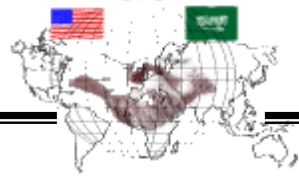


Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

February 24, 2004

Foreign Students' Toughest Test: Getting In

By Susan Taylor Martin

Editor's Note:

The Saudi-American Forum would like to thank the *St. Petersburg Times* of Florida for permission to share this article with our readers. The article originally appeared on February 15, 2004.

St. Petersburg Times

<http://www.sptimes.com>

Foreign Students' Toughest Test: Getting In

A complicated visa process is leading many, especially those from the Mideast, to seek their education in other countries.

By Susan Taylor Martin, Times Senior Correspondent

Bo-Abdullah grew up in the Arab nation of Bahrain, but he always planned to go to college in America. You'll get a better education there, his father told him.

By last December, the 26-year-old engineering major had completed several semesters at Florida schools. So he expected no problems when he went home for vacation and applied for a visa to return to classes this spring.

But what he thought would be a routine interview with U.S. consular officials turned into a stressful interrogation. Did he know anyone who went to Pakistan or Afghanistan? Did he know anyone who hated the United States? Why did he attend a certain mosque near his university?

That was Jan. 13. Bo-Abdullah has yet to get his visa, forcing him to miss this semester and possibly killing forever his dream of obtaining a coveted U.S. degree.

"I understand why they are doing that," he says about the closer scrutiny of visa applicants, "but it's like they're shooting everywhere, they're not aiming. They are investigating the wrong person if they are looking for someone."

Bo-Abdullah is one of thousands of young people - many from the Mideast - who are paying the price for horrific acts committed by men who claimed to be students but instead were plotting the Sept. 11 terror attacks.

Since then, the United States has tightened visa requirements, especially for citizens of Bahrain and other Muslim nations. It has also instituted a complex student tracking system that affects all foreign students and has forced the University of Florida and other schools to hire new employees and buy expensive software programs.

Due in large part to visa restrictions, the number of foreigners in U.S. colleges and universities rose less than 1 percent in 2002/2003, the smallest gain in almost a decade. And the number from Muslim countries plunged: Saudi Arabia, down 29 percent; Pakistan, 28 percent; and the United Arab Emirates, 23 percent, according to the Institute of International Education in New York.

In Florida, the number of foreign students dropped nearly 4 percent, to about 27,000, with much of the loss also coming from the Mideast . The University of South Florida has only a third of the Saudi students and half the Kuwaitis it had before the terror attacks.

If the trend persists, it could be a serious blow to the U.S. economy, which derived an estimated \$12.8-billion last year from tuition and living expenses paid by foreigners. A continuing decline in the number of Muslim students could be especially damaging because many come from wealthy families and are not dependent on financial aid.

But, critics say, there is an even greater threat. Visa obstacles are blocking one of America 's most valuable bridges to young people of other cultures.

"Education is an area where Americans and the people of the Arab and Muslim world have solid common ground," said a recent report by a congressional advisory committee. Since Sept. 11, "many of the best Muslim students in the Middle East and South Asia have grown fearful of coming to the United States.. Security needs must be balanced against the importance of changing attitudes toward the U.S. through (educational) exchanges."

Foreigners studying in the United States have long needed student visas, but the requirements have increased since the Sept. 11 attacks. Two of the hijackers, including alleged mastermind Mohamed Atta, enrolled in Florida flight schools without the proper visas.

Since last August, all foreign students have been tracked through a sophisticated Internet-based system called SEVIS - Student and Exchange Visitor Information System. It links colleges and universities with U.S. embassies, consulates, the State Department and ports of entry.

Before foreigners can enter the United States, they must have documentation from their school and be entered into the SEVIS system. Once here, they are required to report address changes, reductions in course load and other information.

The goal is to quickly identify any foreigner who is "out of status" as a student and may have darker ambitions.

"It's pretty impressive they got this thing up and running, but by and large the result is that

everything takes so much time," says Lynn Frazier of the University of Florida International Center. Her school, like USF, had to hire three new employees to handle SEVIS-related demands.

"I think the federal government is just overwhelmed and they're not staffed to deal with these things quickly and efficiently," Frazier says. "Any time there's a problem, it's not that the problem doesn't eventually get solved, but that it just takes so much time and is so difficult for the student."

Even students who think they are following the rules can be in for a shock. Consider Bo-Abdullah.

Because he still hopes to get a visa, he asked that neither he nor his schools be fully identified. However, the Times has verified his attendance.

Bo-Abdullah first entered the United States in February 2002 on a B-2 visa that let him stay here for six months while he applied to colleges. He got a regular F-1 student visa that summer after he was accepted by a Florida community college.

Last spring, Bo-Abdullah graduated with an associate of arts degree and enrolled in a Florida university for the fall term. Before he left in December, he got an I-20 form from the school - a document showing he is a student there - so he could apply for a new visa and be entered into the SEVIS system for his return to the United States.

But Bo-Abdullah never made it that far.

In a brief interview at the U.S. Embassy in Bahrain on Dec. 15, a consular official asked him a few questions to confirm he was studying in Florida. He thought he was about to get the visa, only to be told the officer "went through his computer and saw something and said, "We have to wire your information to D.C. You'll have to wait for your visa and wait for our call."

By the time he was contacted in mid January, Bo-Abdullah had missed the start of the new semester. This interview took on a more suspicious tone: "They asked me questions about my mosque and whether it has anything to do with al-Qaida."

To his surprise, Bo-Abdullah says, he was told the mosque had received money from a Saudi charity on the U.S. list of organizations supporting terror groups. Bo-Abdullah said he went to the mosque only to pray and socialize. Bo-Abdullah, who plans to be an electrical engineer, is now studying in Bahrain with hopes of transferring credits to his Florida school if he ever gets a visa. He is not angry at the U.S. government, but thinks the visa obstacles are costing it an important chance "to enlighten people about the U.S. "

The State Department says the refusal rate on student visa applications is only slightly higher than before the terror attacks: 15.5 percent now, compared to 14.2 percent then. But the number of applications has plunged by 15 percent - many students say they are no longer bothering to apply.

Mohajed Bayanoni, a 24-year-old Jordanian, said the United States normally would have been his first choice for graduate school because of several factors: He had been to America as a child and liked it; he has a brother and sister here; and the United States is the leader in his field, computer sciences.

But since Sept. 11, Bayanoni said, "I felt an atmosphere of prejudice, discrimination and guilt by association sweeping America against Muslim, Arab and Middle Eastern people."

Bayanoni decided to pursue his master's degree at the University of London.

As more students opt to study in other countries, "there is going to be a serious long-term impact" on American higher education, predicts Catharine Stimpson, dean of the graduate school of arts and sciences at New York University. NYU, with 5,454 foreigners, is second only to the University of Southern California in international students.

"We have the greatest university system in the world," Stimpson says, "but Australia, Canada and the Europeans are aggressively going after graduate students, and if you could get a very good degree in biomedicine from Toronto why go through a lot of hassle to come here? I think there really is a long-term danger."

Indeed, the University of Toronto has seen a "dramatic increase" in inquiries from foreigners, especially Muslims, says Florence Silver, director of student recruitment. Inquiries from Iran soared to 630 last year, more than three times as many as the year before.

For the first time, the university has joined forces with other Canadian schools to have a recruiter in the Mideast.

"The Canadian government is encouraging international student education because it's good politics, good economics and good education," Silver says. "We educate high-level people from around the world and that means we have high-level friends."

By contrast, many fear, the United States risks losing its close ties to political and business leaders in important Muslim nations like Saudi Arabia. Almost 80 percent of Saudi Cabinet members have graduate degrees from America, but visa obstacles are forcing the new generation to go elsewhere.

Saudi Aramco, a large oil company, has long sent promising employees to the United States to earn university degrees. In the 2000-2001 school year, 254 came here; last year, the number was 48.

"They were forced to send the remaining students to countries such as Lebanon, Egypt, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada for their education," says Joseph Mahon of St. Petersburg, a retired Aramco engineer who recently visited the kingdom as part of a survey team from the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations.

"In the future, if this trend continues, not only will the people sitting at the Council of Ministers' table and the top executives of the Saudi national oil company have less knowledge of the United States and its culture, but we will know a lot less about them. It is not in the interests of the United States to allow this to happen."

Related Material

Getting Back on Track: Saudi Study in the United States

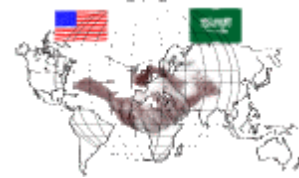
By Grant F. Smith

Saudi-American Forum Essay

http://www.saudi-american-forum.org/Newsletters/SAF_Essay_17.htm

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. Visit the web site at: <http://www.saudi-american-forum.org>

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

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