



Beyond Islamists & Autocrats

Saudi Arabia's Virtual Quest for Citizenship and Identity

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Inside the Saudi kingdom, political uncertainty has often triggered a surge in public demands. For instance, the 1990 protest movement regarding the ban on women driving occurred during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Likewise, the 2003 petitions for political reform came on the heels of 9/11.¹ And more recently, in the wake of the Arab uprisings of 2011, Saudi Arabia again witnessed a sudden revival of political dissent. Petitions for transition to a constitutional monarchy were submitted, political and human rights organizations announced, small-scale protests organized, and calls for revolution posted online.²

Yet Saudi Arabia's online activism presented a misleading picture: in reality, few groups were active. This was evident in the late King Abdullah's first public address to the Saudi people after the Arab Spring:

I am so proud of you. Words are not enough to commend you [for not taking to the streets]; after God, you represent the safety valve of this nation, and you struck at that which is wrong with the truth and at treachery with loyalty.

His speech specifically praised Saudi religious scholars "for prioritizing the word of God over the callers for

sedition," intellectuals and writers "for acting as arrows against enemies of religion, country, and the nation," and the Ministry of Interior's security forces "for shielding the nation by striking against whoever threatens the security of the state."³

Nevertheless, the state seemed unsure of how to guard against the possible development or growth of activism. In the end, a series of fatwas (religious edicts) and royal decrees provided the religious and legal foundation for the prohibition of all forms of dissent. At first, the country's supreme scholar, Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz ibn Abdullah al-Sheikh, warned the country's youth against following the path of Egypt's January 25 revolution, describing it as a "Western conspiracy aimed at weakening the region and destroying religion by instilling doubts and sedition between the rulers and the public."⁴

Later, in January 2014, a more formal response included the passage of laws drafted years before and the issuance of royal decrees against any existing or potential dissent.⁵ The antiterrorism and anticybercrimes laws were used to systematically target activists on charges that ranged from defaming the reputation of the state, insulting Islam, and disobeying the ruler to using the Internet to harm the unity and stability of the state.⁶ The state shut down numerous independent media outlets while sponsoring massive public relations and lobbying campaigns.⁷

In general, Saudi law is uncodified in the tradition of early Islamic jurisprudence, whereby the judge is the instrument of the law. However, the antiterrorism and anti-

cybercrimes laws were exceptions that created the basis for legal persecution of activists and dissenters.^{8,9} The king and interior minister ordered travel bans, legal harassment, imprisonment, and executions as needed¹⁰ to ensure a tight grip on society in all domains, particularly that of online social communication.

To help secure loyalty, the king offered a generous 514 billion Saudi riyals (about \$137 billion) in benefits to key groups, including those expected to rebel due to unemployment or limited income.¹¹ At the same time, sixty thousand new jobs were developed for the Interior Ministry alone to counter any perceived revolutionary threats. An anticorruption institution, Nazaha, was established in an apparent response to the demands of the Islamic awakening stalwarts' call for *islah*, or reform.¹² Religious institutions—the traditional supporters of the monarchy—received massive funds to expand their existing resources. For instance, the king awarded 500 million Saudi riyals (about \$133 million) to restore mosques around Saudi Arabia, 200 million riyals (about \$53 million) to support Quran memorization societies, 300 million riyals (about \$80 million) to support centers of Islamic preaching and guidance, 200 million riyals for the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice to finish building centers across the kingdom, and 200 million riyals to fund three hundred new jobs and build new branches for the *ifta*, or “religious edicts,” department.¹³ In the end, no meaningful civil or political reforms were pursued.

CONTESTING THE SAUDI STATE

Historically, Saudi rulers have secured their monopoly on the state by three means: regional and local partnerships, collection of ample oil rent, and support from powerful Western patrons.¹⁴ Inside and outside the kingdom, members of the royal family have blood, business, and patronage relationships with key religious and other leading figures. For example, King Abdullah did not stop at supporting the Bahraini king with battalions during the island nation's popular February 14 revolution; he also arranged the marriage of his daughter to the sheikh's son.¹⁵ The patronage system, empowering certain groups at the expense of others, has created

varying degrees of loyalty to the ruling family among different groups of citizens.

Facilitating this Saudi patronage culture is a political system that falls somewhere between a tribal structure and a modern state. Whereas the kingdom has ministries, municipalities, bylaws, and regulations, the king and his circle retain absolute authority to override otherwise binding laws, international treaty commitments, or other apparently official decisions. Although, as noted, laws have been intentionally kept uncoded, those that are codified are phrased loosely to allow for flexibility of interpretation and, therefore, political control over the legal system.

The story of Saudi Arabia, as portrayed by state textbooks and media, is one of warring tribes and a vast land unified by the wise King Abdul Aziz al-Saud in a quest to implement Salafism, a puritanical form of Islam. In this view, the Saudi people are the obedient subjects, or *rayah*, following their shepherd or guardian, *wali al-umr*—the singular term for *uli al-umr*, a group of rulers. The plural form is cited from the Quran, in God's command for Muslims to follow the orders of Allah, his prophet Muhammad, and the ruling group (Quran, al-Nisaa 4:59). The Quran always mentions a group of rulers, never a single ruler. Religious reformers have argued that these rulers should represent the will of the people. The king, however, through religious institutions that report to him, manages to delegate absolute power to himself as the people's ultimate *wali al-umr*.

This power structure is reinforced and replicated at different levels of society, including in national institutions and the family. For example, the religious Council of Senior Scholars dominates religious decisionmaking, and men dominate women in families as their guardians. Submission to the king and his appointed guardians is therefore expected from the ideal Saudi citizen. In return, the privileges and entitlements of citizenship are awarded based on religious affiliation, loyalty to the king, and gender.¹⁶ Those serving the king in a military or civic capacity, members of religious institutions, and men in general have been granted higher citizenship privileges than others, namely religious minorities and women.

In Saudi Arabia, most dissent movements arise from a desire to challenge this enforced identity rooted in fealty to the crown and its precepts. Such movements often appear cloaked in religious garb. In turn, when the royal family perceives a threat to its political security, it often acts to accommodate the very forces underlying that threat, sometimes without realizing the collateral damage entailed. Of all such instances, the state has acted most affirmatively, and perhaps damagingly, when it comes to Islamic extremism.

In 1979, the Saudi leadership embraced radical Islam in response to several events: Iran's Islamic Revolution, the siege of Mecca by a radical Saudi Salafist, Shiite riots in the kingdom's Eastern Province, and the need to recruit jihadists in Afghanistan to counter communism. As a result, large segments of Saudi society were radicalized. Ideologies associated with the radical Islamic *Sahwa* (awakening) movement—characterized by a rejection of U.S. troops on Muslim lands, a literal, rigid interpretation of Islamic teachings, and an expanded role for clergy in the state's social, economic, and political domains—became prevalent in Saudi education, media, and religious institutions. In the 1990s, Sunni objections to the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia and Iraq resurged, driving key *Sahwa* religious figures to become political activists.¹⁷

For its part, the state undertook a series of cosmetic reforms to counter its reputation for accommodating Islamic radicalization, such as allowing partial municipal elections, creating a Center for National Dialogue and an international interfaith dialogue center, and appointing women in limited numbers to official positions. These measures were carefully planned to permit only loyalists to hold positions of authority and to maintain the monarchy's political control.

Recently, the state announced its Vision 2030 program, which highlights its political identity as a leading Arab and Sunni Islamic state, as well as its unique potential to become a "powerhouse" for business investments.¹⁸ Through this initiative, Saudi deputy crown prince Muhammad bin Salman is implicitly acknowledging that, to attract new revenue through business and tourism, power must shift from religious conservatives to moderates. To

establish broad leverage for such a venture, royal patronage circles have been expanded to include new business leaders, social entrepreneurs, online "social influencers," religious leaders, and women. Consequently, competition for royal privileges among social groups has intensified. Here, the king is seen by society at large as the ultimate arbiter in empowering any of these groups or potentially saving one from the others. National belonging, therefore, remains problematic when the monarchy enforces unequal distribution of citizenship rights.

Today, several distinct categories of activists are pressing the authorities for expanded civil and political rights. This essay addresses two of them. One is the network of human rights activists—the most diverse and inclusive group—encompassing many Shiites, liberals, and women; the Shiite rights movement and women's rights movement are addressed separately in this piece. The second category comprises social entrepreneurs, who advocate a cultural transformation to resist politically forced norms. Although outside the scope of this project, two other categories of activists warrant mention: the national Arabism movement, composed of youth intellectuals, which advocates an Arab-centered identity, and Islamic reformists, who emerged gradually in the early 2000s and call for a constitutional monarchy.

Indeed, the categories addressed here are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. Saudi women's rights activists, for instance, are often also active in the Arab nationalism or social entrepreneurs' circles. Along these lines, given that restricted freedoms have severely hampered the development of Saudi civil society, activists often stretch their support into interconnected causes across various advocacy groups, thus enhancing interconnection, tolerance, and transfer of skills and knowledge.

SHIITE APPROACH TO EQUAL CITIZENSHIP RIGHTS

Located in the predominantly Shiite Eastern Province, the city of Qatif is commonly referred to as Saudi Arabia's human rights capital. This is not surprising, considering that the state regards Shiites as a proxy for Iran and therefore a security threat. Given this context, hu-

man rights advocacy has represented a safe approach for Shiite activists to discuss equal citizenship rights and an opportunity to network with non-Shiites for support. Online connections via social media and smartphone apps have helped people share information and mobilize despite the forced social isolation of certain groups, such as Shiites, as well as restrictive association and communication laws. Joining Shiites in virtual and smartphone groups pursuing equal citizenship rights are women, liberals seeking religious reforms, and human rights defenders from various national regions.

Historically, Saudi Shiite demands for reform have centered on the community's grievances, such as the arrest of protestors and exclusion of Shiites as a group from governmental or leadership positions. In the early 2000s, however, a change in tactics came about with the return of some leading Shiite opposition figures from exile in the United States and Britain. They struck a reconciliation deal with the late King Fahd that included freeing political prisoners and easing restrictions on Shiite religious practices. At the time, three leading Shiite opposition figures, Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, Jafar al-Shayeb, and Tawfiq al-Saif, began to advocate for equal citizenship rights via sermons, media, and direct community outreach. Shayeb cofounded the first semi-governmental organization toward this end, the National Society for Human Rights. He also established in 2000 a cultural forum with the aim of networking with influential figures and countering prevalent misconceptions about Shiites. Saif, still active as a political analyst and writer, has continuously advocated for equal citizenship rights. In 2003, he drafted the intellectuals' petition "A Vision for the Present and the Future" calling for a constitutional monarchy, a national dialogue, and economic reforms. The petition was presented to then crown prince Abdullah.

Around 2010, Shiite activists began to use the United Nations' human rights mechanisms to advocate safely for political reform. For example, they sought licensure at the Dammam city general court for a new independent organization, the Adala Center for Human Rights, which they had developed to support their work. The religious court ruled against it, citing the noncompli-

ance of Adala's bylaws, based on international human rights law, with sharia.¹⁹ By 2015, several human rights activists from the Shiite region were being targeted for supporting imprisoned protestors; researching violations by law enforcement officials in arresting, detaining, or sentencing prisoners; or communicating with the media or international human rights organizations. In 2016, two notable founders of Adala escaped the country after being targeted legally for their advocacy. This targeting of activists may have reflected an attempt to silence dissent after the recent execution of a leading religious cleric.²⁰ Two years earlier, another Shiite activist, Ali al-Dubaisi, had also fled the country after his arbitrary arrest and established the European-Saudi Organization for Human Rights, which mainly advocates for the Saudi Shiite community. This instance widened the circle of activists in exile (discussed below) and their concerted efforts internationally.²¹

Despite the state focus on the Shiite activists, Saudi legal persecution has affected human rights activists of all backgrounds. In 2012, Waleed Abu al-Khair, a Sunni lawyer, registered his organization, Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, in Canada to avoid a licensure ban in Saudi Arabia.²² He also hosted a regular public meeting at his home in Jeddah called *Sumud*, or steadfastness, to promote public discourse on politics and human rights issues. In 2014, he was sentenced to fifteen years in prison by the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) on terrorism charges that included defaming the state's reputation and disparaging the judiciary.²³ Abu al-Khair refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the SCC or his trial. His organization continued to operate from Canada in documenting the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia. Another activist, Yahya Assiri, who previously worked with Abu al-Khair, also left the country for fear of persecution in 2013, and established another human rights organization, al-Qist (meaning "justice"), in London in 2014.²⁴ The active proliferation of Saudi-based human rights organizations abroad since 2011 reveals the sense of determination by activists to find platforms for their advocacy to compensate for the narrowing political space inside Saudi Arabia.

WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

In the kingdom, women, controlled by their male guardians, have borne the brunt of repressive tribal and religious expectations. Historically, Saudi women's rights advocacy has been sporadic and easily quashed by the authorities, including the women's driving protest of 1990.²⁵ Moreover, women's access to public discourse has often been limited to newspapers, blogs, and private or exclusive group memberships, such as chambers of commerce, literary clubs, or academic circles. Since 2011, however, a shift has occurred whereby Saudi women have become the most visible social group pressing for rights. In 2012 and 2013, several small women's protests erupted aimed at securing jobs and better campus conditions. A few unemployed women tried to organize a protest through a Twitter hashtag before being detained by police, and women protestors' clashes on campus with security forces were uploaded online, stirring public resentment over the unnecessary violence used against them.²⁶

In the past, Saudi women's rights discourse has often been framed within strict societal norms, both tribal and religious. For instance, the demand for expanded women's rights has been justified based on the desire to develop more capable wives, revered mothers, or supportive daughters. However, the driving campaign launched October 26, 2013, altered the public discourse on gender discrimination by focusing it on political, as well as social, restrictions.²⁷ The campaign promoted photos and videos of women driving on social media, including Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp, to advocate lifting the women's driving ban. Men were showcased as campaign supporters, whether from religious, literary, or traditional backgrounds. Further, the campaign has built on the cumulative efforts and lessons of previous advocacy work to lift the driving ban. For example, women avoided protests and instead used their cars to run errands, while questioning the legal and economic impact of the ban rather than the religious justification for it, as they had done in the previous campaigns.

Media images of women driving, and their frequent encounters with the Saudi police, grabbed international

attention, with the ban spotlighted as an unprecedented measure of control over women. Such portrayals, in turn, triggered international interest in delving deeper into the issue of women's rights in Saudi Arabia. It also granted women campaigners some level of protection. For example, when the Ministry of Interior decided to silence the campaigners, a man claiming to be the interior minister's representative made courtesy phone calls to suspected women campaigners to warn them against continuing their advocacy. However, a campaigner and the author managed to meet with the interior minister, who assured them that the issue was under discussion and to expect a positive outcome.²⁸ The ministry was not as lenient, though, with the only man remotely involved in the actual mobilization effort, as opposed to those showing rhetorical support for the campaign. Tariq al-Mubarak was kept in solitary confinement for several days for purchasing a SIM card that was used by campaigners to collect the public videos and photos of women driving, as well as messages of support.²⁹

The campaign continued using online advocacy tools, until two women were arrested and imprisoned for driving across the UAE-Saudi border in 2014. They were referred to the SCC for defying the driving ban, communicating with foreign agencies, and defaming the reputation of the state.³⁰ Although the two women were freed after approximately three months in jail, other campaigners continue to be interrogated over clips posted online of women driving in Saudi Arabia.

This response echoed other examples in which women protesting or demanding more rights were detained, beaten, or imprisoned by the state security apparatus. The excessive use of force by the state highlighted the greater risk associated with any advocacy outside the virtual world. It also heightened the media and the international community's interest in a wide range of women's issues in Saudi Arabia, such as the municipal elections of 2015, in which women were allowed to participate for the first time.

Similar to the driving campaign, the Baladi ("my country") electoral initiative began online, with a Facebook page in 2009. It was coordinated by two women, Fawzia al-Hani and Hatoon al-Fassi, who traveled

across the kingdom to encourage women to participate as both candidates and voters in the municipal elections of 2011. Soon, a national network of women coordinators and members of Baladi developed in major areas. In remote areas, where women were more invisible in the public sphere, Baladi rallied men to reach out to women.

Baladi activists utilized the Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry, where businesswomen have been eligible for membership since 2005, literary clubs and writers' groups, academic circles, and activists' networks to recruit women. They also engaged in online coordination through smartphone apps and social networks and administered workshops between 2013 and 2014, in partnership with prestigious foundations across the Arab world and the Alwaleed Philanthropies in Saudi Arabia. Baladi coordinator Fawzia al-Hani explained that she had decided to advocate for women's political participation in response to the low perception of women by Saudi men. This perception, she said, could only be challenged when women occupy positions of influence and authority, such as the municipal seats.³¹

For a while, Baladi was generally tolerated by the authorities, contrary to other civil society organizations. After all, women's participation in municipal elections was now legitimate and building awareness free of cost was surely a state objective. However, the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs ordered Baladi's closure in 2014 without explanation, possibly to allow licensed, for-profit campaign-management companies to function during the election.³² Nevertheless, Baladi campaign activists participated as candidates and voters,³³ even as three activists, Loujain al-Hathloul, Nasima al-Sada, and Tamador al-Yami, were disqualified with no public justification—and their advocacy itself the likely underlying cause. Hathloul and Sada filed objections since they had fulfilled all the conditions for candidacy, but the authorities did not respond.³⁴

Notably, by 2015, the previously sporadic, disconnected advocacy work for women's rights had gained depth and interconnectedness. Women activists were engaged in national and regional networks, utilizing UN mechanisms, enlisting media support locally and inter-

nationally, and determined to work around root-cause restrictions to gain visibility and push for their demands. In 2016, an online campaign to remove male-guardianship restrictions on women citizens took on a life of its own, with minimal involvement from well-known women activists. The campaign's hashtag has been trending daily and has prompted several announcements of support from key Saudi religious and community leaders.³⁵

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL NORMS

Against the forced, limited, and exclusive political identity propagated in the Saudi kingdom, activists are always striving to expand the boundaries. On this count, social networks have made the promotion of ideas fairly simple, and a number of individuals and groups have gained prominence on the virtual scene.

In 2011, a group of young Saudis established the YouTube channel Telfaz 11 (Television 11), guided by a vision of changing perceptions about local creativity and entertainment. Talented stand-up comedians started developing shows utilizing YouTube and social networks for promotion. One of the shows, *La Yekthar*, has 1,036,619 subscribers to its YouTube channel. The group created a song, "No Woman, No Drive," as a parody of Bob Marley's "No Woman, No Cry," to support the women's driving movement. The trending tune reached three million viewers.³⁶ A Saudi video blogger with similarly high subscriber numbers was less lucky. He was detained with two members of his group after airing an episode on poverty in the kingdom. Activists suspected that the detention was based on charges of "inciting" other youth to control the new media.³⁷

The state's efforts to control media, in all its forms, have emerged in repeated arrests and detentions of individuals utilizing various online means of expression. The Saudi Liberals Network, aimed at encouraging open discussion of religion, is a well-known example. Its founder, Raif Badawi, was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment, a thousand lashes, and a fine of \$266,600 in 2014, after four years in detention and trials.³⁸

Aimed at widening access to education, Rowaq (“hallway”) is a free online platform offering university-level courses designed by certified professors. The courses, presented in Arabic, fit the broad themes of technology, self-development, advanced religious studies, communication, and social science.³⁹ The founder, Fouad al-Farhan, has been an active blogger since 2007, with the stated mission of recovering freedom, dignity, justice, equality, public participation, and other “lost” Islamic values. In 2008, Farhan was arrested and detained for months for supporting political prisoners.⁴⁰ He has remained active on social networks since his release but now keeps a lower profile. In 2011, he participated in the municipal elections amid a public call for boycotting, but his name was dropped from the final list of candidates without any justification.⁴¹

Contemporary art can be a softer, less direct medium of expression that can provoke discourse on identity and political restrictions. Edge of Arabia has emerged as an art partnership established by a British artist and two Saudi artists, Ahmed Mater and Abdunasser Gharem, from the remote Saudi southwestern region of Asir. The two Saudis, a retired military officer and a young medical doctor, strive to carve a tolerated space for themselves and for other Saudi artists. The three founders have formed a nonprofit social enterprise and promoted their work internationally with great success, resulting in 300,000 visitors to their exhibitions, 50,000 books distributed, and an audience of more than 10 million in their communication campaign.⁴²

Edge of Arabia works feature contemporary reflections on religion, feminism, commercialization of spiritual places, urbanization, globalization, environmental deterioration, and the impact of a civilization that revolves around oil. The group has managed to support aspiring young artists by providing local studios and showing their completed artwork in international exhibitions. Inside the kingdom, the artists exercise extreme caution and rarely discuss their work. Although highly promoted and celebrated internationally, their interviews reveal the limitations imposed by formal authorities in Saudi Arabia on their association and expression. For example, Ahmed Mater is a close friend of the Palestin-

ian-origin Saudi poet Ashraf Fayadh, who was arrested for what was considered apostasy in his novel.⁴³ Yet, earlier this month, Saudi deputy crown prince Muhammad Bin Salman selected a work by Mater, *Silk Road*, as a gift to China during his formal visit.⁴⁴ Indeed, the independent artists’ new affiliations with the state may be aimed at fostering greater support for their own vision of cultural transformation.

For their part, unions are illegal in Saudi Arabia, but a group of young female lawyers organized the Young Lawyers Union in 2012. At the time, women lawyers were banned from practicing law professionally despite being able to study law in universities since 2005. The young female lawyers organized small group meetings and eventually an annual conference. After learning of the conference, the Jeddah governorate demanded that it be canceled, along with all the union’s other meetings and activities. Since this closure, the group has nevertheless kept a Facebook page to connect lawyers and share expertise, and organizers still use their connections to support women in finding jobs, research, and advocacy. Such work gained a new layer of utility in October 2013, when Saudi Arabia allowed female lawyers to obtain licenses.⁴⁵

LOOKING AHEAD

In identifying the structural forces of disorder obstructing any meaningful reforms in Middle East states, the foreign policy expert Richard Haass has cited top-down, corrupt, and illegitimate governments, minimal civil society, abundant energy resources, poor educational systems, and various religious problems.⁴⁶ Saudi civil society has been actively addressing each single source listed in Haass’s analysis, whether in demanding accountability, facilitating public participation, establishing independent media outlets, providing better education, or reforming religious narratives and collective identity.

The state’s attempts, in the last few years in particular, to intimidate activists have largely succeeded in slowing the pace of reforms and narrowing their boundaries. However, the intensified Saudi state conflicts with regional and international allies, coupled with reduced oil revenues and increased public expenditures, create

a unique opportunity for reformers. This opportunity can be exploited through the same tactics employed by the state: creating alliances with national constituencies, and harnessing regional and international media and

human rights organizations as alternative, influential power centers. If activists pursue these opportunities, they may well come close to achieving the sociopolitical reforms needed for sustainable stability in the kingdom.

NOTES

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