

Through The Eyes Of Islam

■ Tribal member Sarah Mohammed Farlow became a Muslim in 1989 and calls the United Arab Emirates home.

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Either way, the *Qu'ran* and the *Sunnah* have cultivated a remarkable brand of faith in Sarah Mohammed Farlow, one that has never relented in purpose, even in the wake of her divorce with Fitaihi in 1993. Even after another marriage in 1995 that sadly ended four years later, Farlow remains unshakable.

The *Hajj* (trip) last year to Mecca probably only further cemented her devotion.

"Yes! Yes! Yes! I went," was her response when asked whether she had engaged in the Fifth Pillar of Islam, the obligatory pilgrimage to the sacred city in Saudi Arabia?

"Oh my God, my God, my God." A glazed look seeped over her eyes, which stared into nowhere, while she recounted her experience.

"When we went there, I just started crying," she said. "The experience, I can't...things are unbelievable.

"We did the *to'af* (walk) around the *Ka'bah*," she continued, in reference to the enormous black cube that pilgrims are required to circle seven times. "I thought: 'we're followers, we're obeying again.'"

Ironically, the *Hajj* demands uniformity and both men and women opt for simple white gowns. Many women opt not to wear their traditional veils and gloves, the belief being that everyone is equal in the eyes of Allah.

Tolerance, in actuality, is a virtue espoused expressly by the *Qu'ran*, which makes the friction that Muslims invariably encounter with other faiths all the more confusing.

"God forbids you not, with regards to those who fight you not for (your) faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them; for God loveth those who are just" reads the *Qu'ran* in its 60th *Sura* (chapter). Likewise Muhammad himself expressed "there is a reward for kindness to every living thing."

The view of Islam as a tolerant religion, however, is in a severe minority in this country, particularly in light of what is known about the Taliban, a Muslim government in Afghanistan which forces women into subservience, often through violent means.

"In Islam, the man and the woman are equal," she said. "But the man has his jobs and the woman has hers. Women are allowed to do lots of things, but they choose not to.

"How did that (the Taliban) come about? I don't know," admitted Farlow. "They live in such a different world over there."

Different, indeed, because the Islam that Farlow has known not only condones respectful treatment of women, but peace on the domestic and inter-governmental front. Yet the Muslims seen everyday on television and in newspapers are not of that variety.

"What I want people to understand is that Islam is not about hurting people," she said. "Jihad, the understanding is...I mean you just can't start a fight and call it Jihad."

A Jihad, however, is almost exactly what many Muslims in the Middle East find themselves involved in these days, especially following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Being Muslim, Farlow told me she understood both sides.

Like many others, Farlow also suspects that what happens to suspected terrorist leader Osama bin Laden will not mark the end of anti-U.S. sentiment in the Middle East. Rather, she said, as long as Americans remain uneducated and apathetic about U.S. influence in the Middle East and refuse to accept responsibility for the hand the country has played in creating instability throughout the region, the war between Islam and America will continue.

"They're (middle easterners) tired of Palestinians getting killed," she continued. "They want to know, why aren't the Americans helping them.

"Since I was little my mom was always telling me I was trying to belong somewhere. Now I do."
~ Tribal member Sarah Farlow

17 Degrees Towards Mecca — This mosque, the Salman Al-Farisi Islamic Center, in Corvallis is one of the many places Muslims practice their religion in the United States. The mosque is constructed 17 degrees unparallel to the street so its eastern wall will face Mecca — the center of the Islamic world.

Palestinians are poor. People should stop and think about that."

Farlow said that by supporting one side, America has earned the enmity of the other. "It's a bad thing, cause a lot of innocent people are dying.

"When I went there, they thought all Americans were bad," she said. "What they saw on Arabic TV was American women standing on street corners. And so they thought all women are standing on street corners here."

Just the same as Farlow must explain to Americans the true nature of Islam, conversely she must explain to Muslims how people in the United States really are.

"We, American Muslims, who go back and forth, must do the same thing every time," she said. "We tell them (Americans about Muslims and Muslims about Americans) 'they are not all bad. It's not like that.'"

Farlow, like many other Muslims, has found herself on the defensive quite often while visiting the U.S., enough at least to warrant an eagerness to return to the Emirates. One of her friends, Ali Nikoukar, an Iranian immigrant and a founder of the *Salman Al-Farisi Islamic Center* in Corvallis, was helpful enough to invite me to Friday prayer (Fridays are the holy days in Islam).

The Mosque, in true Muslim fashion, segregates worshippers by gender. Its walls don't line up with the road or sidewalk because as a rule, the eastern wall of a Mosque must face Mecca, the direction Muslims pray in five times per day. Thus the building is 17 degrees unparallel to the street.

While photographing the Mosque, one member approached me with a rather dubious look in his eye.

"What are you doing?" he asked, though not in a threatening manner.

I explained the story about Sarah Farlow, and how we thought having a Muslim Tribal member was a unique story and a rare opportunity to have Islam explained. He nodded and told me this was good, since he felt most papers were offering very one-sided interpretations of Islam, especially since September 11.

"I think it is a great thing you do then," he said and shook my hand and walked off.

Nikoukar experienced his own discomfort following September 11. According to Nikoukar, a reporter from the *Statesman Journal*, evidently of Jewish faith, called up his home and "gave my wife a bad time." She was able to soothe the enraged writer, and ultimately it would result in a story defending Islam, as published soon thereafter. But it was also, like some of Farlow's experiences, a prime example of how alienated some Muslims have felt since those attacks.

And Nikoukar, also like Farlow, sees no link between the real practice of Islam and terrorism.

When asked about the possible reason behind the attacks, he merely shrugged.

"I cannot say what their reasons are. I believe the bombing of Iraq, for example. Maybe it was their idea to show 'America, how does it feel? This stuff can happen to you,'" he said. "It is an eye-opener for America. It can happen

here... innocents are killed."

And once again like Farlow, Nikoukar wouldn't rule out the possibility that the attacks were a long, winding and indirect result of U.S. foreign policy.

"Look at Osama bin Laden. He's our baby. We educated him, we supported him when Russia and Afghanistan went to war," he said, but quickly pointed out that such would still not justify September 11. "If he is responsible for this, then nobody will respect him. That is not Islam."

Men like bin Laden, he told me; only further kicking dirt on the reputation of Islam, especially in the U.S., where a positive depiction of Muslims is virtually unheard of.

"Yes, I think you, the media, do not help much," he said. "You never read in the newspaper 'Ah, a Muslim did great things!'"

And the killing of innocents, and more importantly suicide, are actions not condoned by any serious Muslim.

"I suppose people attach their causes to religion," he said. "How does that compare with Christian abortion bombers? When they attach to a religion they can always drive farther."

And suicide? Nikoukar and Farlow shared the same opinion: that no respectful Muslim would ever think of it.

"There is no suicide in Islam," Farlow pointed out. "When Judgment Day comes, that person will relive their suicide for eternity. And when you kill innocents, you are accountable for the victims.

"That's not Islam," she added. ■

Farlow returned to UAE October 26. She wanted to be back in time for Ramadan; the Muslim holy month when during daylight hours they abstain from eating or drinking. Such a strict dietary regimen would presumably wear down even the most devout of followers, but Farlow, like others, claims she actually looks forward to it. Ramadan is not only a time of physical restraint but emotional as well — no arguing, no backbiting, no sex, no bad deeds — nothing impure. Ramadan lasts more than four weeks.

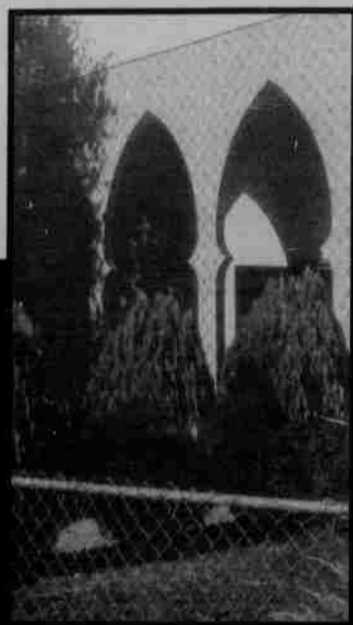
In the Emirates, Farlow works for a charity organization, primarily helping the poor and homeless. Chris (Muhammad) provided her very first grandson, Zubair, named after a great warrior and companion of Muhammad. Farlow found it ironic that her faith and ethnicity shared a common cause — land.

"We grow up and hear 'the white man this' and 'the white man that,' and I look and say, 'can't you see?' We have been fighting for the same thing, for so long," she said. "It's a matter of land being taken away. We, Indians and Muslims, have land we'll never see again."

But in Islam, she told me, one accepts fate, because Allah has preordained everything.

"Whatever happens to you, everything is written," she said. "We shouldn't ask why."

"*Ma sha' Allah*," she said, which usually translates as 'Allah has willed it.' ■



Photos by Chris Mercier