

Saudi Arabia's Debate on Women Driving Masks a Deeper Divide

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Brief Analysis

During the last several months, the question of whether women in Saudi Arabia should be allowed to drive has become a lively topic of debate within the kingdom. Support for the issue has come from the newly enthroned King Abdullah; the most prominent opponent is the long-serving interior minister, Prince Nayef. The men are viewed as political rivals frequently at odds over a range of policies. Increasingly, women driving seems a metaphor for the series of security, economic, and educational challenges facing the kingdom -- and therefore a tempting policy opportunity for the United States.

In an interview with the U.S. television channel ABC conducted by Barbara Walters on October 14, King Abdullah anticipated that, one day, women would be permitted to drive in the deeply Islamic and conservative desert kingdom, the only country in the world in which women are prohibited by law from driving. "In time, I believe it will be possible. And I believe patience is a virtue," Abdullah said. Even though the eighty-three-year-old monarch declined to issue a royal decree imposing a change in the law, his ambiguous comments were reported locally with enthusiasm, and Saudi women were quoted as applauding his statement.

Two weeks earlier, King Abdullah's daughter, Princess Adela, had given an interview to the Saudi-owned pan-Arab al-Hayat newspaper, in which she endorsed both women driving and female appointments to the country's unelected government advisory body, the consultative council, in terms that were clear to Saudis even if they were cryptic from a Western perspective. The princess, who is married to Prince Faisal bin Abdullah bin Muhammad, a senior official in the kingdom's external intelligence service, said driving was "a local issue which is a function of society's needs and convictions. Hence I expect it to come at the appropriate time."

Princess Adela is believed to be not the only female member of King Abdullah's family who is in favor of women driving. Abdullah's public caution masks private approval. Support in such high places may have been behind the brave attempt in May by a lone member of the consultative council to turn a discussion on traffic safety into a national debate overturning the ban. Muhammad al-Zulfa argued that hiring an estimated one million drivers (usually expatriate men from the Indian subcontinent or the Philippines) to drive Saudi women was uneconomical, and that anyway letting male non-relatives drive Saudi women was incompatible with Islamic teachings.

In mid-June Prince Nayef criticized those calling for the lifting of the ban, arguing that the kingdom should not necessarily follow what is happening in other countries. He said Saudi society also had its own viewpoint based on Islamic teachings; making an issue of it would pit one group in society against another. "The whole matter was secondary, not a priority," he said.

A Red Light from Islamists

An indication of the divisions the issue could cause came in a statement posted on the internet on July 15 signed by more than one hundred Islamic clerics, judges, university teachers, and several heads of the Saudi religious police, as well as teachers at the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, the two holiest sites in Islam. The statement noted that no Islamic scholar or "good figure in society" had called for women to drive. It went on to say, "Enemies of Islam are seeking to destroy the great role women have been given in Islam by corrupting them and hence corrupting the Islamic world." The internet message referred to these enemies of Islam as "the Jews, Christians, and hypocrites" although this phrase was dropped in the news story carried in the local Arab News newspaper. (Hypocrites refers to Muslims who are considered too secular by more religious Muslims.)

Interestingly, the statement responded to the arguments made by reformers that it was an economic burden for the kingdom to have to employ one million drivers to chauffeur Saudi women. The signers claimed that women driving would create even greater economic burdens because families would need to have more than one car, they would have to buy new cars regularly -- because "women are known to like everything new" -- and the government would have to open special female sections in all traffic department offices.

The history of women driving in the kingdom is not a blank page. In rural areas, tribal women are often seen driving. In residential compounds of the state-owned oil company, which employs numerous expatriates, foreign women are allowed to drive. In 1990, middle class Saudi women staged protest drives but were arrested -- the Saudi government, which had just invited U.S. troops into the kingdom after Iraq's invasion of neighboring Kuwait, did not want to risk offending the Wahhabi religious establishment, already concerned about the arrival of foreign influences. The possible chauvinist argument -- that women are less able than men -- does not seem to be used, perhaps because driving standards are widely reported already to be atrocious. (Expatriates are said to have a greater fear of involvement in a Saudi traffic accident than being targeted by al-Qaeda terrorism.)

U.S. Caution Required

The issue is nuanced as well as sensitive. A recently reported opinion poll in Riyadh found that most Saudi women were more concerned about their rights to work, mechanisms for marriage and divorce, and protection from domestic abuse. And when Karen Hughes, the U.S. undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, visited in September and extolled the virtues of being able to drive to a local audience of women, her comments reportedly were resented.

Encouraging King Abdullah's predilection for reform is clearly a priority for U.S. policy, but his reputation as a reformer can be overstated -- his replacement of the secular education minister last February by a hardline Islamist was considered in Washington a setback in tackling al-Qaeda-inspired extremism. But Washington also cannot afford to antagonize Prince Nayef, himself a possible future king, even though his view of the need for change is notably more limited.

Prince Nayef may be particularly sensitive at present about foreign comment. On October 16, King Abdullah substantially recast the Saudi National Security Council (NSC). The previous Saudi NSC was a department within Nayef's Interior Ministry; it did not seem to have much of a role. The new Saudi NSC, which is reported to have a substantial mandate, is chaired by King Abdullah with Crown Prince Sultan as his deputy. The Saudi NSC's secretary general will be Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the former ambassador to Washington, who at times has been a major

figure. Nayef will be merely a member of the new council. As such, initial comment on the development depicts it as the new king establishing his leadership and a bureaucratic setback for Nayef.

Simon Henderson is a London-based senior fellow of The Washington Institute. ❖

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