Seeing Saudi Changes Up Close: A Week's Worth of Surprises

by David Pollock **(/experts/david-pollock)**

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Brief Analysis

The Saudi kingdom's grinding proxy war against Iran and its allies in Yemen, its long-delayed decision to grant women the right to drive, and most recently its bizarre feud with Canada over arrested Saudi dissidents have all captured international attention and propelled much heated discussion about the country's internal affairs. But despite its place in the spotlight, there is much about the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia one doesn't often hear about. Last month, I was invited to participate in a conference concerning the future of Syria hosted by a new, unofficial research institute in Riyadh. During my visit, I was able to get a glimpse into the Saudi social landscape and found that Saudi society is not only more diverse than it may seem on the outside, but also much less culturally conservative than it once was.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that this transformation is social rather than political. In other words, while the Saudi monarchy is allowing, and even promoting, the expansion of some personal freedoms in the kingdom, political freedom remains absent. When I first visited the country twenty-five years ago, the government's slogan (believe it or not) was "Saudi Arabia: Progress without Change." Nowadays, an apt slogan might be "Saudi Arabia: Liberalization without Democracy." The nature of this liberalization in selected spheres of life, still uncertain in its total trajectory, is illustrated in some vignettes from my visit below.

SOCIAL DIVERSITY MORE ACCEPTED

For many years, Saudi leadership toiled to present an image of the kingdom as a religious and ideological monolith. However, my conversations indicate that this is no longer the case. "We're not all Wahhabis," joked my host, a young scholar at the small, serious new think-tank specializing in social and political research and dialogue. We were discussing an initiative to integrate Saudi Shia—who mostly reside in the country's eastern province—into mainstream Saudi society.

Saudis from different regions may now differ more freely not only in their religious beliefs but also in their views on other issues, including geopolitics. For example, I was told that in the country's western and southern regions, whose residents come into contact with Yemenis rather frequently, there is greater sympathy for Yemen and

concern for civilian casualties there than in other parts of Saudi Arabia. And I saw for myself that Saudis today openly debate the pros and cons of closer cooperation with Israel against Iran (more on this in a later post).

The unexpected diversity of Saudi society extends to more mundane matters as well. One day when it was 115 degrees but bone dry in Riyadh, one of my new Saudi friends showed me a realtime phone video of his hometown of Abha in the south. I marveled to watch a cloudy, chilly rainstorm sweep across the green mountains there, even as we sweltered in the dusty sandstorms of the central Saudi desert. And one middle-aged Saudi scholar told me this, in a tone of mixed wonder, disgust, and grudging acceptance: "My daughter has a dog!"

RELIGIOUS RELAXATION

The acknowledgement of diversity within the Saudi public goes hand in hand with a certain degree of religious liberalization. Neither Saudi authorities nor Saudi public life are now as fundamentalist as they appeared to be just a few years ago. This goes beyond the slow process of allowing more women to drive—still very rare, from what I or my Saudi acquaintances have experienced—or the opening of a few AMC movie theaters in Riyadh.

Indeed, whereas only a few years ago every meeting I attended and each television interview I participated in featured Saudi speakers starting their remarks with the phrase "*bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*" (in the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful), during my current visit only one speaker began in that way. The decline in Saudis' strict public religious adherence became even more obvious when, while walking around the streets of Riyadh, I noticed that there was little change in people's behavior during prayer times: stores and restaurants remained open, and passersby did not stop their conversations. This was a far cry from just a few years ago, when the country would come to a standstill five times a day.

But the most shockingly vivid evidence I found for the erosion of Saudis' extreme public piety was graffiti I spotted in al-Uyayna, a small town about an hour outside Riyadh—and the reputed birthplace of Wahhabism's founder Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab. Inside the very ruins of his ancestral home, sprayed on a wall in gigantic black letters visible for all to see, was this line (translated from the Arabic): "And I was the one who had lost my heart on your breast the last time we were entwined together here."

This message made me ask about the possibility of a fundamentalist backlash. Not to worry, my young Saudi colleagues replied. Extremists exist, but they are now scattered, unpopular, and afraid. The religious police have been severely reined in; the clerical establishment mostly coopted; and the hardline dissidents dismissed, blocked from social media, or even imprisoned in a few cases. They insisted that even al-Qassim, a former hotbed of religious reaction, has been neutralized. I could not verify their assertions, but neither did I see any evidence to contradict them.

What I could directly sense is that as Saudi society moves away from "Islamic puritanism," new attitudes, priorities, opportunities, and customs are arising. Over the past decade, for instance, more Saudis have begun to take an interest in the country's national, rather than purely religious, history. Celebrating the nation's past, authorities have completely renovated Saudi Arabia's former capital Dariyah, as well as the historic al-Masmak fort in downtown Riyadh, which previously languished in ruins.

SEXUAL STEREOTYPES SOFTENING SOMEWHAT

And while authorities are rediscovering Saudi Arabia's past, Saudi women are moving forward. Whereas a few years ago only non-Saudi men worked at hotel or business lobbies and reception desks, nowadays these jobs are filled by Saudi women, many of whom are fluent in English and comfortable interacting with members of the opposite sex. I was momentarily taken aback when one such woman, completely clothed up to her eyes in a black *niqab*, concluded her business with me by saying, with a laugh and a noticeable wink, "and by the way, I like your tie!"

Indeed, almost all the Saudi women I saw in public are still fully covered. Yet one Syrian woman in our little group went about formal meetings, hotel lobbies, and even on the street without even a headscarf, with nary a hostile word or glance from anyone else. This would probably not have happened until very recently.

Among certain circles there may even be a growing tolerance towards the LGBTQ community. During the conference, a member of the Majlis al-Shura told me that after he had told his ten-year-old son that a character in his video game seemed gay, the child turned to him and asked, “Dad, how can you be so homophobic?”

“LIBERAL AUTOCRACY”

According to many of the people I spoke to, these cultural shifts are the types of changes the Saudi public wants to see. Young Saudis are mostly interested in reforms to their lifestyle and are willing to forgo political freedoms in order to achieve that end. “None of this,” one of my newfound Saudi acquaintances asserted approvingly, “would be happening if not for the new Crown Prince. And we support him.” All around him, a group of ten or so Saudi male professionals of various ages nodded in agreement. On his part, Mohammad bin Salman is open to reform, so long as he has complete control over it. Public criticism or just advocacy—whether for or against reform—can be harshly punished with loss of job, exile, or prison. Saudi women may now have the right to drive, but a few of those who lobbied for it have been arrested.

One senior Saudi media executive I spoke with illustrated the point by noting that he had personally been questioned several times by various internal security and other officials about his relatively freewheeling coverage and commentary. “I can criticize corruption in the Ministry of Health, but the Ministry of Defense is a different matter.” “Anyway,” he added, “most Saudis believe there’s much less corruption there now.”

Indeed, the official crackdown on corruption, arbitrary though it may be, appears to have significant popular support. A typical comment I heard was, “the rich guys detained at the Ritz deserved it; all they had to do was give up forty years of ill-gotten gains.” And the Saudi government, always intent on social stability even amid significant changes, keeps close private tabs on such sentiments—as the next post from this visit will explore in detail. ❖

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