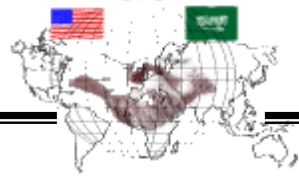


# Saudi-American Forum

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SAF Item of Interest

December 4, 2003

## **A Change in the Kingdom: U.S. may allow its pervasive influence in Saudi Arabia to fade because of the fallout from 9/11**

By William Tracy

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

The Saudi-American Forum would like to thank Mr. Tracy for permission to share this article with our readers. This article first appeared in the Eugene Register-Guard on November 23, 2003.

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In October, at the invitation of the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce, I visited the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with a dozen other Americans who have lived and worked there over many years. Together, the members of our group represented more than 270 years of experience in Saudi Arabia. Our goal was to bring our past knowledge of the country up to date and witness firsthand the changes under way.

Some of the developments we saw were dramatic, even from the perspective of my last visit in 2000. Most of them would have been unimaginable when I first went to Saudi Arabia in 1946 with my parents as a boy of 11.

We visited Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's sprawling capital of 4 million persons; cosmopolitan Jeddah on the Red Sea; and the Dhahran, Dammam, Al Khobar metroplex in the oil-producing Eastern Province along the Persian Gulf.

Everywhere, we were astonished at the number of signs in both English and Arabic, advertising American products on storefronts and on towering illuminated billboards. The signs covered the spectrum from Dunkin' Donuts to Starbucks; from Safeway and Toys R Us to Nike; from Whirlpool, Harley Davidson and Sealy Mattresses to Midas Mufflers. After three days, my list of such U.S. companies numbered more than 50.

During our study visit we heard from dozens of Saudi men and women about their warm feelings for America and their shock and anguish over the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. They also told of their sadness and frustration when they see the U.S. media so quick to blame their entire country for the outrageous acts committed by a dangerous but relatively small fringe of radical extremists.

They went on to tell us what they have learned from the attacks, how Saudi Arabia has taken a close look at itself to identify and acknowledge the problems faced by their traditionally conservative society, and the active steps they're taking to institute the political and social reforms necessary to resolve such problems.

Most of those we met and talked to during 10 days of travel were U.S.-educated professionals and businessmen. We met them in ministry offices, manufacturing plants, shops, hotel restaurants and living rooms.

As Dr. Faisal al-Sugair, a Stanford Ph.D. at Riyadh's Advanced Electronics Co., pointed out, since the 1950s some 200,000 Saudis have earned degrees in the United States. Before 2001, as many as 15,000 were studying in the U.S. annually.

At one luncheon at the home of an elderly dairy farm owner and founder of a home for the mentally retarded in the Eastern Province, I exchanged memories of Eugene with his six adult sons, all graduates of the University of Oregon or Lane Community College.

The women we met were teachers, computer specialists, small-business owners, writers, wives and daughters, and they were usually college graduates.

Today's Saudis are able to watch U.S. television, thanks to their ubiquitous rooftop satellite dishes. One businessman said, "The question we keep hearing is, 'Why do they hate us?' The short answer is, 'We don't.' Those of us who know Americans or who have studied there or conducted business, taken our elderly for medical care or our children for family vacations love America and admire it. The United States was the only country where we felt as comfortable and as much at home as in Saudi Arabia. In fact, we want to ask the question the other way around: 'Why, suddenly, do you seem to hate us?' "

Samar Fatany is a radio talk show hostess in Jiddah. Over tea and sweets in her living room she said, "You can't apply collective guilt on a whole nation or a whole faith because of a few criminals who were involved. It's not fair! I wish to God that those radical Saudis were not involved, but they didn't represent either Saudi Arabia or Islam. They were just criminals."

Dr. Khalil al-Gosaibi, Saudi Arabia's minister of planning, talked about his student days in America. "You invested so much in us. We left a closed society and came to a free and open society. We felt your influence in every aspect of our lives, not just educational, but even emotional. Every Sunday when I was a student at UC Berkeley in the mid-1960s, a local family would host us for a barbecue.

"Today some 60 to 70 percent of Saudi Arabia's cabinet ministers are graduates of U.S. universities. Saudi students have been our country's ambassadors to you and your ambassadors back to us here," he continued. "But the current difficulties in the relations between our two countries may result in a generation of young Saudis who no longer bring U.S. educational, social, political and economic influence back to their country. What will happen 10 or 15 years from now when there are no U.S. grads in the cabinet, when they are no longer a product of your

system and your way of life? It is something both of our countries need to think about."

A political officer at the U.S. embassy in Riyadh said Saudi travel and study in the U.S. has dropped 80 percent because of what he called a "visa processing breakdown."

"We should keep Saudi students coming to the U.S.," he said. "It's very important to both sides. And it's the best way to bring American ideas to Saudi Arabia."

Recently The Register-Guard reported a significant drop in the number of students from Muslim nations enrolling in American universities, mostly because of the perceived difficulties in the lengthy process of obtaining visas. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait sent 25 percent fewer students to the United States this year, while universities in Australia, Canada and Great Britain are stepping up their recruitment of foreign students.

If some Saudis initially found it almost too painful to believe that men calling themselves Muslims could actually commit such ungodly atrocities as the attacks of Sept. 11, reality struck home on May 12, 2003, when terrorist bombs exploded in a housing compound in Riyadh, killing expatriate families and Saudis alike. The attack shook the most skeptical and marked a definitive turning point for the kingdom. The most recent attack will reinforce such changes.

The most striking change I observed was a new openness among both officials and the public to debate social and political issues that have traditionally been taboo. Not just in private conversations, but in the pages of the newspapers, on television and on call-in radio talk shows, a national discussion is under way.

On our car radio, for example, I heard a young woman talking with the male host about America's diplomatic role in the Israeli-Palestinian standoff. Alongside the world news, stock market quotes, sports and the latest Hollywood gossip in the Arab News and the Saudi Gazette, I read editorials and columns on the role of women in society, unemployment, poverty, drug addiction, human rights, the need for Christian-Muslim understanding, and even two op-ed articles by Israeli peace activists. There is Saudi financing for radio broadcasts from London (MBC, the Middle East Broadcasting Company) and for Al-Arabiyah satellite TV (a Saudi counterpart to Al-Jazeera in the Persian Gulf).

"I can say that our highest levels of government are now firmly committed to change," Ali Naimi, the minister of petroleum and mineral affairs, told us. "We have undertaken a total review of our educational system and opened up an on-going public dialogue on religious and social issues."

The U.S. embassy's political officer agreed. "Today in Saudi newspapers you see many issues that have never before been discussed openly. A human rights conference was held in Riyadh with 400 men and women participating. In Saudi Arabia, that's remarkable."

Many Saudi observers identify a population surge as one major source of problems facing the Kingdom. As Zaki Yamani, the former minister of petroleum, said to the study group, "Saudi Arabia is facing a serious situation, with more than half of its population aged 20 or below.

Unemployment is very high and the kingdom will be needing education, new jobs and new housing for 50 percent or more of the people. As a result, we have to reform economically, politically and socially. There's no alternative."

Start with education. Government textbooks have already been revised to eliminate passages that could be interpreted as advocating intolerance. English, already taught at high school levels, is being introduced at an earlier age.

"Until now there has been a mismatch in what schools teach and the skills and knowledge that modern industry needs,' said Dr. al-Gosaibi, the minister of planning. "Saudi Arabia has been unable to absorb its high school graduates, even though we have eight universities. Now three new universities are in the pipeline and we also plan to build technical colleges in the fields of health services and vocational training."

At two cutting-edge private schools we visited, one in Riyadh, one in the Eastern Province, boys and girls studied together with female teachers from pre-school through the second grade, before moving to separate classes on opposite sides of the campus. There were virtually no public schools for boys in Saudi Arabia until the 1950s. Schools for girls followed in the 1960s, a relatively short lag in the course of a country's history. In Saudi Arabia today women make up 52 percent of all university students and in recent years a published list of the kingdom's top 10 students was so consistently composed of all women that statisticians began issuing two lists, the top 10 women and the top 10 men.

Education is a necessary element of economic reform. And economic reform is vital to the kingdom because of the population explosion. Saudi Arabia's economic goal is to process more of its raw materials domestically, both to increase export revenues and to provide much-needed jobs. The government will reward companies that train Saudis by compensating them for up to 50 percent of wages paid to trainees.

Saudi Arabia is working to attain membership in the World Trade Organization by 2004. New financial regulations and judicial reform will encourage and protect the private sector, which accounts for 46 percent of the gross domestic product.

At a presentation at the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce, the conference table was decorated with tiny Saudi and American flags. As we left for our next appointment the American flags were being replaced by Czech flags in preparation for a delegation of that country's businessmen. One chamber member said, "We conduct much of our business in English, but because of the current visa issue with the U.S. there will be a gap between us and our children's generation. They will be more attuned to Europe and Japan."

New Saudi laws now permit 100 percent foreign ownership of new projects (Such ownership was formerly limited to 49.51 percent.). Among foreign investors, the largest number of new firms (108 so far) involve U.S. interests (worth \$4.8 billion) followed by Japan.

Until now, Saudi Arabia's balance of payments with the U.S. is in America's favor. Twenty percent of the kingdom's imports come from the U.S., followed by Japan at 16 percent.

A third area of reform is social and political. The government has announced that it will hold elections for half the seats in 14 municipal councils in about a year. Regional elections and national elections to the Shoura (the Royal Advisory Council) will take place within two to three years. One-third of the seats on the Shoura will be elected, with the remainder continuing to be appointed by the king. These elections will be the first ever held in the kingdom - although women don't have the vote yet, neither do men. But women are speaking out in newspapers and on radio talk shows to be included.

"Yes," Samar Fatany, the radio hostess said. "We do 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. But that doesn't mean that women are oppressed or abused, you see."

"The wearing of a black abaya or another modest covering when in public reveals little about the rights, privileges, responsibilities or status of the woman inside the garment," a female Saudi teacher said. "It's just a question of custom. To most women here it's no more serious as an issue than the formal dress code for men at IBM."

Cooperation in the global efforts to defeat terrorism is another area getting increased attention. In fact, stepped-up domestic investigations by the Interior Ministry and internal security crackdowns seem to be squeezing extremists enough to draw heightened terrorist fire, at least in the short run. Our traveling group saw tight security measures in place at airports, roadblocks, checkpoints, ministries, embassies, foreign residential compounds and high-profile public buildings such as international hotels.

The possibility that some charitable contributions from the kingdom may have inadvertently financed terrorist activities is being tackled with strict new banking regulations. The issue is complicated by the fact that charity is one of the five basic tenets of Islam.

Saudi Arabia provides financial aid and humanitarian assistance in nearly 90 countries, and for each of the past 25 years has contributed to the world's less fortunate peoples an average of seven times (on a per-capita basis) what the U.S. provides.

Even though it is contrary to long-standing cultural traditions, Saudi Arabia is attempting to monitor and audit charities and banking transfers more closely. But it wants to do so without imposing extreme laws and sweeping enforcement policies. The immediate blanket freezing of funds based on undocumented allegations, for example, can be harmful to legitimate charities and people suffering in need.

This issue, as well as any other, highlights the concern that our group heard most frequently: Those who admire the United States for its freedoms and its honesty are hurt and frustrated by what sometimes looks to them like a double standard. Nearly all of the men and women we met asked us to explain when we returned home that although our two societies share countless basic values, of course we do come from two sometimes different cultures.

Samar Fatany said it like this: "Like anybody else, the main concern of the silent majority in Saudi Arabia is to put food on the table. But we still see a demonizing of Islam and of Saudi Arabia in particular in the American media and we don't understand why. The U.S. has been our No. 1 destination for students going abroad, our No. 1 destination for medical treatment and our No. 1 destination for family vacations, not to mention our important business relationships.

"In the end, what does America want? Through frustration and injustices it can actually create hatred. I don't want to be your enemy, so why do you insist on making me your enemy? It's not in my interest or in yours for me to be your enemy."

^^^ Saudi-American Forum ^^^

**William Tracy** of Eugene studied, worked and taught throughout the Middle East and now writes and lectures about the region.

**Read other SAF articles by William Tracy:**

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- *Half a Century Separates Two Royal Handshakes*

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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.

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