

THE TESTING COLUMN

THREE DAYS IN RIYADH

by Susan M. Case, Ph.D.

As a break from my usual topics of scaling, equating, performance differences, and other matters psychometric, I am writing this time about my most recent trip to Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. I have had so many questions about Riyadh that I decided to write about it in a column, particularly since very few Americans have the opportunity to go there.

Riyadh is located in the center of the Arabian Peninsula on a large plateau. It was settled more than 1,500 years ago. In 1774, it became part of what is known as the First Saudi State, which was overtaken by the Ottoman Empire but reconstituted as the Second Saudi State in 1823. Following decades of fighting, the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in 1932 with Riyadh as its capital.

Today, Riyadh is a huge modern city with over four million people, some of the highest skyscrapers in the world, major highways, and the usual heavy traffic. Seemingly every driver, every passenger, and every pedestrian on the street is using a cell phone. Familiar signs ranging from McDonald's to Planet Hollywood are everywhere, as American fast-food and chain restaurants are very popular. Even more surprising to me is that American retail giants, including even Victoria's Secret, are also common.



Riyadh is viewed as one of the most conservative cities in the Middle East. The vast majority of Riyadh residents are Sunni Muslims; the city has over four thousand mosques. Much American attention is focused on the role of Saudi women, and it is true that Saudi Arabian women are not permitted to drive or to be alone with a man who is not a "sanctioned" relative (father, grandfather, brother, uncle, husband) or their driver. However, women can work, have their own bank accounts and businesses, own real estate, make investments, and own cars. Women are well represented as academic department chairs and deans; and in a hospital I visited on a previous trip, women often ran entire departments with men reporting to them. They are not as anxious to drive as you might think; as they say, having a driver is not so bad.

I was invited to Riyadh to give a few talks and conduct a few workshops on testing. This was my third trip to Saudi Arabia and my fifth trip to the Arab world. My husband, Bob, accompanied me; this was his first trip. We were met at the airport by the dean of the medical school who had invited me and by the school's office liaison for foreign visitors. We were whisked through customs and immigration and were met by a car and driver who took us to our hotel and interacted with the front desk to

ensure all was as arranged. This hotel, like others I have stayed at in Saudi Arabia, was modern and well-appointed; I felt safe and welcome. TV stations included CNN and BBC; Internet access was commonly available. One surprising observation I've made throughout Saudi Arabia is that all the hotel staff are men (including the "maids"). Typically, the custodial workers throughout are not Saudi, but rather men from outside Saudi Arabia, often from Pakistan or India.

Each day, I was picked up at 7:00 A.M. by a driver, and the ride to my lecture location took about 45 minutes through terrible traffic. Bob had been assigned his own driver for our stay, and he was free to do whatever he wanted. Luckily for me, he spent some time in the souks (markets) and purchased some beautiful jewelry.

My official day began at 8:00 A.M. Workshop attendees were there on time and stayed the whole day. Cell phones were turned off; interruptions were rare. As in the past, the audience was largely Saudi, with a few folks flying in from other countries. The group was about half men and half women. About half of the men wore western clothes and about half wore traditional Saudi garb. About half of the women wore white lab coats like the ones worn by doctors in the United States; the other half wore traditional *abayas* (black full-length robes with head scarves). Unlike in other Saudi cities, all the women, even those in lab coats, wore black head scarves; some also covered some portion of their faces. One woman was completely covered, somehow looking through a semi-opaque veil that completely covered her eyes, nose, and mouth. I wore conservative clothes that I would wear in the States: slacks and a long-sleeved shirt—no *abaya*, but no spandex either.

Once the workshop began, the interaction among the men and women and among the participants and me was exactly as it would have been in the United States. The women spoke up in discussions, argued their points, ran at least half of the small groups, delivered lectures—essentially, the clothes they wore quickly became unimportant. On my first trip, it was surprising to me that the participants' English was perfect. Many of the schools, and all the medical schools, use only English in their curricula; many Saudis, especially before 9/11, took graduate courses in the United States and many continue to watch much American television. All the Saudi children I have met speak perfect unaccented American English. Clearly this was not a cross section of children but the children of professional workers. Overall, there is about an 80 percent literacy rate in Saudi Arabia. There are 19 public universities, and about half the students are women.

One evening, Bob and I were entertained, along with school dignitaries and other workshop organizers and participants, at a dinner on the 77th floor of the Four Seasons Hotel, which is located at the top of a hill, overlooking all of Riyadh. At the foot of the hotel's driveway, our car was stopped and checked carefully for bombs. The driveway itself was reduced to one lane with concrete barriers blocking alternate sides of what had been a two-lane road, causing us to go extremely slowly, moving back and forth from one lane to the other. At the top of the driveway, we arrived at the magnificent hotel, as glamorous as seen anywhere. There was a separate elevator dedicated to the restaurant, where we had an eight-course meal. Of course, no alcohol was served, but we started with a delicious sparkly fruit-based "cocktail" and were then served a fruit-based

drink throughout the meal. After dinner, we were taken to the 99th floor of the hotel, where there was a glass bridge connecting one wing of the hotel to another. It was all very impressive, very exotic, very flashy.

I'm not sure when the Saudis sleep. Each of my trips has involved late nights and early pickups (for instance, returning to the hotel at midnight after an 8:00 P.M. dinner, only to be picked up at 7:00 A.M. the next morning). The workdays seem to run from 8:00 A.M. until at least 5:00 P.M., typically with an hour-long commute home.

Our most memorable evening involved a personal invitation to the home of two Saudi doctors and their two children, of whom one was in medical school and the other in dental school. We were honored to be invited into the family section of their home (not their entertaining section). Our time was mostly spent in their basement family room, which was comfortable and, aside from the indoor swimming pool (!), similar to American-style basement family rooms. After dinner we had the opportunity to see their very formal, very opulent first floor. Dinner was amazing, all prepared by the wife, who was one of the workshop organizers—hummus, tabbouleh, lamb and rice, falafels, various unusual vegetable dishes and salads. It was served family style. Conversation was spirited. The daughter, whose favorite TV show is *House*, wants to attend graduate dental school at Harvard.

The law in Saudi Arabia is called Shari'ah and is based on the Islamic code. There is a formal

legal education process, and there is a code that is somewhat similar to our code of professional responsibility. A person who practices law must satisfy some educational requirements, such as holding a degree from a Shari'ah college or a bachelor of law from one of the Kingdom's universities or an equivalent of any of these degrees obtained from abroad. In addition, at least three years of practical legal experience are typically required, although this may be reduced to one year for someone with a master's degree in Shari'ah or in law. There is also a character and fitness requirement that the applicant must be of good conduct and not under interdiction. Both women and men may be lawyers.

I feel very fortunate to have had this experience in Riyadh. Together with previous trips in this part of the world, this trip has caused me to revisit my beliefs about Saudi Arabia, which turned out to be very inaccurate. The Saudis seem to have a very positive view of Americans; they have an amazing knowledge of the United States—geography and sports, as well as politics. Their concerns are the same as those of people everywhere: their families, their careers, inflation, unemployment, health care, world peace. We were met everywhere with unfailing kindness, even by strangers with no connection to our reason for being in the country. 🇸🇦

SUSAN M. CASE, PH.D., is the Director of Testing for the National Conference of Bar Examiners.