campaign that is targeting the innocent among the Arab and Muslim world. American media must shed its one-sided, monochrome approach to the Middle East.

The United States needs to recognize and respect its friends and allies, so together we can win the war on terror that is a threat to both our people. Finally, I hope that both our governments will have the wisdom and tolerance to stop these threatening ideologies that are spreading like wildfire among the unenlightened, underprivileged, desperate and frustrated people of the world, who fall victim to evil and malicious elements in both our countries and various parts of the world. As people of conscience, wisdom and knowledge, we need to work together to protect our children and the planet Earth from the deadly pursuits of terrorists, racists,

supremacists, and xenophobic minorities that have taken over our world.

I thank you for your attention.

**Mrs. Samar Fatany** is Senior Announcer and Radio Journalist in the English Service at Radio Jeddah, where she prepares and presents cultural, religious, and news programs, covers local and international conferences and trade exhibitions, conducts interviews with official delegations and dignitaries visiting the Kingdom, and covers major events and activities of foreign embassies and consulates in the Kingdom. She has been at Radio Jeddah since 1976.

From 1976 until 1980, Mrs. Fatany was also a newscaster at the English Service of Saudi TV Channel 2. She has also appeared on international TV and radio programs on BBC, CBC, CNN, NPR, and NBC. Mrs. Fatany's interests include the role of women in Saudi society and abroad, Saudi Arabia in the international community, Islam, and conducting social awareness campaigns.

Mrs. Fatany earned a B.A. in Mass Communication at Cairo University and has taken BBC media courses.

#### **ABOUT THE ANNUAL ARAB-US POLICYMAKERS CONFERENCE**

The 12th Annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference was held in Washington, DC on September 7-8, 2003.

For more information about the conference -- including the agenda, speakers' biographies and links to press reports and more -- visit: <http://ncusar.org/auspc/index.html>

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#### **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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**CONTACT INFORMATION**

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@Saudi-American-Forum.org](mailto:info@Saudi-American-Forum.org)

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