

Q&A with Author Jean Sasson: About Saudi Arabia

#1 Q: Was it easy for you to get a job and work in Saudi Arabia?

A: No, it was *not* easy to get a job in the kingdom,

I well remember how difficult it was to be hired to work at The King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

First of all, the Faisal was a royal hospital and their standards were extremely high, for doctors, nurses, and administrative staff. Anyone employed to work there was required to have seven years of experience in their field, and receive the highest job recommendation. Although I had the experience, and my former hospital administrator boss had had given me an outstanding recommendation, I was nearly passed over for the administrative position. Was this because of my credentials and ability? No. I nearly missed the chance to work in Saudi Arabia because I was a blonde whose hair hung to my waist. The person who interviewed me for the job told me later that he was concerned that I would cause problems in Saudi Arabia because I was a single female with long blonde hair.

I was shocked when I heard the story, because I have always been very serious when it came to work, but I quickly realized that working in Saudi Arabia is very complex, both then, and now, because the social issues and cultural limitations are extremely challenging. This aspect of living and working in Saudi Arabia is considered a very serious matter to the Saudi government, and therefore to the organizations who recruit for the kingdom.

Single women from America were a rarity in those days, and I can now understand the interviewer's concerns. The last thing he wanted to do was to send someone to work for the head of the hospital who might create problems with the men of Saudi Arabia. In those days, it was forbidden for any western woman to date a Saudi man, yet many Saudi men were enamored of dating western women.

In fact, there were very few American women working in the kingdom. Let me give you the statistics and you will understand how rare it was for American women to be hired to work to live and work in Saudi Arabia.

When I arrived in Saudi Arabia the population of Saudi Arabia was approximately 7 million people, of which 5.5 were Saudis, and 1.5 million were expatriates. Of these 1.5 million expatriates, there were around a million Arabs from Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and various other Arab countries. There were approximately 400,000 expatriates from Asian lands, and around 100,000 westerners from the United States and Europe.

35,000 out of the 100,000 westerners were Americans. 13,000 of the Americans were working in the oil industry in the Eastern Province. This left around 22,000 Americans who were working in schools, hospitals, or in various businesses in the private sector. Of this 22,000, approximately 1,000 were single females who had been approved to work in medicine and education.

I was one of those 1,000 women.

While being hired was difficult, my time in Saudi Arabia was very easy. Once I arrived in the kingdom, everything went perfectly. In those pre-the first Gulf war days of 1990/1991, most Saudis, and certainly the educated Saudis, were exceedingly welcoming to Americans, and some other foreigners, although Americans were respected and admired greatly. In twelve years of living in the country, I was always made to feel welcome and needed. I remember shopping in the souks and being interrupted more than once by Saudis who could speak English. Those men walked up to me unprompted to say, "Thank you for coming to our country and helping us."

Although I had warned that the social life in Saudi Arabia would be restrictive, it really was not nearly as bad as I had envisioned.

Of course, there were rules.

Non-Muslims were told not to date Muslims. And, I did not.

Women could not drive. And, I did not, although I was one of the lucky women who always had a car and driver at my disposal.

Most Americans were required to live in a compound with other westerners. I was fortunate in that I only lived in the compound built especially for females working at the hospital for only a few months. After that, I was living in a villa in a Saudi neighborhood. I had to get special permission to do this (I was living in my ex-husband's villa).

I was told that I did not have to wear the head scarf and the abaaya, but I did because the religious police appeared so hostile when women were not dressed very modestly. However, I did not cover my face unless I wanted to do so.

Although the men of religion appeared to personally detest western women, as they would stand for long minutes and shoot contemptuous looks of hatred my way, they otherwise ignored me. Those men tended to attack Muslim women from Muslim lands if those women dared to walk with any hair exposed or their faces uncovered. Why, I do not know, although I was told by Dr. Feteih, my boss, that King Khalid had given orders to the head Mutawa that the religious police were forbidden from hassling western women.

Unmarried men and women were forbidden from being together, but this was pretty much ignored until around 1988 when the religious police became much more bold about stopping and checking the papers of foreign couples to see if they were married.

Because I worked for Dr. Feteih, who was the head of the hospital, and was a Saudi who was King Khalid's cardiologist, and in fact, very close to King Khalid and Crown Prince Fah'd, I was in a unique position. The royal family used the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre as their special hospital (although they were often transferred to the Mayo Clinic and other US facilities when their medical situation was dire). Since Dr. Feteih ran the hospital and knew the king and other royals, he was involved in every aspect of their care. And so I met a number of the royals,

including the king and the crown prince. I also came to know a number of princesses who invited me to weddings and parties.

I was not the only one thus invited. I know various physicians and their wives who were invited into the homes of the royals and other Saudis, too. This is something that would never happen today, for the reasons I mention below.

#2 Q: Is it easy for Americans to work in Saudi Arabia in 2014?

A: This is a complicated question that requires a fairly detailed answer, but if I had to say yes or no, I would say no, it is not easy for Americans to work in Saudi Arabia. Although Saudi Arabia requires many skilled workers, the barriers to working in the kingdom are daunting. And, even if you pass all the requirements to live and work in Saudi Arabia, the atmosphere is no longer friendly to expatriates.

These days there are around 21,000,000 Saudis and approximately 9 million expatriates working there. Of this number, most expats are Muslims from Islamic countries. Although no one seems to know exactly how many westerners or Americans are working in the kingdom, percentage wise, the number is dwindling, despite the fact the salaries are still high, and holidays are liberal, with as much as two months of vacation annually.

There is a reason for this negative transformation. This change has slowly evolved since the first Gulf War when Saudis became very upset that American soldiers were on their soil. Before those wounds could heal, 9/11 occurred. With the majority of the hijackers identified as Saudi citizens, there was enormous attention focused on the Saudi government, and on the Saudi people. Saudis felt wounded by the accusations, because the vast majority of the Saudis had nothing to do with 9/11.

Neither the Saudi government nor the Saudi people are accustomed to the deep media probes that occurred after 9/11. Therefore, affection for Americans no longer exists. Quite simply, the Saudi government and the Saudi people would prefer to rid the kingdom of all westerners and non-Muslims, because they see us now as problem makers instead of problem solvers.

Therefore, it is much more difficult for a westerner to be employed in Saudi Arabia these days. The Saudi government feels that expatriate jobs should be filled by those of their faith.

But even if a westerner/American is hired to work in the kingdom, he or she can expect to live confined on a compound and rarely see anyone outside that compound or the people they meet at work. The restrictions against westerners have increased and there is no room for a mistake. I have been told by a number of western expatriates living in the kingdom that when they go shopping that they never receive welcoming gestures, or even smiles. They only receive scowls from Saudis.

Nowadays, it has become much more difficult for single men and women in the kingdom. If an unmarried couple are caught in a car together, or walking down the streets together, both will be arrested, possibly flogged, and deported.

(Westerners now working in Saudi Arabia can scarcely believe the good relationships once enjoyed between Saudis and westerners working in the kingdom. I now know that I was in Saudi Arabia during a golden time when the Saudis were optimistic and enthusiastic about their future(s) and Americans were considered an important part of their building a modern Saudi Arabia.)

This is no longer the case. So, no, it is not easy for an American to be hired to work in Saudi Arabia, but most importantly, the challenges of living in the kingdom have increased.

#3 Q: Are Saudis our friends politically these days?

A: The answer to your question is no. The previous friendly political and personal relationship between the Saudi government and the United States has unraveled. Saudi citizens no longer trust or even like Americans.

There is a long history to America's friendship with Saudi Arabia, which makes this turn of events very sad. The political goodwill goes back to the 1930's, a period of nearly 100 years.

Saudi Arabia's relationship with America has its roots in the oil industry when American geologists working for Standard Oil discovered oil in 1938. Later, in 1944, King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud granted authority over the Saudi oil fields to American oil companies.

Although Saudi Arabia was neutral in World War II, the war led to King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud's meeting with the U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt. The two men met onboard the USS Quincy in the Suez Canal on February 14, 1945. There was a noted warmth between the two men and their camaraderie resulted in a productive meeting. That's when the political and economic friendship between the United States and Saudi Arabia was strengthened.

At the end of WWII, American oil executives and workers swarmed into the country. Both Saudis and American enjoyed their special relationship. Once the wealth from the oil poured into Saudi coffers, much of that money was used to modernize Saudi cities. Generally American companies received special treatment and won many lucrative contracts.

The combination of the effects of the first Gulf War, and 9/11, has greatly damaged the once close political and economic relationship between the two countries, and the two peoples.

#4 Q: How is Saudi women's absence in the work place felt in Saudi Arabia?

A: Saudi females make up only 15% of the entire Saudi workforce, which is a small number in comparison to most countries, yet this is considered great progress in the kingdom. For example, consider the fact that during the twelve years that I lived and worked in Saudi Arabia, I only knew one Saudi woman who worked outside her home.

Certainly, Saudi Arabia is held back economically and socially by the lack of Saudi female workers. There is need for many more expatriates to live in and work in the kingdom only because Saudi Arabia is failing to tap into the female labor force.

There are many educated Saudi women who want to work, but there are so many obstacles in their path. These educated and highly qualified women must fight against family and societal disapproval before they can look for a job. If a position is found, then their guardians must give their approval before any woman can accept a position. Then the organizations hiring the women must make their businesses gender-separate proof, with specific offices for women and men, as the two sexes are forbidden to mingle.

There is a reason for this extreme caution. In Saudi society, the role of women has always been that of wife and mother. Saudi women cannot mix with men not of their family. Therefore, female participation in the work force is met with suspicion, disputes, and even intimidation. I have even heard of women who were locked inside the family home to keep them from working.

However, due to the large number of educated Saudi women, and the fact the government wants to replace many of the expatriate workers, there is a lot of hope that the government will push families to allow their daughters to seek and accept employment in the Saudi workforce.

#5 Q: Can you rank Middle Eastern countries in terms of conservation.

A: Yes. I lived 12 years in Saudi Arabia, and importantly, I have travelled extensively in the region for an additional 24 years. Bear in mind that change is frequent in the Middle East, and freedoms for women are fluid. For example, Iraq under Saddam was one of the most liberal countries for women but today women's freedoms are being slowly reversed, particularly in the South Shiite region of Iraq. A similar reversal of female freedom is occurring in Syria as the civil war there has created many pockets of radical extremism, whose fighters are trying to pull women back into the dark ages.

While most of the countries in the Middle East are conservative, some are more conservative than others. Therefore, I will number the countries I believe to be the most conservative to the least conservative. (Note: I have not included several countries that some might consider Middle Eastern as certain Western Asia countries overlap with the Middle East.)

MOST CONSERVATIVE to the LEAST CONSERVATIVE:

- 1) Yemen
- 2) Saudi Arabia
- 3) State of Palestine
- 4) Iraq
- 5) Syria
- 6) Oman
- 7) Jordan
- 8) Egypt
- 9) Oman
- 10) Qatar
- 11) Bahrain
- 12) United Arab Emirates
- 13) Turkey
- 14) Lebanon
- 15) Cyprus
- 16) Israel