

# Saudi Arabia Stands By Its Arrest Of An American Woman In Starbucks

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By Sonia Verma

**Saudi Arabia's religious police have issued a rare public statement defending their arrest of an American woman living in Riyadh, jailed for sitting with a male colleague at Starbucks.**

Yara, a businesswoman and married mother of three, said she was strip-searched, forced to sign false confessions and told by a judge she would "burn in hell" before she was released on Feb. 4.

Late Monday night, The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice publicly denounced her with a statement posted on the Internet, saying her actions violated the country's Shariah law.

"It's not allowed for any woman to travel alone and sit with a strange man and talk and laugh and drink coffee together like they are married," it said.

"All of these are against the law and it's clear it's against the law. First, for a woman to work with men is against the law and against religion. Second, the family sections at coffee shops and restaurants are meant for families and close relatives," it continued.

The Commission contested Yara's version of events, saying she was never strip-searched or forced to sign confessions.

It accused her of wearing makeup, not covering her hair and "moving around suspiciously" while sitting with her Syrian colleague, who was also arrested, but later released.

Speaking from the family's home in Jeddah where they have lived for eight years, Yara's husband, who did not wish to be named for safety concerns said: "We are afraid for our lives, for our family and from further harassment."

"The things that they are suggesting about my wife, of course it isn't true. She's a professional businesswoman and she was at a café, not at a bar. They are coming up with ways to justify their actions."

Yara's story captured international attention and has fuelled fierce debate within Saudi society, where reformers and human rights groups are pressuring the government to liberalize.

The powerful religious police have launched a crackdown on the local press for its criticism of the religious police and its handling of the incident.

The "Mutaween" has vowed to sue two newspaper columnists who have written in Yara's defense, saying: "The Commission has the right to sue the writers because of the lies they are spreading. It gives the wrong idea of Saudi Arabia."

Yara, a managing partner in a finance company, has meanwhile returned to work in Jeddah, though she no longer travels to her company's offices in Riyadh where the incident took place.

Her family is contemplating a return to America, saying they feel caught in the middle of a greater debate in Saudi society between conservatives and reformers.

"There are a lot of Saudis who are angry and they are using Yara's story to say 'Enough of these people in our country.' Regardless of whether we agree or disagree, we don't want to get further punished for this," Yara's husband said.