Twitter and the Saudi Campaign to Preserve Male Guardianship Over Women

by **Kendall Bianchi (/experts/kendall-bianchi)**

Jan 13, 2017
Also available in
العربية (/ar/policy-analysis/twytr-walhmlt-alswdyt-llhfaz-ly-wlayt-alrjal-ly-alnsa)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kendall Bianchi (/experts/kendall-bianchi)
Kendall Bianchi is a research assistant in the Military and Security Studies Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Brief Analysis

The New York Times this fall published an article entitled "'I Live in a Lie': Saudi Women Speak Up." The piece portrays life as a Saudi woman living under a system that forbids women from basic pursuits such as traveling, attending college, and accessing health care without the permission of a male relative, known as a guardian. "It's suffocating. I'd rather kill myself than live with it," the article quotes one woman saying; "It's like I'm in handcuffs," says another.

The Times article exemplified a larger wave of Western attention surrounding the Saudi campaign to end male guardianship over women. Recently, Arabic-language "hashtags" translating to #SaudiWomenWantToEndGuardianship and #TogetherToEndMaleGuardianshipOverWomen have proliferated on Twitter; meanwhile, in September, nearly 15,000 Saudi women signed a petition to the king calling for the end of guardianship. The movement sparked the attention of Western media, with outlets like CNN, The Wall Street Journal, and BBC covering the story. Western support for the campaign has also included English-language Twitter hashtag campaigns like #StopEnslavingSaudiWomen and #IAmMyOwnGuardian.

While support for Saudi feminism is clearly welcome, many Western voices paint an incomplete picture of the dialogue surrounding male guardianship in Saudi Arabia. These critics - not always, but usually - present only one side of the story: that of women who oppose the system. Dialogue among Saudis on social media, however, suggests that these simplistic portrayals obscure a complicated reality. This article examines the two primary pro-guardianship arguments in Saudi Arabia, through a snapshot of Arabic Twitter discourse on the topic. Both men and women propagate these arguments, which resonate in Saudi society to a degree that many Westerners fail to comprehend. The first narrative ties the anti-guardianship campaign to foreign conspirators aiming to dismantle Saudi society; the second turns the Western narrative on its head by depicting guardianship as a woman's right, protecting her from an array of financial and familial burdens. Through an examination of popular sentiment, this piece seeks not to legitimize guardianship, but rather to shed light on the formidable social barriers that stand in the way of abolishing it.

The Hidden Hand

Saudis on Twitter and elsewhere often portray the anti-guardianship cause as a Western conspiracy to destroy Saudi

society and the state. One popular Arabic hashtag translates directly to #AbolishingGuardianshipIsAForeignPlot; users tweeting under the hashtag claim that "[foreign conspirators] aim to strip our society of Islam" and that the West sees the campaign against guardianship as a method of "imposing Westernization upon us." In a recent voice recording in Arabic of a woman claiming to be Rowdha Yousef, one of 16 women behind the counter-campaign "My Guardian Knows What's Best for Me," she pleads with Saudis: "Believe me, the campaign to end guardianship will herald the end of our society more generally… When I met with the liberals, they told me that their goal was to eliminate guardianship within families as a way to subvert society, and in turn, topple the state."

Other Twitter users have attempted to tarnish the campaign by tying it to atheists, Zionists, and other reviled groups in Saudi society. "Looking at the accounts of [those calling to end male guardianship], atheism and moral deviance are clearly present among them," said one. Another tweeting under the "foreign plot" hashtag argues that "the Zionist and Iranian lobbies failed to destroy us politically and militarily, so they have infiltrated our society in order to dismantle it from the inside." Much discourse also centers around activist and self-described atheist Isaac Cohen, who regularly tweets against guardianship and Saudi Arabia generally. One Saudi Twitter user in November lamented that "the Atheist Cohen" wants to "corrupt women's minds and create problems between families"; another posted an illustration of provocatively-dressed women surrounding an image of Cohen's face with the Arabic caption "these women are willing to obey the Jew Cohen, but not their fathers, brothers, and husbands." Large numbers of users have also tweeted under a hashtag translating to #SaudiWomenAgainstMissCohen, an attempt to smear Cohen's name by effeminizing him.

Although some observers might dismiss these conversations as harmless conspiracy theories, the unfortunate reality is that accusations of foreign plots resonate extremely well in a society that sees itself as constantly subject to harmful foreign meddling. Moreover, given the vital role of the family as the basic unit of society, activists seeking to alter family structures are particularly vulnerable to portrayal as enemies of the state itself. Because these ideas constitute powerful forms of delegitimization in Saudi discourse, foreign activists should be aware that certain actions could unintentionally undermine the legitimacy of local activist efforts.

The Guardian's Burden

The other prominent argument against the campaign to end male guardianship is the idea that guardianship itself constitutes a woman's right. Here, it is useful to understand the difference between Western and Saudi concepts of equal rights. While Western feminists seek to achieve the same legal and social rights for men and women, the Saudi framework tends to view equal rights as an exchange, whereby women sacrifice certain aspects of freedom in exchange for men's assumption of burdens like providing for the family and child support in case of divorce (see, for example, the results of a 2010 Gallup poll of Saudi residents). It is this freedom from financial burdens that many Saudis view as a woman's right, compensating for her lack of freedom in other domains.

Indeed, an implicit yet key aspect of the guardianship system is the man's responsibility to protect and provide for his wife and children. Mohamed Alarefe, a prominent Saudi Muslim scholar with the largest number of Twitter followers in the Arab world at over 16 million, has argued that Qawama (the Quranic concept often used to justify guardianship) is not an honor for a man--but rather a burden, since it requires him to be responsible for his family. From this perspective, we can see how portrayals of male guardianship as a woman's right, while antithetical to Western standards of feminism, hold considerable sway in Saudi Arabia. Many Saudi women have expressed their support for what the system offers. "As a Saudi woman, I demand to have a guardian," said one interviewee in a 2010 New York Times article; another woman was quoted as saying, "If you want stability and safety in your life, if you want a husband who takes care of you, you won't find it except in Islam."

Discourse on Twitter echoes this sentiment. One popular Arabic hashtag, for instance, translates to #GuardianshipIsForHerNotAgainstHer. "In Europe, most converts to Islam are women who realize that Islam

requires men to protect and provide for her," argues one female user. According to another, "Guardianship benefits a woman by providing her with a way to preserve her religious commitment, her lineage, and her honor." In the purview of many Saudis, the guardianship system not only provides for women financially but also protects them from strange men seeking access to them: "Guardianship prevents men from approaching strange women--that's why they want to abolish it!" says one female Twitter user, echoing a widely-circulated quote attributed to Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef: "Those calling for women's freedom don't want to liberate women--rather, they want access to them."

One cannot dismiss the possibility that some of these Tweets and hashtags were in fact organized by religious and political authorities seeking to shape public discourse through a covert social media campaign. Indeed, the Saudi government has in the past created fake automated Twitter accounts to demonize Iran and Shia opposition and glorify the Saudi regime. A cursory glance at the conversation, however, suggests that the pro-guardianship campaign reflects genuine popular sentiment rather than government infiltration. Most of the accounts tweeting under pro-guardianship hashtags were created well before the peak of the campaign in the fall of 2016; furthermore, there seem to be relatively few "recycled tweets," a tell-tale sign of automation.

None of this is to say that public support somehow justifies male guardianship; undoubtedly, the system exacerbates problems of abuse, sexual assault, unequal opportunity, and other atrocities against women. They do, however, illustrate the fact that even in the face of gradual reform, male guardianship is entrenched within Saudi society on a deeper level than what many Westerners acknowledge. Despite the official removal of laws requiring a guardian's permission for women to work outside the home, for instance, many employers continue to seek such approval. More generally, even a clear economic need for fewer restrictions on women's activities does not mean that change will be rapid, or even linear. So although many Saudi feminist activists readily cooperate with Western allies and benefit from their pledges of support, these Westerners should avoid falling into the trap of thinking that speaking out on behalf of Saudi women will in itself solve the problem. Westerners must also resist the temptation to treat Saudi women as a homogenous bloc that uniformly opposes male guardianship; just because a woman wants access to healthcare and education, does not mean that she necessarily supports abolishing guardianship as the best way to achieve those things. These realities demand a re-examination of Western efforts to aid Saudi feminist activism. Assistance is necessary, but so is a critical evaluation of the approach. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022

◆

Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)