

Women's Solar Seminar presentation

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Before I talk specifically about the solar industry in Saudi Arabia, I want to tell you a little about my country. Saudi Arabia is the largest Arab state in Western Asia. It makes up the most of the Arabian Peninsula and has about twenty million citizens. In addition, we have approximately eight million expatriate workers, which is creating challenges for our economy that I'll touch on later.

Saudi Arabia is more diverse than most Westerners realize. Everybody knows we have deserts, but we also have mountains, and in some places we even have *snow*. And just like any other country, each region has its own unique culture. For example, I come from the Western region, where people are totally different from people in the Central region.

We have a lot of different ethnic backgrounds. To say that all Saudis are exactly alike is like saying that New Yorkers are just like people from Dallas, Texas or Orange County, California. If you visit, don't be surprised if you see a lady who looks Chinese but speaks only Arabic. Her ethnic background may be Chinese, but that's it—she's Saudi.

Another thing everybody knows about Saudi Arabia is that we have the second-largest oil reserves in the world. Today our oil industry supplies about one-fifth of all the world's oil. That accounts for more than ninety-five percent of our exports and seventy percent of the government's revenue. Oil has made us a wealthy country, but there's a growing awareness that it's not going to be sustainable for us over time. The government is working to promote the development of the private sector, and power generation is one of its top priorities. In many ways, Saudi Arabia today is a country in transition, and that's having a big effect on both women and the solar industry.

Now to be honest, I'm a bit of a weirdo among Saudi ladies. The majority of us are more shy than Western women. Our role in society is evolving, much as it did in the West, but the changes are happening in a way that reflects our culture. And I'll be frank—a lot of men in Saudi Arabia still expect women to focus on taking care of the children. Imagine the West in the 1950s and you'll have a pretty good idea of the stage we're going through right now.

It's also important to understand that some women don't want to interact with men in the workplace. Because of their cultural background, they often feel more comfortable working in their own private offices instead of what we call a "mixed environment." At the same time, there is a small but growing group of women who are more liberal in the Western sense who are looking for greater challenges.

Many Western people think that Saudi women have no rights, but there are actually a lot of benefits of being a woman in Saudi Arabia. For example, by law no company can force a woman to work after six o'clock or in harsh environments unless she's okay with it. We have no trouble getting maternity leave or nursing hours.

Ten to fifteen years ago, most employment opportunities for Saudi women were in education and healthcare, but nowadays it's much more common to see women working in all different fields. There are no real restrictions for private companies any more as long as they follow the cultural

rules. If a woman has the qualifications she needs or if a company is willing to provide on-the-job training, the government is happy for her to work.

As I mentioned earlier, there are currently eight million expat workers living in Saudi Arabia. Since our government doesn't allow them to become permanent residents, they are typically replaced on a regular basis by others from outside the country. In recent years the government has introduced incentives designed to encourage the private sector to hire and train more local workers, especially women. For example, our Ministry of Labor gives benefits to companies that maintain a certain ratio between Saudi residents and foreign workers.

For the purpose of these calculations, they give companies two points for hiring a Saudi lady compared to one point for hiring a Saudi man. Virtual technologies are opening up more opportunities as well, since it allows women to work from home and saves money. It also gives companies the option to hire more women as part-timers.

Women who have backgrounds in engineering, solar, or even renewable energy are "rare currency" as we call them. That's not because of any kind of government restriction, but because opportunities in the solar industry are just emerging for both women and men. Until now, there simply haven't been many local jobs in solar, but we expect that to change as our solar industry starts to grow. Saudi universities are just beginning to offer programs in solar and there are encouraging signs that other institutions will soon offer high-level solar programs in the near future. At the moment, however, most Saudi ladies who want to specialize in solar and renewable energy or to train as engineers get a scholarship from the United States, Canada, or even Japan.

Solar power isn't new to Saudi Arabia. We've always been a country that has enjoyed energy advantages, both from fossil fuels like oil and natural gas, and from the year-round sunshine that creates such abundant potential for solar. But until recently, fossil fuels were so plentiful and cost-effective that it didn't seem economical to pursue alternative energy.

What's changed in the last few years is that we're approaching a historic turning point. Saudi Arabia's domestic oil and gas consumption was twenty-four percent of production in the year 2000. By 2010 it had grown to thirty-five percent, and if current trends continue with no change, experts estimate it will reach sixty percent by the year 2030, even if current oil production nearly doubles. If Saudi Arabia continues to rely solely on oil and gas for power production, it could potentially require us to become a net *importer* of oil in the next fifteen to twenty years. What's more, while the price of crude oil is expected to continue increasing over time, the cost of utility-scale solar power has been declining. All of these factors are creating a great deal of support for solar energy, both from our government and from international companies.

One of the most significant was a royal decree issued on seventeen April, 2010, calling for the creation of a sustainable city: King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy, or "K.A. Care" for short. The initial phase of the K.A. Care project includes plans to develop sixteen gigawatts of photovoltaic capacity, and to become the world's largest concentrated solar power market with a target capacity of twenty-five gigawatts by 2032. In short, we're hoping to become the Saudi Arabia of solar power! In February of this year, the government released a draft of the white paper that will officially launch the first round of solar IPP tenders, which is anticipated later this year.

Thanks to the K.A. Care program, Saudi Arabia has become the most promising market for solar power in what we call the “MENA” region, which stands for “Middle East and North Africa.” Multinational companies are already showing a great deal of interest—the draft white paper received more than a thousand comments and inquiries.

Our hope is that many of these companies will soon come to Saudi Arabia to help us lay the foundation for a strong solar industry, with opportunities for both women and men.

My organization, the Saudi Arabia Solar Industry Association, or SASIA for short, was created to help make both of these visions a reality.

SASIA is a non-governmental organization dedicated to helping Saudi Arabia and the Middle East realize the full economic and environmental potential of solar energy. Our goal is to bring the national and regional solar industry together, transforming the vast solar potential of Saudi Arabia and the Middle East into a commercially- and environmentally-viable solution for our growing demand for electricity.

SASIA offers its members services such as educational workshops, networking functions, and special reports on breakthrough solar innovations. We provide assistance to international companies seeking to expand solar operations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. The association is currently working on initiatives to bring together leaders from the policy sector, academia, and the private sector. We also publish the **MENA Solar Brief**, a free monthly electronic publication that goes out to more than three thousand two hundred readers active in Middle East renewable energy.

SASIA was officially launched with membership in January of this year, and I was one of the first people hired. As an organization we are fully embracing the opportunities for women who want to participate in the solar industry, and we are here to facilitate that in any way we can. We run two networking groups on LinkedIn, one of which is specifically designed to help women connect with the industry. We want SASIA to provide opportunities for Saudi women. At the same time, we also want SASIA to be connected to the world. I encourage you to help us achieve both goals by becoming participants in our LinkedIn groups, and by visiting our website at www.saudi-sia.com.