

American Woman Boasted of Saudi Freedoms To Bush Brother Before Arrest at Starbucks

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By Sonia Verma, FOX News

Two weeks before Yara, an American businesswoman, was arrested by Saudi Arabia's religious police for sitting with a male colleague at Starbucks, she said she strolled past the very same cafe with another businessman: Neil Bush.

Bush, President George W. Bush's younger brother and CEO of the education software company *Ignite!*, was in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, speaking at an economic forum hosted by King Abdullah for hundreds of influential business leaders.

Yara, who does not want her last name revealed because of safety concerns, is a managing partner at a Saudi financial company. She went to hear Bush speak, and she said she invited him later to tour her company's offices, to give him a sense of what life was really like for women living in the capital.

"I was boasting about Riyadh, telling him it doesn't deserve its bad reputation," she said. "I told him I never experienced any harassment. I'd had no trouble as a woman. It was business as usual."

But on Monday, Yara learned that she had been wrong. She was thrown in jail, strip-searched, threatened and forced to sign false confessions by the kingdom's "Mutaween" police.

"When I was arrested, it was like going through an avalanche," she said. "All of my beliefs were completely destroyed."

Yara's crime: sitting with a male business partner in the "family-only" section of the Starbucks -- the only area of the café where women and men can sit together. In Saudi Arabia, public contact between unrelated men and women is strictly prohibited.

Yara, who was born in Tripoli, Libya, to Jordanian parents, grew up in Salt Lake City. She moved to Saudi Arabia eight years ago with her husband, a prominent businessman.

The 37-year-old mother of three said she had an “all-American” upbringing in Utah and lived most of her life in the U.S. before moving to Riyadh.

She described herself as secular, and apolitical. “I am anti-political,” she said. “I have never advocated for anything in my life.”

She said she made a point of wearing an abaya and a headscarf, like most Saudi women, “out of cultural respect.”

“I observed the rules and tried not to stand out in business settings,” she said.

But on Monday, when the power failed in her company's offices, Yara and her male colleagues decided to use a nearby Starbucks, which has wireless Internet, as a temporary workspace.

She settled into a booth with a male colleague and opened her laptop. Moments later, she was arrested.

“Some men came up to us with very long beards and white dresses. They asked, 'Why are you here together?' I explained about the power being out in our office. They got very angry and told me what I was doing was a great sin,” Yara recalled.

The men were from Saudi Arabia's Commission for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, a 10,000-strong police force charged with enforcing dress codes, sex segregation and the observance of prayer times.

Yara said they grabbed her mobile phone and pushed her into a taxi bound for Riyadh's main prison. There she was interrogated, strip-searched and forced to sign and fingerprint confessions of guilt.

Later, she was made to stand before a judge who condemned her behavior, telling her she would “burn in hell.”

She said she spent hours in a filthy prison cell with dozens of other women who had been arrested by the religious police, before her husband used his political connections to secure her release.

She has since vowed to remain in Saudi Arabia and continue working, but she says she will never return to Riyadh and now travels with a bodyguard.

And her family is furious that the American Embassy hasn't done more to support her.

An embassy official said her case was being treated as “an internal Saudi matter” and would not offer further comment.

Starbucks was waiting to learn more about the facts surrounding the incident, a company spokesman said.

“Starbucks was very concerned by reports that a customer was asked to leave one of our stores and arrested,” said Brandon H. Borrman, a spokesman for the company.

“Starbucks takes pride in respecting different cultures, and as a global company with locations in 44 countries, we recognize that religious customs, social norms and laws will vary among the communities where we work,” he said.

Yara said she carries her American passport with her as a precaution. But on Monday, she said, her identification was confiscated by the religious police, who told her they didn't care about her citizenship.

She is taking medication to treat post-traumatic stress while she recovers from her ordeal at her family's home in Jeddah.

“Thank God they did not harm her more,” said her husband, Hatim.

“The psychological impact is beyond description,” Hatim said. “She's normally a very calm, stable woman. Now she's afraid to leave our compound.”

FOXNews.com's Sara Bonisteel contributed to this report.