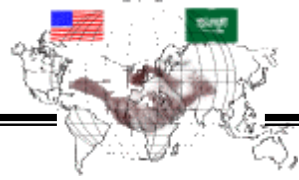


Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

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A Different View: A Young Saudi Woman Talks About Society and Culture – An Interview with Sahar Al Hussein

Editor's Note:

Sahar al Hussein is a young woman who was born and raised in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and in Bahrain. She recently shared her observations on the Kingdom -- growing up there, the importance of family in Saudi society, attitudes of young people, and the changes underway -- as well as the partnership between American and Saudi Arabia. We are pleased to bring you the transcript of an interview she recently gave to a radio talk show.

[Boston Radio Talk Show Interview - September 20, 2003]

Host. You're going to enjoy this first interview. Sahar al Hussein is a 24-year-old Saudi who has been studying in the United States for the past six years. Her outlook on the United States and Saudi Arabia is quite interesting for us to hear because she has some views regarding what life is like there for women versus what life is like here for women.

Sahar, welcome to the show, great to have you here. I want to ask you right off about what it's like to have a foot in both cultures, the Saudi culture and the U.S. culture, and what you think about going back to live in Saudi Arabia after having been in this country and being free of all the family pressures and all the behavioral guidelines that family members and others in the society want to put on you back in Saudi Arabia?

Sahar al Hussein. It's definitely a problem but at the same time, maybe I'm a little different. To me, that's why home is so important – that tightness of family, the togetherness. I love it when somebody asks that you have to come over to have coffee with me. I feel I belong, and there's no judgement. People say, "Oh you're the one who lived in the States. Come, we want to hear how it is. And, I want to know what they've done that year, and what happened in Ramadan during fasting, and how you missed all the festivities." In the future, I want my kids to feel that belonging. If I ever move back, I wouldn't move back unless I knew I could give my kids the opportunity that I had to see what else is out there because I think living one way or the other isn't the right way. There needs to be integration.

Host. But maybe your positive attitudes towards the idea of living back in Saudi Arabia are

tilted because you're so fortunate. You come from a family that was affluent enough to send you to be educated over here.

Sahar. That's definitely true. I definitely think I'm a minority in what I've been able to experience but, at the same time, I think it's possible for other people to experience that in a different way. For example, take Bahrain. They've built movie theaters. They have malls. Life in Bahrain is like living in the States but in an Arab influenced culture. There's clubs. There are movies. There's this and that. And, then when you go home, you have to watch your etiquette. It's a very nice balance. I think it's great. Before the movie theaters and all these malls opened, a lot of the girls couldn't even go to coffee shops cause "it's not proper." Now, girls go. You sit. You have sheesha [hookah or water pipe]. You have conversations. It's great.

Host. Saudi Arabia is such a conservative country. Will we ever see those kinds of social changes in Saudi Arabia?

Sahar. I think so. It's like what me and my friends say, there's a huge teenage "bomb waiting to explode" kind of thing.

Host. Are you referring to fact that 60% of the Saudi population is now under the age of 20?

Sahar. I think so. A lot of that has to do with it, and then cell phones and the Internet are finally everywhere with infrared texting, e-mailing and messaging. Kids are going out without their parents knowing. There's a huge underground movement of parties and mixing.

Host. Are you trying to tell me there are now raves in Saudi Arabia?

Sahar. There are raves in Saudi Arabia. Maybe, "house parties" is a better term to use. If you're from the city, the city life in Saudi Arabia is very different than the village or rural life, and all this change is going to happen and, of course, start in the cities. I would say the leading city is Jeddah, but Riyadh, supposedly, has a huge underground. They're definitely hyping it up. I mean the city people are a lot more socially active, and the city houses are set up differently. You have a family women's majlis room. You have the men's majlis room. You have a separate room for their kids to entertain their friends. The houses are segregated. There's a kitchen for the family. There's a kitchen for the guests. There's a dining room for the family and a dining room for the guests.

Host. We're talking to Sahar al Hussein on this week's show. She is a woman who was born and raised in Saudi Arabia but has lived for the past six years, or since she was 18, being educated here in the United States. So, she's got a foot in each country. Sahar, tell us about yourself.

Sahar. I was born in Dhahran, where both my parents worked for the oil company, Saudi Aramco. I have extended family and dozens of second cousins in Jeddah, Riyadh, Al-Hasa, and Dhahran. I studied in Dhahran and Bahrain then did degrees at George Washington University and a B.S. in nursing at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. I have now started working and training at a hospital in Virginia and am doing it on my own. I have American and Bahraini driver's

licenses, my own car and apartment.

Host. Sahar, how would your friends and family in Saudi Arabia respond to you if they could see you now, see the way you're dressed in standard western clothes, and your big curly hair out all over the place with moose in it and your designer glasses? How would they respond to you?

Sahar. I go out like this in Saudi Arabia actually, and I'll tell you a funny story. I worked for the Saudi Aramco hospital in Dhahran as a summer intern, and at first when I arrived, I knew that only two of my friends wore the Hijab (head cover) out of six girls. But when I saw them at work, all of them wore the Hijab at the summer internship, and I asked: "Did you guys veil? Are you into Hijab now?" I asked, "Should I cover?" They said, "No, no, no. You know, we just have to wear it for culture, people get offended if they see a Saudi girl without a Hijab." I was the only one out of 80 girls that didn't wear a Hijab, and after three weeks of being there, I convinced this other girl to remove the Hijab. The first two days she was there, she wasn't veiled and then she veiled because she felt out of place. Then she saw me, and it convinced her. People told her, "Look, Sahar is not wearing it, why should you wear it?" We ended up going to this luncheon that adjourned the summer session, and we were both in regular clothes. It was pretty neat to see. I asked my friends, "Guys do you think I should cover? What do you think?" They said, "No way! You're the one who can do it because you studied in the States. If we studied in the States too, we wouldn't be.." They said, since I'm the one with the Western influence, they would expect me to be more open about it. But my friends, if they see me, they're always like "That's Sahar. She's the one that doesn't listen or she's the one who's crazy like that."

Host. But, what about strangers? If you're going out in Saudi Arabia, and you're not covering yourself up, don't strangers make comments?

Sahar. Some people do. Some people pass comments. Some people will look at me, and they'll think I'm Lebanese until I say something very Saudi. You know, very Saudi girl thing to do and they'll be like whoa, whoa! You know it's like, what did I just hear. I think that's good. I also like to do that just to make a point. Even when I travel in a Saudi airport with my friends, they're always saying, "Sahar's at it again. She's not wearing the Hijab, or she's listening to her music and walking like this." They laugh too because they almost.. Sometimes, a lot of people say, "I wish I had the guts to do what you do."

Host. We hear so much about the religious police that are supposedly patrolling, looking for people like you who aren't covering up the way you're supposed to. Do we have an unrealistic sense of this?

Sahar. All my life, I've heard that people get hit. I've never had any of my friends actually get hit or abused or even have the religious police bother them. I've had many encounters with the religious police, and actually, it's interesting. There are two kinds of them. They're all run by something called the Mutawi'een, and they're an institution. Basically, they're the religious police that promote "proper Islam."

Host. Am I right in my assumption that this is not a real police force?

Sahar. They have an institution. They are protected by the national police, but they're not a police, so to speak. They're just like an institution that's allowed to come visit malls. There's a mall in Saudi where they're allowed to come in, but if they cause any havoc, they're kicked out of the mall. They're not allowed to harass anybody.

Host. So, their goal is to convince you by their very presence to behave a certain way.

Sahar. Yes, to sort of administer and watch and make sure no one's out in tank tops or bikinis. So, I've had two encounters or actually three with them. In one encounter, this guy was walking by, and I don't even think he was a police but he looked like he could have been part of their organization. He looks at my cousin and me, and he says, "Cover" and then starts screaming, "Cover, cover, cover!" This was in the days when you didn't have to wear an Abaya (cloak), and I was in a brown skirt and very conservative shirt. My Hijab was on my neck, and he wanted me to wear the Hijab over my hair. My hair is always tied back when I go out in public. I try not to flaunt anything because nobody needs to be flaunting. My cousin all of a sudden puts her Hijab on and covers her face, and I hear him say something like, "You should cover your face too." And I'm like, who covered their face? I look at my cousin and I ask, "How could you do that? You know I wouldn't do that. She's said, "Sahar, I got scared." And, I said, "He can't do anything to us. We're not doing anything wrong."

Host. We're talking with Sahar al Husseini, who is a young Saudi woman, 24-years-old, and for the past six years, she's been studying in this country. Sahar, it sounds like you have a rebellious streak? Do others? Do your friends have this kind of attitude, or do you have it because you've studied outside of Saudi Arabia?

Sahar. Some of my friends do, and some of my friends choose not to. I think it depends on how involved your family is. I have a friend who got into trouble. She has a history with a couple of people who rebelled, and it's not a smart idea for her to take too much action.

Host. But amongst young people, Sahar, is it common to find this kind of spirit of rebelliousness?

Sahar. Yeah, it definitely is. The girls today, they say, "You want us to wear our Abaya? Fine." Then, they wear the most seductive Abayas. I said, "This is not an Abaya. This is like lustrous." So, they rebel like I rebel by not wearing the Hijab. But, I wear the most tacky, horrible Abaya because I hate the Abaya. I look like a mess. I look like a beggar almost. I wear my Abaya with such horrible fashion sense. I still pull it off because I get bored, but my friends they rebel in other ways – the Abayas that they wear, the way that they wear it. I show my hair, but my cousins and friends, who don't show their hair and wear their Hijab the right way, they get more attraction from guys than I do. I might just get screamed at to "Cover!" But if the police catch these other girls and guys, they might accuse them of flirting or something.

Host. Does this mean that there's some sort of sexual change, some sort of sexual revolution going on in Saudi Arabia as well?

Sahar. Definitely, it's huge. I would almost say too huge because of the repression. People

have almost become more obsessed with boys, girls and parties, and they've lost the true sense and essence of what the change needs to be about.

Host. Sahar, what role is modern technology and information playing in the transformation of Saudi society and the Arab society in general? First tell us, is the Internet in Saudi Arabia, and is there any impact as a result?

Sahar. There is. TV was the first outlet and, actually, it was the worst outlet because people watch TV, and they see shows like "Beverly Hills 90120." It's the wrong way to see the world because that's the only outside world that they see. Many have never necessarily traveled, and not a lot of them are literate enough to understand. So, the negative side of that is the impression of, "Oh yeah, I know what they're like in America." I watch TV. I know what they're like in London. But, people at home may say, "I've seen this movie, and they wear the skimpy stuff or they wear this or they do that." It's like the people here who watch J. Lo [Jennifer Lopez]. They see she carries a Louis Viton bag or that she wears Minolo Blanches, and people interpret that as what we have to wear and do and that it's not classy.

Host. Are you saying that people are seeing our trashiest export, and then assuming that's what we're about – that they know what we're about?

Sahar. Sometimes, they think that trashiness is how we should be. Or, it becomes the opposite, and people become more conservative and they say, "This is what you want us to be like? Then, we're not going to change." And it's like what I was just saying that kids now are just so involved with all that sex and "let's meet guys" attitude. And I don't blame people for seeing that, but they say, "We want to be more modernized, and that's what modernization entails." In reality, that's not at all what modernization entails. It may be an aspect of it, but then it also gives a reason for the religious people to say, "Well, this is what you want to be." I get into discussions with my friends all the time and I say, "Why can't we do this and that?" They say, "So, you want us to be like America." No, there are so many other countries in the world, and we have to find our balance. It's interesting.

Host. Sahar, what do young people think of Osama bin Laden in Saudi Arabia?

Sahar. I don't know anyone who likes Osama bin Laden. Not one person I know likes Osama bin Laden and not necessarily just him. It's his way of thought. Not one of my friends believes in what he did. Even the most religious ones don't believe in anything he did.

Host. Well, is there any feeling that even though it may have been wrong, what Osama bin Laden did and what Al Qaeda is about, but that maybe America deserved it?

Sahar. There is no spirit of that at all. But I'll tell you what people do say. Nobody believes that anyone deserves to die. Nobody believes that. I think what they've realized is that you [the United States] need to see that you're not invincible. It's that everybody is susceptible to harm, whether you're a power or you're not. Finally, you know what other people in the world go through. That's what they say. Nobody thinks it's right. I know people who had relatives that were on the planes. I know people who have relatives that were working in the World Trade

Center. You know we have so many friends that work in New York, and we freaked out when September 11th happened. We said, “Our friends – they might be dead.” So, even the people who were in New York, you know, they were like, it happened. We need to wake up. There are people out there who want to hurt everybody. Look, it hit the strongest country; we never thought it would happen to. It’s sort of like an international awareness. But I think what’s hurting us now that this happened is that it’s become a very strong reaction with the whole national defense. Maybe, it’s taken the wrong twist.

Host. Now that Saudi Arabia has suffered the May 12th attacks there, is there any more sympathy and understanding for the American response to September 11th?

Sahar. I think people now feel that the United States is taking a parental role to Saudi, and the Saudis say, “You’re not our parents. You’re our friends. We have both experienced terror. We’re supposed to be a buddy-buddy kind of relationship.” I was scared for my father, who works in Riyadh, and my brother who was visiting that night. They both felt the Riyadh Airport shake from the blasts.

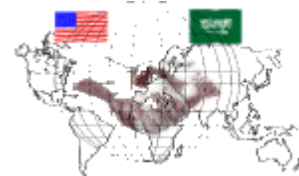
Host. That’s 24-year-old Saudi, Sahar al Hussein, who’s been educated in the United States the past six years. So, she’s got a pretty good handle on both cultures.

ABOUT

Sahar al Hussein was born in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia and was raised in the Eastern Province. She attended Dhahran Ahliyya School and moved with her family to Bahrain during her high school years. Sahar was active in the drama club and student council. She attended George Washington University in Washington earning a BA in Human Services with a minor in Public Health. She was awarded a second Bachelor's degree, in Nursing, at the John Hopkins University. She is a Registered Nurse in Arlington, Virginia and looks forward to completing graduate studies.

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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.

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