

Is Saudi Arabia Really Changing?

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Articles & Testimony

A woman's right to drive has much to say about the influence of the kingdom's hardline clerics and the prospects for deep, lasting reform.

Tuesday's announcement that women in Saudi Arabia will be allowed to drive is extraordinary both in social and political terms. There is also an important economic dimension: Currently, an estimated one million foreign men, mainly from the South Asia and the Philippines, are employed as [drivers](#) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-arabias-debate-on-women-driving-masks-a-deeper-divide>) for Saudi families. Now, many will no longer be needed.

Perhaps anticipating yesterday's news, last week a Saudi cleric said that the ban on women driving should [remain](#) (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-woman-driving-ban-remain-lack-intellect-men-sexism-sheikh-saad-al-hajari-islamic-leader-a7960501.html>) in place. He argued that women had only half the brainpower of men; when they went shopping, it was reduced to a quarter, he said. The uproar was instantaneous. The cleric was banned from preaching, though he probably still remains on the government payroll.

Saudi society traditionally venerates age and at least publicly respects Islamic preachers. But all this might be changing. The decision to remove the ban was nominally King Salman's, but it is clear the driving force was his son, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. The 32-year-old wunderkind is trying to transform the kingdom's economy. His [Vision 2030](#) (<http://vision2030.gov.sa/en>), a grand plan announced last year to bring the Saudi economy and society into the 21st century, envisages an economy with a broader industrial base less tied to oil. He also has a much less conservative view of social mores. Authorities allowed women to attend a [celebration](#) (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-09-24/saudi-women-seated-in-stadium-for-first-time-at-anniversary-gala>) of Saudi Arabia's Independence Day in a sports stadium this week. Part of his economic plan involves the development of tourist resorts along the Red Sea coast, a paradise for divers. The facilities will be built to

"international standards," a term **widely interpreted (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/02/saudi-arabia-open-luxury-beach-resort-women-can-wear-bikinis/>)** as allowing not only gender-mixed bathing, but also bikinis and probably alcohol.

"Change" is a word used cautiously in the kingdom. In the past, any hint of progress has been covered by the word "reform." Letting women drive clearly breaks this template, raising the question of whether the new policy will succeed.

In reality, the driving ban has never been enforced 100 percent. Out in rural Saudi Arabia, tribal women have been driving for decades to look after animals and perform other farm chores. In the cities, expatriate compounds where many foreigners live have allowed women to drive, safe in the knowledge that the Saudi police, or worse still the religious police, are not allowed inside the gates. Saudi Aramco, the state oil company, has allowed women drivers inside its "little America"-style townships since the days when it was owned by American oil companies.

The credit for the breakthrough may go to the crown prince, or MbS as he is known, but the ground has been well-prepared. Brave Saudi women have been tempting arrest in organized group protests since **at least (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/ap-was-there-saudi-women-protest-driving-ban-in-1990/2017/09/27/dfb28e2a-a355-11e7-b573-8ec86cdf1ed_story.html?utm_term=.6ab3cfaf50c)** the 1990s. In 2005, it was once again a live issue when Barbara Walters interviewed King Abdullah. "In time, I believe it will be possible. And I believe patience is a virtue," he **said (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-arabias-debate-on-women-driving-masks-a-deeper-divide>)**. The brake at that time was identified as the now-dead Prince Nayef, then Abdullah's interior minister and rival, who notoriously **alleged (<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/17/world/middleeast/saudi-crown-prince-nayef-dies-led-crackdown-on-al-qaeda.html>)** that Jews had perpetrated the 9/11 attacks. Abdullah's daughter, Princess Adela, was known to support women driving.

The question now is whether the royal family will follow through on its decision. It will be several months before women actually start driving legally. They will have to apply for licenses and then, presumably, take driving lessons. Perhaps they will need women traffic police as well. Other details beg for clarity. Will women need the permission of a male relative to obtain a license? (Saudi ambassador to Washington Prince Khaled bin Salman **said (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-women-drive.html?mcubz=0&r=0>)** yesterday they would not.) Will women be allowed to drive with a male non-relative in the same vehicle? Can women be prepared to wait?

In the wider social-cum-political sphere, this measure further reduces the authority of the conservative clerics who have an institutionalized but increasingly threatened status. It also erodes the traditional social structure where the leadership of the family is held by old men. It is one thing for the word of the father or grandfather to be challenged by women in the privacy of the home. It is quite another for him to be perceived as lacking the family's total respect outside his house.

The emerging style of MbS's leadership is a combination of energy, forthrightness, and flamboyance. It is audacious to the point of dangerous. As a newly appointed defense minister in 2015, he was the architect of the war in Yemen. A few months later, after being elevated to deputy crown prince, he announced Vision 2030 and the more short-term National Transformation Plan. This summer saw the diplomatic rift with Qatar, when both the kingdom and its ally, the United Arab Emirates, finally became exasperated with their neighbor's diplomatic individualism.

Yet Yemen is now a quagmire and the NTP is being adjusted after its targets were admitted to be too **ambitious (<https://www.cnbc.com/2017/09/07/saudi-arabia-is-reportedly-revising-its-ambitious-plans-to-change-its-economy.html>)**, and the crisis with Qatar is at a stalemate. Under the circumstances, what are the chances that the women-driving initiative goes smoothly?

Once, Saudi Arabia could have been described as a coalition between the House of Saud and the Wahhabi clerical establishment. Their alliance dates back to 1745 when a tribal chief, Muhammad bin Saud, bonded with a preacher named Muhammad bin Abdulwahab, and decided to combine fighting prowess and religious zeal to conquer and purify Arabia. The influence of the clerics has waned over the years, but Saudi royals still know that their role as custodians of the two holy places of Mecca and Medina is much more important than leading the Arab world or being a major oil exporter. Hence the enormous effort to make sure the annual pilgrimage, the *haj*, when millions of Muslims flock to the kingdom, goes smoothly.

Tangential clerics learned they were not immune from official sanction when several were arrested earlier this month for being less than fully supportive of the anti-Qatar **policy** (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/15/saudi-arabia-prominent-clerics-arrested>). The clerical establishment has been hesitant to show any criticism of King Salman and MbS, perhaps waiting for some political crisis or setback which would enable them to argue along the lines of "we told you so."

A woman's right to drive may seem trivial to the rest of the world. But to Saudi Arabia, juggling economic change while oil prices are weak, along with diplomatic problems in Yemen and with Qatar, it may herald national transformation. Or it may be the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the [Atlantic website](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/saudi-arabia-women-driving-reform/541218/)

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