

Teaching English in Saudi Arabia

Teaching English: Overview

English teachers are in high demand in Saudi Arabia and employment numbers are expected to increase in the coming years as the importance of English in obtaining scholarships or employment has grown. The U.S. Embassy does not maintain a database, either formal or anecdotal, of English schools or recruiting agencies in Saudi Arabia. Anyone considering accepting an English teaching job in Saudi Arabia is strongly advised to carefully review the terms of the contract regarding working and living conditions and visa status, and to ask for references from persons familiar with the institution, especially former American employees. We further advise Americans to seek employment with a reputable institution, to gain a clear understanding of their visa classification, and to negotiate a well-written contract before leaving the United States. American citizens should also read and become familiar with the [Country Specific Information for Saudi Arabia](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1012.html). (http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1012.html)

Different Expectations

Many types of people teach English in Saudi Arabia. Some are professionally trained, with degrees, others are members of TESOL. Some hold graduate degrees in other disciplines and teach English in Saudi Arabia because they want to experience another culture. Different teachers have different expectations. They bring their own unique perspectives to their jobs and their own reactions to new circumstances.

Types of English Teaching Positions Available

Recruitment processes in Saudi Arabia vary. Many teachers are hired directly by universities or other educational entities, but English teachers in particular are often hired through recruitment agencies. English teachers are assigned to work for a wide variety of institutions including:

- Private elementary and secondary schools
- Public Universities
- Private Universities
- Industrial Colleges
- Private Language Centers
- Technical and Vocational Training Colleges

Some of the institutions are located in large metropolitan areas such as Riyadh or Jeddah, while others may be located in remote, ultra-conservative towns or villages. Teachers are advised to understand where they will be assigned prior to accepting an employment offer.

Visa Matters

English teachers in Saudi Arabia receive a wide variety of visas, which largely depends on the request made by the employer. Three of the most common visa scenarios are listed below. It is important for prospective employees to have a clear understanding of their visa classification prior to travelling to the Kingdom.

1. Many teachers receive a 90-day work/visit visa at the time of initial hire, which permits them to enter Saudi Arabia and begin teaching. Some work/visit visas only allow one entry; others permit multiple entries. Note: If the visitor visa has been annotated “not permitted to work,” and the individual takes up work anyway, there would be no legal grounds to pursue a case against an employer should a dispute arise.
2. Some teachers receive a residence/work visa prior to arrival, which is accompanied by an “*Iqama*” or residence card after arrival. The residence/work visa and *Iqama* allows an individual to travel freely to and from Saudi Arabia during the stated validity period.
3. Other teachers receive a work/visit visa to begin teaching, but are later given the option to pursue a residence/work visa. Because holders of work/visit visas cannot transfer to residence/work visas inside the Kingdom, they must leave the country -- often to their home country -- and re-enter to change visa status.

The “*igama*” application process may take from 3-6 months, during which time the teachers give their passports to the school. In the meantime, the teacher would not be able to leave the country until the “*igama*” has been issued. If an emergency should arise during this process, it is extremely difficult to make arrangements to leave. While the “*igama*” is being processed, the teacher should ask for a letter from the school which explains their status in country should they be stopped by the police for any reason.

Saudi labor law and employment practices are vastly different from those in the United States. It is your responsibility to understand local laws and obey them. Some Americans have run into serious legal problems with Saudi Immigration because they take up a teaching position on a visa annotated “not permitted to work.” Other teachers have stayed in Saudi Arabia after being dismissed by their employers, in an effort to seek other employment. Without the consent and transfer-of-sponsorship by the initial employer, however, these individuals are unable to take up a new assignment before leaving the Kingdom. Furthermore, an individual’s sponsor has the ability to report a teacher as an absconder—a crime that can result in a heavy monetary fine, detention, deportation and a five-year ban on returning to Saudi Arabia. Once a final exit visa has been issued, the employee must depart the country within 60 days. Failure to do so, despite unresolved legal problems, could result in the sponsor reporting the employee as an “absconder,” which results in another fine, possible deportation and five-year re-entry ban.

Contracts

Prospective English teachers are advised to negotiate a clear, detailed contract prior to accepting a position in Saudi Arabia, specific key issues including:

- Terms of payment;
- Terms of resignation and/or dismissal;
- Whether the company will issue a residence or temporary work visa;
- Whether the visa is single or multiple entry;
- Whether the employee will be permitted to retain his / her passport in Saudi Arabia;
- Assignment location and the possibility of being relocated to another part of the country

The written Arabic text of a contract governs employment and business arrangements under Saudi law. Before signing a contract, U.S. companies should obtain an independent translation to ensure a full understanding of the contract's terms, limits, and agreements. No U.S. citizen should come to work in Saudi Arabia or make a business arrangement without having read and understood the full written contract. Verbal assurances or side letters are not binding under Saudi law. In the event of any contract dispute, the Saudi authorities refer to the contract. Since the Saudi sponsor holds the employee's passport and controls the issuance of exit permits, U.S. citizens cannot simply leave Saudi Arabia in the event of a labor or business dispute. A U.S. citizen who breaks an employment or business contract may have to pay substantial penalties before being allowed to leave Saudi Arabia. To change employers in Saudi Arabia requires the written permission of the original sponsoring employer, which is discretionary. Saudi courts take seriously their responsibility to adjudicate disputes. This process, which is performed in accordance with Saudi law and customs, should not be entered into without an Arabic translator, generally takes several months, and may require hiring legal counsel.

Persons involved in legal cases are not permitted to leave the Kingdom until the case has been resolved or abandoned. The U.S. Embassy and U.S. Consulates General cannot adjudicate labor or business disputes or provide translation or legal services. U.S. consular officers can provide lists of local attorneys to help U.S. citizens settle business disputes, but ultimate responsibility for the resolution of disputes through the Saudi legal system lies with the parties involved. For additional information on Saudi labor law, please refer to the [Ministry of Labor's information](#) on related regulations.

Most employers promise to provide tickets home upon completion of a contract; however, in the case of labor dispute, termination or failure to complete a contract, this commitment may not be honored.

Housing

While some employers provide a housing allowance, most schools and institutes provide housing for teachers. This can be an apartment (furnished or unfurnished) or as rudimentary as dormitory accommodations, common at some universities, or in remote villages. Accommodations may be gender segregated. Women may find themselves isolated and unable to move about freely, depending on taxi or employer-provided transportation to grocery stores once a week. It should be noted that in the case of contract dispute or termination, an employee may be quickly evicted from employer-provided housing.

Working Hours

Most schools/institutes require foreign instructors to teach a minimum of six hours per day or longer, five to six days per week. Some English language teachers have complained that expatriate teachers are often required to work longer hours than local national teachers.

Potential Pitfalls

Cultural norms in Saudi Arabia differ vastly from those of the United States. Conservative dress codes are strictly enforced (including wearing of an *abaya* and headcover for women), alcohol and pork products are forbidden, as is gender mixing among individuals who are not immediate relatives. Religious police, commonly known as the "mutawwa" often patrol locations frequented by westerners, in an effort to enforce cultural norms. Women, in particular, can find their freedom of movement and freedom to pursue everyday activities limited.

According to several recruiting companies, incoming English teachers have a 90-day probation window during which time the employee or employer can freely end the working relationship. After the 90 day period elapses, an employee who wishes to quit must provide 30 days' notice. If the employer wishes to dismiss the teacher, it must provide 30 days' payment and a flight home. If the teacher quits, s/he may

be responsible for his/her own ticket home. Many U.S. citizens are unaware that a 90-day probationary period exists and claim this information was not stated in their employment contract.

Holders of single-entry visas must obtain a new visa to return to Saudi Arabia after a trip abroad, including brief visits to neighboring countries. This has caused complications for some teachers when delays in the visa renewal process have prevented them from returning to their positions.

Some teachers are not aware that they may be assigned to work outside Riyadh or Jeddah to a remote location where the local residents are ultra conservative and there are limited opportunities for movement outside the classroom and residence compound.

Other teachers also claim that their passports are retained at a central office in Riyadh, which essentially requires them to seek advance permission in order to travel abroad.

How the Embassy Can Help

The Embassy, by regulation, cannot enter into any civil case, conduct any investigation, or act as a lawyer for any personal mishap or employment dispute experienced by a U.S. citizen. We cannot investigate, certify, or vouch for employers. It is up to each individual to evaluate an employer before signing a contract, and to use common sense when traveling this far, including keeping sufficient funds available to return home should the situation become untenable.

If you find yourself in need of legal help, the Embassy can provide a [list of attorneys](#); however, we are unable to recommend any specific lawyer from this list.

We encourage all U.S. citizens to [register](#) with the Embassy via the Smart Traveler Enrolment Program (STEP). Registration allows us to contact you in the event of a family emergency.

We hope that this information has been useful. If you have any problems, please contact the American Citizen Services branch at the U.S. Embassy, Diplomatic Quarters, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia or the Consulates General in Dhahran or Jeddah.

U.S. Embassy Riyadh
Telephone: (966) (1) 488-3800
Fax: (966) (1) 483-0773
e-mail: RiyadhACS@state.gov

US Consulate General Dhahran
Telephone: (966) (3) 330-3200
Fax: (966)(3) 330-6816
e-mail: DhahranACS@state.gov

U.S. Consulate General Jeddah
Telephone: (966) (2) 667-0080
Fax: (966)(2) 669-3098
e-mail: JeddahACS@state.gov

Please visit our website (<http://riyadh.usembassy.gov/service/hours-and-contact.html>) for appointment information and public service hours.

Other Sources of Information

These links are intended for general informational purposes only; the information on these web sites does not reflect the views of the U.S. government, nor is it an endorsement of any organization listed therein.

<http://www.saudiembassy.net/>

http://www.1001arabian.net/saudi_arabia/saudi_arabia_info.htm

<http://www.teachaway.com/teaching-english-saudi-arabia/>

http://www.eslfocus.com/articles/teaching_english_in_saudi_arabia-508.html

<http://www.footprintsrecruiting.com/teaching-in-saudi-arabia/790-women-in-saudi-arabia>