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Stability in the Face of Social Change: Gender Mixing in Saudi Arabia

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Dedicated to the Memory of My Friend and Colleague Prof. Joseph Kostiner



This picture might not be considered particularly remarkable, except for one thing: It is a photograph released in May 2010 of the King of Saudi Arabia and his Crown Prince *in*

the company of women. Saudi Arabia is known as one of the most conservative countries in the world with respect to the role of women and women's rights. Women are forbidden to drive or travel without being accompanied by a male relative.

But Saudi Arabia is actually a society in transition. This is a very slow shift, imperceptible to the unpracticed eye but quite noticeable to those familiar with Saudi history. To be sure, the West continues to be concerned that funds from Saudi Arabian citizens are still making their way to terrorist organizations, even though it appears that the government is making efforts to halt this flow. On the other hand, Abdallah is making slow strides in reforming Saudi society, and that should please all those concerned with the stability of the Saudi regime.

In particular, the subject of women's rights is moving front and center. According to a recent study by the Researchers' Center for Women's Studies in Riyadh ([*Markaz Bahithat li Dirasat al-Mar'a*](#)) that examined Saudi newspapers and websites in January and February 2010, 40 percent of print media articles and 58 percent of articles appearing on websites dealt with women's issues. Although the study did not compare earlier periods, it was anecdotally clear that this was indicative of a huge jump in coverage of the subject. Activists are now gearing up for a campaign to allow women to participate in the nominally democratic but symbolically important municipal elections, slated for Fall 2011.[i]

Not Yet In The Driver's Seat, But Headed That Way

Over the past year, the issue of gender mixing (*ikhtilat*) has become a hot topic in the Kingdom. It was sparked by the late September 2009 opening of the King Abdallah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), which is designed to be a cutting edge, *coeducational* research and graduate education facility – Saudi Arabia's first. Ever since unofficially taking over the running of the country in 1995 from his ailing half-brother King Fahd, King Abdallah (officially, since 2005) has surprised many who thought he would be a very conservative leader. He slightly liberalized the press in 2000 and

initiated a discussion of the status of women, a previously taboo subject.

By establishing KAUST and naming it after himself, Abdallah sent a strong signal – things were going to change for women in Saudi Arabia. Essentially, he threw down the gauntlet to the kingdom's conservative forces, daring them to take on gender mixing at the new research facility personally sponsored and funded by the King.

The response was not long in coming. Shaykh Muhammad al-Nujaymi, chairman of the Interior Ministry's Advisory Committee on Religious Affairs, came out against gender mixing at KAUST, adding that Muslim women would have to wear a head covering (*hijab*).^[ii] In October 2009, Shaykh Sa'd al-Shithri, recently appointed by Abdallah to the highest religious body, the Council of Senior 'Ulama, [attacked gender mixing at KAUST](#), saying that it was not allowed in Islam. Abdallah reacted immediately, [sacking](#) him.^[iii] The daily *al-Watan*'s liberal editor, [Jamal Khashoggi](#), wrote that al-Shithri owed his position to Abdallah, and therefore should not speak out against "the King's university."

Al-Shithri's firing was indeed a signal to all the clergy, and they were quick to toe the line. The head of the Mecca branch of the religious police ("The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice"), Shaykh Ahmad bin Qasim al-Ghamidi, gave a detailed explanation why gender mixing was permitted in Islam, based on examples from the life of the Prophet Muhammad (the *hadith*). He stressed that whoever condemned KAUST for gender mixing did not properly understand Islamic teachings, and called KAUST "that blessed university." Those who opposed gender mixing, he concluded, hypocritically applied a different standard even in their own homes.^[iv]

Other Saudi religious leaders, as well more prominent scholars from overseas, soon joined al-Ghamidi in endorsing the Saudi King's efforts. These included probably the most well-known contemporary Islamic jurist, Qatar-based Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, and the Grand Mufti of Egypt, 'Ali al-Jum'a.^[v]

But some scholars tried to demonstrate that they were not in the pocket of the Saudi royal family. Shaykh `Abd al-Rahman al-Barrak, a well-known fundamentalist firebrand who does not hold an official position, issued an Islamic legal opinion (*fatwa*) decrying gender mixing. “As advocated by modernizers,” he declared, gender mixing was forbidden since it allowed people to see forbidden things and to conduct forbidden talk. More important was what al-Barrak had to say to those who permitted such mixing: “Whoever allows this mixing allows forbidden things, and whoever allows them is an infidel and this means defection from Islam. Either he retracts or he must be killed, because he disavows Islam and does not observe Islamic law.”[vi]

Calling someone an infidel, and thereby permitting their blood to be shed, a practice known as *takfir*, is old Wahhabi *praxis*, but is rejected by many Islamic scholars, including Saudi ones. The general trend in Wahhabism since the 1920s has actually been to support the rulers in nearly every case, and if correction was needed, it was to be done privately. Al-Barrak, however, had basically called King Abdallah an infidel.

Not surprisingly, the Saudi press exploded with calls for al-Barrak to be put on trial. Several media personalities and journalists called for an official statement outlawing such extremist decisions, which caused hatred and even terrorism. There was none. But among al-Barrak’s defenders was Shaykh Nujaymi, who had been fired for opposing gender mixing at KAUST.[vii]

The development of the Internet in the Arab world should have put Shaykh Nujaymi on notice that he could be – and was – being watched. In March, he traveled to a conference in Kuwait marking International Women’s Day. There he was caught on [video](#) engaging in gender mixing, including joking with an unveiled woman. The video went viral as numerous bloggers used it to demonstrate his hypocrisy. The *schadenfreude* was palpable. Moreover, a [Kuwaiti website](#) then published additional pictures of his encounters with women – some unveiled – during his visit. Al-Nujaymi was finally forced to [respond](#), which he did by insisting that this type of gender mixing was allowed by Islam, in order to instruct misguided women.[viii]

The issue of gender mixing was not limited to KAUST. In March, Yusuf al-Ahmad, professor of Islamic jurisprudence at Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, called for demolishing the Grand Mosque in Mecca to allow women-only floors during the pilgrimage rituals. Again, the response was withering, emphasizing the ridiculousness of al-Ahmad's idea.[ix]

Abdallah's balancing act was on view in late April. During that month, the Kingdom's chief cleric, the Grand Mufti, told al-Ghamidi, who had supported gender mixing at KAUST, to stop pronouncing on these issues. On April 25, he was [fired and then immediately reinstated](#). It was a confusing incident, but illustrated both that the control of the conservatives was waning and that they were still a force for the King to reckon with.

This debate will continue. The King made a graphic statement about it in early May, when he and the Crown Prince [posed](#) for the above photo with about 40 Saudi women. It was as if he was saying, "take *that*, you who oppose progress!" Henceforth, an attack on gender mixing could be viewed as an attack on the King himself.

Saudi attitudes are slowly changing, with King Abdallah's encouragement. Even though Saudi Arabia filters the Internet, determined people can surf the sites they wish. And the Internet, dominated by young people, is a new arena for public expression where Saudi men and women are giving vent to their feelings. But Abdallah is still performing a certain balancing act. Much of Saudi Arabia's approach to reform is of the "two steps forward, one step back" variety. KAUST will likely remain an `ulama-free zone and a place where genders can mix. But the issue of women's role in society is a hot topic, and even the fact that it is being discussed is in itself noteworthy. In early April, the mass circulation daily *al-Riyadh* published a long article exploring [how the driving ban might be lifted](#). One suggestion was that it be done gradually, one city at a time. The fact that this was being discussed openly and at length in a major daily, and not an Internet site, illustrated how women's rights have become a touchstone topic in Saudi society. One may conclude that the dam has broken, and the level of women's rights is slowly rising.

But the time when someone can proclaim, “Ladies, Start Your Engines,” is still a ways off.

[i] *Arab Reform Bulletin*, May 12, 2010, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <http://bit.ly/cR9Dm6> .

[ii] <http://www.almisq.net/news-action-show-id-1694.htm>, September 23, 2009. See the photos at the KAUST website, <http://www.kaust.edu.sa/media/photogalleries.html> .

[iii] Saudi Press Agency, <http://www.spa.gov.sa/English/details.php?id=705857> .

[iv] MEMRI, January 11, 2010, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/3898.htm> .

[v] *Saudi Gazette*, December 11, 2009, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2009121156698&archiveissuedate=11/12/2009> .

[vi] Reuters, February 23, 2010, citing Barrak’s website at albarrak.islamlight.net.

[vii] Elaph.com, February 26, 2010.

[viii] Good coverage with links on this issue can be found at Brian Whitaker’s blog, www.al-bab.com .

[ix] *Arab News*, March 20, 2010.

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