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BEING A WOMAN IN SAUDI ARABIA: WHAT WAS AND WHAT IS?

EVALUATION NOTE

If Saudi Arabian model Rumi Al-Kahtani had not competed in the Miss Global Asia Beauty Contest in Malaysia, Turkish public opinion would likely be less focused on Saudi Arabia. As a society that enjoys tabloids and scandal, our attention was immediately drawn to Saudi Arabia. So much so that we almost attempted to introduce secularism and democracy into Saudi Arabia.

Yes, we must admit that Saudi Arabia has been undergoing major reforms for quite some time. In our last post, we addressed the socioeconomic reasons behind this, as well as the rise of nationalist speech in Saudi Arabia. In this essay, I will explore the women's issue and how things have changed for women in Saudi Arabia. Because there is a significant shift that cannot be reduced to a beauty contest. The women's issue in Saudi Arabia, as well as the rights that women have earned, are societal realities. Saudi Arabia cannot be comprehended without first recognizing its reality.

The Cold War ideology is being abandoned

I should clarify that Saudi Arabia's harsh stance on women is more ideological than religious. In reality, the Cold War and the Iranian Revolution influenced their stringent approach to women. In two separate addresses, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), the architect of Saudi Arabia's recent developments, underlined the role of these two events in the country's hardening.

One of them is an interview with Karen De Young of the Washington Post. In this interview, Mohammed bin Salman admits that "during the Cold War, at the request of the allies, we spread Wahhabism against communism". "Now we have

¹ https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1368/Hilmi+Demir_+PhD

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to put it all back together," he said, adding that Saudi governments had lost the plot in this endeavour, and that the financing of Wahhabism propagation activities was no longer provided by the government, but by Saudi-based foundations.²

The other was during the Public Investment Fund's Future Investments Initiative summit in Riyadh on October 24, 2023, which drew 2,500 participants from over 60 countries.³ In his speech, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman referred to 1979 and stated that Saudi Arabia has been going through a nonstandard process since then. MbS blames the Iranian Revolution for the process. He acknowledges that the Iranian revolution has caused political turmoil, and that his country has hardened to deal with it.

What was Saudi Arabia like in the 1970s?

It is impossible to disagree with Mohammed bin Salman's analysis of his country. Because when we go back to Saudi Arabia in the 1970s, we see that many of the rights that are considered reforms today were already being practiced in daily life.

The first legal regulations on women's education were introduced in the 1970s. And at the forefront of these reforms was Queen Iffet, the Istanbul-born Turkish wife of King Faisal (Faisal Bin Abdulaziz al-Saud). Queen Iffet Al-Thunayan, for whom the Effat University in Jeddah is named, invested heavily in girls' education and women's rights in Saudi Arabia together with King Faisal. Queen Chastity's granddaughter is Reema Bandar Al Saud, who was appointed Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Washington. I am sure this story, about which we do not know much, is still very vivid in the memories of Mr. Ambassador. In fact, in a 2015 interview, Ambassador Reema called her grandmother "my hero" and "my idol."⁴

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/saudi-prince-denies-kushner-is-in-his-pocket/2018/03/22/701a9c9e-2e22-11e8-8688-e053ba58f1e4_story.html.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>.

⁴ <https://daktilo1984.com/forum/kralice-iffet-suudi-kadinlarin-pek-bilinmeyen-ilham-kaynagi/>.



Unfortunately, after radical groups attacked Mecca in 1979 because they believed the government was pro-Western, this process started to change. For example, a decree banning women from working in the same place as men was issued in March 1983.⁵

The Iranian revolution and the war in Afghanistan have motivated growing radical Islamist movements in many Muslim countries, but they have had a greater impact on Saudi Arabia, forcing it to return to its strict religious identity. And the life of women in Saudi Arabia, which is governed by Sharia law, has turned into a nightmare.

One of the first bans was that women could not go out with their heads uncovered, and they were even required to wear a strict hijab. This was followed by a series of other prohibitions such as not being allowed to be side by side with men in public spaces, not being allowed to work in the same workplace, not being allowed to drive a car, not being allowed to travel without a man, not being allowed to get behind the wheel of a car

Looking at the process of change that has begun in recent years, I can say that Saudi Arabia is currently undergoing a process of undoing, not reform. The traces of the Cold War period and the radical Islamism that started with the Iranian revolution are being undone. In the words of Mohammed bin Salman, the state of emergency that Saudi Arabia went through after 1980 is being normalised.

⁵ Triangle of change: the situation of women in Saudi Arabia Executive summary By Eman Alhussein, 2014.

September 11, 2001: The Beginning of Change in Saudi Arabia.

However, it is vital to note that the trend of increasing women's prominence in Saudi Arabia did not begin with Mohammed bin Salman. In truth, the transformation in Saudi Arabia began on September 11, 2001, when Al-Qaeda attacked the Twin Towers.

Some of the perpetrators of this incident were Saudi citizens, and the world focused on Saudi Arabia as a government that backed terrorism. Following it, Saudi Arabia had to announce an internal battle against radicalism. In 2003, Saudi Arabia created the Counter-Terrorism: Prevention, Rehabilitation, and After-Care Strategy (PRAC) to tackle terrorism.⁶ Between 2005 and 2015, King Abdullah went to tremendous efforts to assist global anti-extremism campaigns at home and abroad, establishing and sponsoring a number of counterterrorism institutions, initiatives, and projects.

Another problem was the rising opposition of Saudi women. Because of the Arab Spring, a group of Saudi women occasionally drove alone in 2011, bypassing the restriction, sparking a campaign that lasted several years.⁷ In the early 2000s, Haifa Al Mansour, the country's first female director, started making films in Saudi Arabia, which had no cinema halls. She received international awards. In interviews with the international press, Mansour said that some princes supported her work.

This process culminated in January 2013 when King Abdullah issued a royal edict to include women in the Shura Council, a kind of advisory body. Women thus became official members of the highest political body in the country. In October 2013, three female members of this council submitted a proposal to lift the ban on driving. Also in October 2013, women were allowed to obtain a license to practice law. In January 2014, the first women's law firm was opened by a Saudi woman in Jeddah. In 2015, Saudi women for the first time gained the right to participate in the upcoming municipal elections as both voters and candidates.

As a result, when Mohammed bin Salman was appointed Crown Prince in 2017, he arrived on the heels of a wave of transformation in Saudi society. It is not unexpected that social reform began with women, given that these marginalized groups of society were already under the most strain.

Naturally, Wahhabi clergy in Saudi Arabia felt compelled to speak out against the reforms. The clergy's resistance to the changes was nothing new though. For example, King Abdullah dismissed Sheikh Saad bin Nasser Al Shatri from the Council of Religious Scholars after he questioned co-education of men and women at the institution he established near the Red Sea.⁸ Anticipating the backlash against the reforms, Mohammed bin Salman visited and attracted these clerics to his side, as well as used the state's power against potential harsh opposition, particularly against influential Muslim Brotherhood networks known as sahwa within the education system, purging, exiling, or punishing them.

The organic clergy in Saudi Arabia did not make a lot of noise out of devotion to the state. For example, Grand Mufti Abdulaziz bin Mohammed al-Sheikh altered his fatwa to state that

⁶ https://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp97_boucek_saudi_final.pdf.

⁷ <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saudi-womens-driving-campaign-perspective>.

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/01/saudi-arabia-clerics-king-abdullah>.

women's driving is never regarded a transgression under Islamic law. In retaliation, dissidents including Abdulaziz al-Fawzan were jailed.⁹

Saudi Arabia needs women to be involved in society

MbS has taken several steps to bring Saudi Arabia into the twenty-first century, and one of the most significant issues he has encountered is diversifying the country's oil-based economy.

Mohammed bin Salman recognized that Saudi Arabia, which relied on uncertain oil earnings owing to international crises, could not be a competitive power in the area. He thus embarked on a multifaceted economic growth strategy. The 2030 Vision and the NEOM Project were the outcome. At this point, women's participation in the labor force became unavoidable.

Saudi Arabia's megaprojects, such as NEOM, Diriyah Gate, Qiddiya, and the Red Sea, which have received a lot of attention in recent years, will definitely create a large number of jobs. For example, the Red Sea Project, a vast tourism project spanning 28,000 square kilometers and more than 90 islands on Saudi Arabia's west coast, is estimated to generate 70,000 employment and \$5.9 billion every year. In addition, the Qiddiyya project, which will be built near the city of Qiddiyya, will be the world's largest entertainment city, with 14.5 million visitors per year. These projects will generate a significant need for new hires in a variety of fields, including advertising and digital transformation, sales and marketing, social media management and content management, technology design, and public relations.

In order to meet these needs, Saudi Arabia has to encourage the participation of educated women in the labour market... Because Saudi Arabia is a country with a low female labour force participation rate. According to data released by the General Authority for Statistics (GASTA), the country's official statistical agency¹⁰, the average age of Saudi women is 28, while half of Saudi women are under the age of 27. Moreover, the proportion of Saudi women in the labour market is 35 per cent of total Saudi workers.¹¹ According to the report, the unemployment rate among Saudi women decreased compared to previous years, especially in the fourth quarter of 2022. The unemployment rate among Saudi women is currently at 15.4 per cent... The ratio of working Saudi women to the population increased from 27.6 per cent in 2021 to 30.4 per cent in 2022.

There has also been a major breakthrough in education. Saudi women account for 49.99 per cent of the total number of higher education students, including bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees.

In which sectors do women work?

Saudi women are largely employed in the private sector and are only recently entering public positions. The first two women in senior government positions were appointed in July 2022: Shihana Alazzaz was appointed deputy secretary-general of the Saudi Cabinet and Princess Haifa bint Mohammed Al Saud was appointed deputy minister of tourism.¹² The Shura Council has a mandatory gender quota, requiring that only 30 of the total 150 seats be reserved for women.

⁹ <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/middle-east-briefs/pdfs/101-200/meb156.pdf>.

¹⁰ <https://portal.saudicensus.sa/portal>.

¹¹ <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1638686/suudi-arabia>.

¹² <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2115661/%7B%7B>.

However, women in the private sector have made more significant progress. By the first quarter of 2022, 39 per cent of Saudi women working in the private sector held senior and middle management positions. As of March, about 27.7 per cent of women were working in the education sector and 17.7 per cent in retail and wholesale.

Saudi women across different walks of life

If we look beyond the magazines to grasp the changes in Saudi Arabia, we may see that women's societal roles are expanding. Women can now be found in every profession, including sports, technology, politics, and the economics. For example, sports have recently become the most popular activity among women.

Between 2015 and 2020, women's participation in sports climbed by 149%, with over half of the kingdom's players in the fast-growing sector being female.¹³ Women have also become more active in e-sports. Maryam bin Laden, a Saudi endurance swimmer and dentist, became the first Arab woman to swim from Saudi Arabia to Egypt. The Saudi women's national football team won its first international match on February 20, 2022, defeating the Seychelles.¹⁴

Women are becoming more prominent in traditionally male-dominated professions such as ambulance driving. For example, a video of Eman Abdulazim, a female ambulance driver, transporting a woman in labor to a hospital in Riyadh went popular on social media. As a result, in today's Saudi Arabia, there is a female character who stands out as an individual throughout the public arena.

Princess Reema bint Bandar, the granddaughter of Queen Iffet, was named Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2019, making her the kingdom's first female ambassador.

Rayyanah Barnawi, the first Saudi female astronaut, was assigned to the International Space Station in 2023. According to Hind al-Zahid, undersecretary for women's empowerment at Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, Saudi women might soon be appointed judges.

The beauty pageant pales in comparison to Saudi women's achievements. Mishaal Ashemimry, the first Saudi female aerospace engineer to join NASA; Dr. Maha al-Mozaini, founder of Saudi Arabia's first HIV/AIDS laboratory; Saudi Arabian filmmaker Haifaa al-Mansour; and hundreds more are helping to build the new Saudi Arabia and following in Queen Iffet footsteps. The women of Saudi Arabia are among the most powerful and influential forces driving change in the country.

They have arisen from a Saudi Arabia altered by the Cold War and terrorism, establishing themselves as Saudi patriots with their own experiences. Women's voices in the Middle East are louder than they were yesterday. Saudi Arabia appears to have had a portion of this. Let us never forget that no freedom gained can be taken away.

¹³ <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2020/06/20/Women-s-participation-in-sports-in-Saudi-Arabia-rose-by-149-pct-since-2015-Minister>

¹⁴ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2028491/sport>.