

# **Saudis Again Head to U.S. Campuses**

## **Record Demand Ends Years-Long Decline, Notably Since 9/11**

**By Caryle Murphy and Susan Kinzie**  
**Washington Post Staff Writers**  
**Saturday, November 11, 2006; A11**

**A record number of nearly 11,000 Saudis are pursuing higher education in the United States, reversing a years-long decline in students coming from the oil-rich kingdom, particularly after the 2001 terrorist attacks.**

**The surge is a result of recent measures taken by the U.S. and Saudi governments, including a major Saudi government scholarship program for study abroad, launched last year, and implementation of more organized procedures for issuing student visas by the U.S. Embassy in the kingdom.**

**The education initiative, which also envisions a second scholarship program to enable U.S. scholars to study and teach in Saudi Arabia, arose from a mutual desire to counter growing hostility between the populations of both nations sparked by the discovery that 15 of the 19 hijackers Sept. 11, 2001, were Saudi citizens, according to officials on both sides and Middle East experts.**

**"At the government level, relations are strong. . . . But at the popular level, there's a huge amount of mistrust and antipathy," said F. Gregory Gause III, a University of Vermont professor who specializes in Saudi affairs. "This [scholarship program] is a good step towards trying to dissipate some of that mistrust and antipathy."**

**The Saudi ambassador to the United States, Prince Turki al-Faisal, said in a recent interview that the large number of Saudis choosing to study in the United States signifies "that Saudi youth still look upon the United States as a means of achieving their ambitions in life by acquiring the skills and the know-how that your academic institutions provide for."**

**Saad Mohammed Abuabat, 23, an accounting major at Catholic University who arrived 10 months ago, agreed. "Who doesn't want to study in the U.S.?" he asked. "I don't know anyone."**

**A degree from the United States "means a lot" to companies at home, Abuabat said. "They prefer you to [a] guy with [a] degree from Saudi Arabia."**

**Saudi cultural attache Mazyed Ibrahim Almazyed said that 10,936 Saudis are enrolled at 733 U.S. educational institutions across the country. He said he expects an additional 3,000 students to arrive next semester, bringing the total to about 14,000. Virginia ranks fourth -- behind California, Florida and Colorado -- in the number of Saudis at its schools: 637.**

**The number of Saudi students now here surpasses the peak academic year of 1980-81, when 10,440 Saudis were enrolled in U.S. schools, according to the New York-based Institute of International Education, a nonprofit that works with the State Department. The current figure is also nearly twice the 5,579 Saudi students counted here by the institute in September 2001.**

**State Department officials interviewed for this article declined to be named. And the department's public affairs office declined to provide an official to speak on the record about the increased number of Saudi students here. But in an e-mail statement, Thomas Farrell, deputy assistant secretary of state for academic programs, said, "[T]he significant growth we are seeing in educational exchange**

between our two countries can only increase the mutual benefit derived from leadership development, skills-building, understanding and respect."

**Turki, the Saudi ambassador, said the bilateral education effort grew out of the April 2005 meeting between President Bush and King Abdullah, then the crown prince, in Crawford, Tex., when the two "agreed that they would encourage more Saudis to come to the United States," whether as students, business people or medical patients.**

Even before the Crawford meeting, "there was unanimity of opinion that the Saudi-U.S. relationship, especially in the area of creating clear understanding between Americans and Saudis, had suffered from neglect," one State Department official said.

Saudi students began coming to the United States in large numbers in the late 1970s. After 1981, their numbers gradually declined, in part because higher education facilities were built in the kingdom but also because their government put less stress on getting international experience.

Then the 2001 terrorist attacks sent bilateral relations into a downward spiral and for a few months afterward no Saudis were given student visas, with only "a trickle" granted in 2002, Almazyed said.

According to the Institute of International Education, the number of Saudi students dropped 25.2 percent in the 2002-03 academic year, and by the 2004-05 term, only 3,035 Saudis enrolled -- a level not seen since the mid-'70s.

"For Saudi students to have a full, clear understanding of America, of its culture and of its educational system, they have to come and interact with Americans," said Almazyed, who received his doctorate in education from the University of Oregon in 1975.

One State Department official said that after Sept. 11, "the bottom fell out in applications [for student visas] around the world, because there was a strong feeling not to apply because you wouldn't stand a chance."

U.S. officials are trying to dispel that perception, he added. "Apply. You'll have a fair shot" is how he characterized the message they now aim to convey.

In addition, visa processing around the world was slowed by several requirements imposed after Sept. 11, according to another State Department official. Those included in-person interviews and fingerprinting for most applicants, and a review by law enforcement authorities of some visa requests.

Also, a 2002 law directed at Saudi Arabia mandated the presence in that country of visa security officers from the Department of Homeland Security, whose job is to screen all visa requests and, if necessary, relay them to Washington for more intense checking.

During the height of delays in 2002 and 2003, some Saudi applicants waited six to 12 months for a visa if their documents had to be sent to Washington for added review, the State Department official said.

At present, the average wait for an interview is 98 days; once that occurs, "it takes about a week to get the visa," the official said. Now, he added, "the biggest challenge for us in Saudi Arabia for student visas is the demand. There are more Saudi students applying for visas than ever before."

According to State Department figures, 9,471 Saudis were given student visas in the year ending Sept. 30, a 297 percent increase over the 2,383 issued the year before.

Dalal Ali Al Kandil, who is working toward a master's degree in instructional technology at George Mason University, said she was "shocked when they said you have to make an appointment [for an interview] four months prior to traveling. Saudis were never treated that way. I understand security and everything. But it hurts me a little bit."

Still, this country remained her first choice for study abroad because it "is known for its very good education," said Kandil, a teacher and one of the 1,653 female scholarship recipients in the United States.

"I never felt I would be in any kind of trouble or danger" in the United States, said Kandil, who arrived two months ago and lives in Fairfax.

And, she added, "the best thing about America, no one looks at you like you're so stupid. . . . You can ask the dumbest question, and they'll answer you with a smile."

Fahad Al Dhelaan, 20, a junior at George Washington University studying computer science, said the scholarship program aimed "to send this generation of students outside to get . . . another perspective back into the country in a few years. I think it will work, I think it will work fabulous."



**"What happens in Crawford stays in Crawford."**

**—Jay Leno**