

FAREWELL TO EASTERN PROVINCE

from Mike Hurley, former Head of
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The sense of consumer confidence and economic drive is tangible too. The political environment is stable, the scope of social debate is broader and deeper than in the past, and we have seen a smooth transfer of sovereign in the past year. The Saudi government's commitment to crack down on, and defeat, terrorism in the Kingdom has been remarkably effective: the terrorist campaign has been successfully disrupted, and as a result we are witnessing the return of British business visitors to the market. There are around 20,000 British residents in the Kingdom, many of whom have stayed on throughout the worst days of the terrorist threat and who have made a long-term commitment to the Kingdom.

There are challenges: finding work for the estimated 300,000 young people entering the job market every year, including the growing number of women looking for jobs. But within these challenges lie many commercial opportunities, as the Saudi government extends its commitment to developing a better social infrastructure and more balanced economic development outside the big cities. The UKTI team in Saudi Arabia stands ready to help UK business interested in engaging with this promising market. They can offer much helpful support through staff in the three major commercial centres (Riyadh, Jeddah, Al Khobar). This is important in a country so culturally different, with considerable regional diversity and several different regional identities.

Al Khobar? Where's that? Saudi Arabia? Sits on a quarter of the world's oil? This was the nub of a conversation I had with Roger Sykes, my predecessor, when I met him in Kuwait shortly after taking up my posting there in autumn 1996. Roger assured me, with a knowing smile, that a posting to Al Khobar was one of the Foreign Office's better kept secrets.

Nearly ten years on, I can vouch for Roger's judgement. Many words can be used to describe my time here - demanding, and, on occasion, a tad uneasy, but also challenging, entertaining, illuminating, hectic, highly educational, and, for the most part, very enjoyable. The pluses far outweigh the negatives. One thing it has never been is boring. And I feel privileged to have experienced life in the Eastern Province, the engine room of Saudi Arabia, the home of Saudi Aramco, SABIC, Jubail Industrial City, KFUPM, and the world's largest oasis in Al Ahsa.

I leave with many happy memories, but they are best summarised by the old cliché "it's the people who make it". From the day of my arrival, I have been touched by the sincere friendship, support, understanding, and frank talking, from both the expatriate and local communities, which has so enhanced the quality of life and work here, and is so far removed from the negative images of Saudi Arabia that appear too often in the media. I have particularly valued the

unstinting cooperation of Saudi Aramco at every level, the Royal Commission, SABIC, and the Eastern Province Chamber of Commerce & Industry Board, Secretariat & members, all of whom share a common aim with us in developing Saudi-British ties.



I also leave here with many wishes for the future. Obviously that the terrible events of summer 2004, which so transformed lives here, are a thing of the past. That more British companies start waking up to the massive opportunities that exist here, and get on planes to come out and see for themselves. That Saudi visas are more easily available to let them do so. And that there are more direct flights between UK and KSA for them to choose from. That Saudi Arabia starts "marketing" itself better internationally, both politically and economically, to counter the misperceptions. That Saudi Arabia's natural wealth continues to be reinvested in the long term future of its people, equipping young Saudis with the skills they need in today's world, with British institutions hopefully playing a major role.

Finally, many thanks to everyone concerned for their support during my time in Saudi . Shukran Jazeelan and Ma'a Al Salamah.