

# The Saudi Women's Driving Campaign in Perspective

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Brief Analysis

## Turnout for the Saudi women drivers demonstration planned for late October will help gauge public interest in mobilizing for reforms in the kingdom.

On October 26, Saudi women are expected to answer their sisters' call to support women's driving rights by driving cars in the kingdom -- an act that can lead to detention, a fine, and in the worst case scenario, imprisonment. The campaign has garnered significant support on the internet, with an online petition attracting approximately 15,000 signatures in three weeks. Still, it's unclear if the actual demonstration will attract only dozens of participants like a similar campaign in June 2011, or if it will draw larger numbers due to an appetite among Saudis to mobilize for change, as reflected in social media forums.

## CAMPAIGN ORIGINS

The Saudi ban on women drivers forces women to rely on their husbands, brothers, fathers, sons, and hired male help to take their children to school, run basic errands, and travel to and from jobs if they work. Women's driving rights constitute one of only a handful of issues that Saudis have come out to the streets to support since the start of the Arab uprisings in early 2011.

The current campaign represents the third major effort of its kind in the kingdom in twenty-three years. On June 17, 2011, approximately fifty women drove in cities across the kingdom as part of the Women2Drive campaign following the arrest and imprisonment of a Saudi women's rights activist who had posted a video of herself driving on YouTube. More than two decades earlier, on November 6, 1990, forty-seven women drove through Riyadh as part of a similar campaign, only to be arrested and in some cases suspended from their jobs and banned from travel.

The September 21 launch of the current campaign is linked to statements made by a senior official of the Saudi Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (a.k.a. the religious police). According to an article in the pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat*, the official instructed the religious police not to pursue and detain women drivers, and maintained that no law existed that gave them the mandate to do so. This echoed a similar statement

from Saudi justice minister Muhammad al-Isa in April 2013 regarding the absence of a constitutional or regulatory text on the issue of women driving. While the chief of the religious police, Abd al-Latif al-Sheikh, denied that instructions were issued not to detain women drivers, he also commented that sharia, by which the kingdom is governed, "does not have a text forbidding women from driving."

## **PUBLIC SUPPORT**

**W**omen's driving rights appear to have a wider support base in the country than several other concerns that have compelled Saudis to take to the streets since 2011. In a Gallup survey from 2007 -- several years before the Arab uprisings inspired new ways of approaching basic rights -- 66 percent of Saudi women and 55 percent of Saudi men expressed the belief that women should be allowed to drive. On October 8 of this year, three female members of the exclusive Saudi Shura Council recommended that the council "recognize the rights of women to drive a car."

Participation in women's driving demonstrations has transcended the country's deep Sunni-Shiite divide. In June 2011, both Sunni and Shiite women drove -- and later this month, members of both sects are expected to drive -- across the kingdom in support of the campaign. This contrasts with the explicitly Shiite character of the most numerous and deadly protests since early 2011 in the Shiite-majority Eastern Province. Saudi Shiites make up 10-15 percent of the country's citizen population.

Women's driving rights also may be more attractive to a wider swath of Saudis as a cause than the issue that has produced the most prominent nationwide protests since early 2011: political prisoners. The kingdom's thousands of political detainees include both Shiites and Sunnis, with many of the latter rounded up during security sweeps in the mid-2000s when the country faced its own internal threat from al-Qaeda-linked terrorists. As a result, demonstrations calling for their trial or release have crossed Sunni and Shiite lines. However, the issue of political prisoners has not gained traction with many Saudis partly because of the prisoners' association with terrorism.

Of course, support for women's driving rights does not necessarily translate into participation in actual rights campaigns, as the June 2011 experience indicated. Apparent public support for the issue might be belied by a limited demonstration on October 26.

## **PROSPECTS**

**T**he campaign faces tough odds for a change in national policy. Saudi authorities have shown their hand by blocking access to the original campaign website on September 29, and then its mirror website on October 7. The now infamous assertion by Saudi cleric Saleh al-Loheidan on September 27 that driving affects women's ovaries and results in children with clinical disorders is unusual in its medical specificity, but it underscores conservative clerical opposition to lifting the ban.

In many of the country's rural areas, Saudi women drive without issue. The religious police may temporarily turn a blind eye to women drivers in urban areas, but eventually an active decision for or against licensing women will need to be made, especially if an increasing number of women get behind the wheel.

## **A DIFFERENT KIND OF MEASUREMENT**

**M**any Saudis seem hungry for change. As noted, this is particularly evident in social media channels, where Saudis routinely decry economic, social, and political conditions in the kingdom. Yet, for the most part, this apparent appetite for reform has not moved in substantive ways from the internet to off-line activity beyond the Shiite-majority east of the country.

It is in this context that the driving campaign should also be measured simply by its size and nature. The two previous driving demonstrations in the country, in November 1990 and June 2011, each compelled fifty or so women to get behind the wheel. If similar numbers participate this time around, we can say that Saudi eagerness to

mobilize for change on this issue and maybe others has not evolved much in the last couple of years. This would be the case especially in the absence of warnings about the severe consequences of participating in the campaign and preemptive security actions by Saudi authorities.

A significant increase in the demonstration size or the numbers of Saudi women getting behind the wheel before or after October 26, however, could indicate expanding interest by Saudis in mobilizing for change in the highly pressurized and tumultuous regional environment. Some Saudi women have posted videos on YouTube of themselves driving cars, and some Saudi men have offered support for the campaign on YouTube and Twitter over the past weeks, suggesting this expanded interest is a possibility.

## U.S. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The women's driving campaign comes at a time of strain in U.S.-Saudi relations related to differences over involvement in Syria's civil war, support for Egypt's interim government, and shifting relations with Iran. The challenges of U.S. diplomacy regarding the issue of women's driving rights in the kingdom were highlighted in June 2011 when U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton expressed public support for the campaign in complement to American "quiet diplomacy" on the issue. In London this past Friday, October 11, Clinton restated her support for women's driving rights in the context of the current campaign. Saudi officials consistently reject foreign interference in reform debates and other internal affairs.

There are indications that King Abdullah -- who is believed to be strongly influenced by his women's rights promoting daughter, Princess Adila bint Abdullah al-Saud -- may favor lifting the ban but is mindful of adamant opposition to such a move by the Saudi clerical establishment. If this is really his view, then Washington's argument over women's driving rights would be with Saudi clerics, not the Saudi government.

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