

A close-up, high-angle photograph of a person's eye, looking slightly to the left. The person is wearing an orange headscarf, which is visible at the top and bottom of the frame. The eye is dark and has a yellowish tint, possibly due to the lighting or the person's ethnicity. The skin is light and has a warm, golden glow. The overall mood is contemplative and focused.

A Kingdom's Future:

Saudi Arabia Through the Eyes
of its Twentysomethings

by Caryle Murphy

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Contents

1	Introduction
11	A Demographic Portrait
17	Connected to the World and to Each Other
27	Education Woes
41	Aspirations, Worries, Expectations
55	Politics
71	Religion
87	Women: Rights and Romance
109	Shiite Youth
121	To Be or Not to Be Like Everyone Else
135	The Wild Card: Students Abroad
147	The Future
159	Acknowledgments

the 1990s, the number of people with a university degree has increased from 10% to 20%.

There are several reasons for the increase in the number of people with a university degree. One reason is that the number of people who go to university has increased. Another reason is that the number of people who complete a university degree has increased. A third reason is that the number of people who have a university degree but do not work in a university has increased.

The increase in the number of people with a university degree has led to a number of changes in the labour market. One change is that the number of people who work in the public sector has increased. Another change is that the number of people who work in the private sector has increased. A third change is that the number of people who work in the non-profit sector has increased.

The increase in the number of people with a university degree has also led to a number of changes in the economy. One change is that the number of people who work in the service sector has increased. Another change is that the number of people who work in the manufacturing sector has decreased. A third change is that the number of people who work in the agriculture sector has decreased.

The increase in the number of people with a university degree has also led to a number of changes in society. One change is that the number of people who are employed has increased. Another change is that the number of people who are unemployed has decreased. A third change is that the number of people who are in poverty has decreased.

The increase in the number of people with a university degree has also led to a number of changes in the environment. One change is that the number of people who are concerned about the environment has increased. Another change is that the number of people who are using public transport has increased. A third change is that the number of people who are recycling has increased.

The increase in the number of people with a university degree has also led to a number of changes in the culture. One change is that the number of people who are interested in the arts has increased. Another change is that the number of people who are interested in sports has increased. A third change is that the number of people who are interested in science has increased.

The increase in the number of people with a university degree has also led to a number of changes in the politics. One change is that the number of people who are interested in politics has increased. Another change is that the number of people who are voting has increased. A third change is that the number of people who are running for office has increased.

The increase in the number of people with a university degree has also led to a number of changes in the health. One change is that the number of people who are healthy has increased. Another change is that the number of people who are sick has decreased. A third change is that the number of people who are dying has decreased.

The increase in the number of people with a university degree has also led to a number of changes in the quality of life. One change is that the number of people who are happy has increased. Another change is that the number of people who are satisfied with their lives has increased. A third change is that the number of people who are content with their jobs has increased.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“One thing about our country, it’s run in a very patriarchal way. And in terms of longevity I don’t think that’s sustainable. The world is becoming more globalized. People are beginning to see what’s happening in other countries and they’re gonna want that. It’s not sustainable for you to keep feeding people whatever you want to feed them... It’s just not gonna happen.”

—Riyadh woman recently graduated from Washington, D.C.-area university, 22

The casting call for Saudi comedians was posted on Facebook one day in 2009. “You don’t have to be an actor or good looking,” it said. “We just want... people of every shape and size... who are naturally charismatic, funny, unique [or] have personality.”

More than 100 young Saudi men decided they fit that description and converged on a downtown Riyadh hotel to audition. Mostly in their twenties, many wore jeans and T-shirts. One had a tiny diamond stud in his left eyebrow and his moussed hair shaped into a stand-up comb. “They call me the rooster,” he joked. Several toted video recorders for making clips to post on YouTube. All were hoping to land a role in a pilot for a TV sitcom about a rock band. One young man, sporting a long pony tail down his back, played the guitar. Another impersonated a growling Robert de Niro because, he said, the actor “is funny to me.” Another youth—inexplicably—used his audition time to recite Shakespeare in Arabic.

The cheeriness and intentional goofiness of these young Saudis, whom I met while working as a journalist in the kingdom, made them a striking contrast to their fellow nationals who horrifically seared America’s national psyche on September 11, 2001. For weeks after that day’s terrorist attacks

in New York and Washington, mug shots of the 15 Saudis among the 19 suicide hijackers filled the media. Their glowering faces bespoke anger, bitterness and, as we learned too late, a desire to destroy both themselves and as many Americans as possible. Their average age was 23.

From 2008 to 2011, I was among a small band of resident foreign correspondents in Saudi Arabia. During those three years, I met scores of young Saudis. Like the wannabe comedians, they were far more representative of their country than the Saudi terrorists of 9/11. I interviewed them for articles about the national education system, the ban on female drivers, the first female basketball team, the infamous Saudi religious police, mapping the camel genome, unemployment and volunteer work. We discussed al Qaeda, corruption, tribalism, love, marriage, divorce, Islam, gender segregation, obesity, their favorite pets, why they love the month of Ramadan, how they miss movie theaters and the problem of fathers who refuse to let their adult daughters marry because they want the women's paychecks.

I also collected silly questions that young Saudis get from foreigners, such as: "Does your family own an oil well?"

Most young Saudis I met during my three years there bore no grudge against Americans or non-Muslims, though some attempted to convert me to Islam. They included bloggers, lawyers, journalists, film-makers, painters, novelists and students. A couple confided that they aspire to become university presidents. One wants to run his own newspaper. Males bemoaned the huge cost of getting married; females, the lack of interesting men. Some youths were doing dangerous stuff like taking amphetamines or racing cars on city streets.

Several young Saudis became close friends when they worked for me as interpreters and assistants for extended periods. Five of them—three men and two women—are now pursuing higher degrees in the United States and Canada.

AWAKENING YOUTH

The Middle East's recent cascade of epoch-shifting events known as the Arab Awakening has shifted its political center of gravity from an older generation steeped in an authoritarian mindset to a younger one eager for greater personal

liberty and individual autonomy. The youth of the Arab world are now the prime object of attention for anyone concerned about the region's future. In all of the countries shaken up by the Arab Awakening—Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Morocco—it is young people who are seeking a new order that gives them more economic and political opportunities.

But what of the nation that so far seems unperturbed by the Arab Awakening—to the great relief of the global oil market, as well as its most important, longtime ally, the United States?

Saudi Arabia has weathered the storm of Arab youth discontent seemingly unscathed. This begs many questions about its young people—who make up a large part of the kingdom's population.

Indeed, it is quickly evident to visitors that the kingdom is a youthful place. Infants, toddlers and teens abound in shopping malls, parks and restaurants. Sixty-four percent of its 19.4 million citizens are under age 30. Those aged 12 to 16 are 12 percent of the population, making them the kingdom's largest-ever "youth bulge." If only by their sheer numbers, young Saudis will dramatically alter the kingdom over the coming two decades.

Saudi Arabia is the world's largest oil producer, the spiritual homeland of Sunni Islam and a heavyweight in regional diplomacy and trade. It also is the economic and military powerhouse of the Gulf Cooperation Council, whose six member nations are ruled by hereditary monarchies and royal families. Socially and politically conservative, the GCC bloc is also youthful, with those under 25 comprising 54 percent of the region's population.¹

It is crucial, therefore, to foresee as much as possible this strategic country's likely future path by examining its youth. What do they want? Where are they headed? What do they value? What are their aspirations? What do they consider their greatest challenges? How different are they from their Arab peers? Are they affected by the Arab Awakening? Why have they not rebelled? What differences exist among Saudi youths themselves?

The answers to such questions touch on many aspects of Saudi life that affect young people: education, family life, religion, an unemployment crisis, a deeply conformist culture, as well as new forces that are eroding that conformity, namely the Internet and its celebrated progeny: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.



Young Saudis clowning around outside a Riyadh hotel after auditioning for a TV sitcom pilot (Caryle Murphy)

How much Saudi Arabia changes, or is forced to change, in the years ahead will depend to a large extent on its young people. Understanding their ambitions, challenges and world view will help policy-makers and non-governmental organizations more confidently gauge where the kingdom is headed.

A fellowship at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars from September 2011 to June 2012 gave me an opportunity to supplement the knowledge I had already acquired about Saudi youth while living there. For this report, I first interviewed Saudis studying in the United States, meeting with 21 who live in various parts of the country, including the greater Washington, D.C., area, Los Angeles, Florida, New York and Massachusetts. I then returned to Saudi Arabia in March-April 2012 for six weeks, conducting interviews with 39 young Saudis in Riyadh, Buraida, Jeddah and the Eastern Province cities of Qatif and Safwa.

These extended interviews were one-on-one for the most part. On three occasions in the kingdom, I had group discussions. When those youths are included, the number of interviewed subjects totals 83, of whom 31 were

female. For some interviews in Saudi Arabia, I used an interpreter, but most interviewees spoke English.

I found most interview subjects by word of mouth, asking both young Saudis and older professionals who work with young people for references. The interviewees had a variety of educational backgrounds and came from diverse families. Some came from privileged homes, others from low-income ones. Some had parents only 20 years older than themselves; others had fathers in their sixties or eighties. Some interview subjects had never traveled outside the kingdom. One had never been in an airplane. His “dream,” he declared, is to be a pilot.

The United Nations defines “youth” as persons aged 15 to 24 and “young adults” as those 20 to 24. I arbitrarily set out to interview Saudis aged 18 to 28 but ended up meeting mostly ones in their early to mid-twenties. The youngest interviewee was 19, and a few were 29. I also interviewed older Saudi professionals who deal with or study young people in their twenties, including university professors, sociologists, religious scholars, a motivational speaker, a lawyer, businessmen and high school teachers.

The youths I interviewed were polite and open to having their minds probed. They showed up on time for appointments. And most seemed genuinely touched that I was soliciting their opinions and views. At the end of one two-hour session in Virginia, a 22-year-old student interviewee declared: “Thank you. You made me feel important.”

I promised all my subjects anonymity in order to solicit candid replies to my questions.

A couple of youths declined to meet me after reading my questions, and one failed to turn up for a scheduled appointment. Because the Saudi population is largely traditional and conservative, I made an extra effort to meet as many young Saudis as possible from such backgrounds. It is noteworthy that some students declined to speak with me because they distrust Americans. One university professor in Riyadh put out a message on the iPhone app “Who’s Here?” saying he was looking for young religious conservatives willing to talk to a visiting American researcher.

He got several positive responses, but told me that “to my shock, a lot of them replied with anger, saying it’s a crime to sit and talk to an American

who obviously has ulterior, bad motives. So why are you arranging for this in the first place?”

DESIRE FOR DIVERSITY AND CHOICE

The interviews I conducted while at the Wilson Center form the spine of this report. But it also is informed by data gathered during my three years in the kingdom. For the most part, the interviews reinforced conclusions I had reached while reporting in Saudi Arabia. In the chapters that follow, I present what my young interviewees told me regarding their views on religion, politics, gender relations, career aspirations and how they see their country evolving in the next decade.

In sum, they are by no means a revolutionary lot, preferring gradual, step-by-step change. They want change, but not at the cost of safety and security. Most favor more tolerance for diversity, including in the realm of religion—a trend illustrated by a March 2012 online statement titled “Saudi Youth Regarding Guarantee of Freedoms and Ethics of Diversity.” The statement demanded the right to express opinions “with no attempt to impose consensus,” noting that “no one can claim monopoly of truth or righteousness in the name of Sharia law.”²

A glaring and dangerous exception to this tolerance, however, is an unabashed hostility among many young Saudis, including some of my interview subjects, toward their Shiite Muslim peers. Their attitudes reflect the prevalent antipathy towards the Shiite minority among the kingdom's Sunni majority.

Young women are increasingly chafing at the suffocating restrictions they endure, and are becoming more assertive in demanding greater opportunities and independence. Indeed, among both men and women, a growing culture of “rights” is fostering a more outspoken attitude toward authority. Nevertheless, the rights being demanded are just as much—if not more—materialistic as they are idealistic. That is, they are focused on economic benefits that young people believe they deserve rather than on civil, political and human rights.

Born into a society that for centuries has sought to make children into exact replicas of their parents, most contemporary Saudi youths see themselves as very different from their parents in both lifestyle and aspirations.

They want to travel, and while their attachment to tradition, always a major theme in Saudi culture, remains intact, it is evolving into a more relaxed, utilitarian-based stance in which traditions are examined for how they will enhance or complicate one's daily life.

"I'll be frank and honest. When it comes to traditions, my father taught us that we have our own minds... and if this tradition does not make sense, then it's 100 percent something bad and we have to get rid of it," said a 26-year-old university teaching assistant getting his master's degree in the U.S.

Young people are worried about unemployment and being able to find an affordable home for their family. They are angered by the perceived favoritism in government services, and the need for a *wasta*, or contacts, to get many things done. They feel that they are not heard by officialdom, and they want more say in matters governing young people.

Above all, they express a deep desire for greater freedom and space in their personal lives, whether it be how they dress, what major they choose at university or classes they take in high school.

The government "shouldn't assume that they know what's best for young people because what was true 30, 40 years ago is not true today," said a 23-year-old medical school graduate in Jeddah. "Before, it used to be, 'We know what's best and we would like to hear your opinion but in the end we're going to do what's best.' Now, at least the language in the media and the press has changed. I don't know if anything on the ground has changed."

A 35-year-old religion teacher of high school boys in a very conservative area of the kingdom said this impulse for greater personal autonomy is why many of his students want a foreign experience. "Most of the boys... actually obsess about leaving the country and studying on scholarship abroad," he said. "They admire the West, and especially America, because to them America represents the opportunity of living their life the way they want, because that is not what is happening here. Here, they have to obey so many rules, whether they're traditional or cultural or religious. There, people don't really care what you do, and that's what [his students] want."

A YouTube video posted May 23, 2012, which was viewed almost 1.8 million times within just a few weeks, illustrated the frustration some

young Saudis face—even with regard to such trifling matters as nail polish. The video showed a woman's confrontation with a member of the religious police after he ordered her to leave Riyadh's Hayat shopping mall because she was wearing nail polish and lipstick.

"This is none of your business," she yelled at him. "I'm free to put on nail polish if I want to." The video, which the woman recorded on her phone, was posted to YouTube by a 25-year-old female subscriber—presumably the same woman in the clip.

Saudi youths of today are more diversified and complex than earlier generations were at their age. In addition, as more and more Saudis question long-held assumptions and traditions, multiple strands of thoughts on different topics are developing in a society that has long regarded conformity as one of its highest values.

One challenge in discussing Saudi youth is to highlight that diversity. In the absence of overt political activity, which is banned in the kingdom, and a robust civil society, which is suppressed by the state, it is sometimes difficult to define and categorize this diversity. Simple labels such as "conservative" and "liberal" are deficient. And looks can be deceiving. Long bushy beards and full face-covering veils don't guarantee that their bearers are conservative in all aspects of life and would not support, for example, democratic elections in the kingdom. And an English-proficient smoker with a clean-shaven face does not necessarily signal a man who favors greater freedoms for women or disavows polygamy.

"Nowadays, you can be really conservative and traditional but you can also be really open-minded.... This is one of the good things happening here," observed Farouq S. Alzouman, a 34-year-old Riyadh motivational speaker who works with young people.

The inescapable reality, however, is that Saudi society overwhelmingly remains conservative and cautious. It may be the only country in the world where the population is more conservative and change-averse than the government. However, it is equally true that there is a growing minority of Saudis who aspire to see change in their society and politics, who value open-minded tolerance toward those who are different, and who want their country more integrated with the rest of the world. Many in this expanding minority are youths.

Between 1997 and 2000, researcher Mai Yamani³ conducted scores of interviews with young Saudis. It is striking that many of the same complaints and hopes about their lives expressed to her were repeated by my interview subjects, only with greater intensity. This continuity underscores an enduring direction in the desires and frustrations of Saudi youth, which are detailed more fully in the chapters that follow. It also suggests that this direction will likely continue into the future, providing a roadmap for the Saudi government if it wants to fulfill youth's desires and assuage their frustrations.

Here, in the pages that follow, is what I found in the land that once gave us 15 suicide-hijackers, but now sends us tens of thousands of curious students.

NOTES

1. The 54 percent in this case encompasses the entire population, including expatriates working in GCC countries. "More than half of GCC population under age 25," *Arab News*, July 17, 2012
2. The youth declaration can be found here: <http://youthpetition.wordpress.com/>
3. Yamani, Mai, *Changed Identities, the Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia*, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 2000

CHAPTER 2

A Demographic Portrait

Saudi Arabia is passing through an unprecedented demographic period that for the next 15 or so years presents it with significant social, economic and political challenges.

Nearly two-thirds of the kingdom's indigenous population—64 percent in 2012—are under the age of 30.¹ And this demographic profile will not change significantly until 2026, when the country's median age will be around 30—that is, when only half the population will be under 30. (By comparison, 41 percent of the U.S. population is under 30, and its median age is 37.2 years.²)

More significantly, perhaps, the kingdom's largest-ever “youth bulge” has not yet come of age or begun to enter universities and the job market. This bulge, which accounts for 12 percent of Saudi Arabia's 19.4 million³ citizens, comprises boys and girls who were 10 to 14 years old in 2010 and now are 12 to 16.

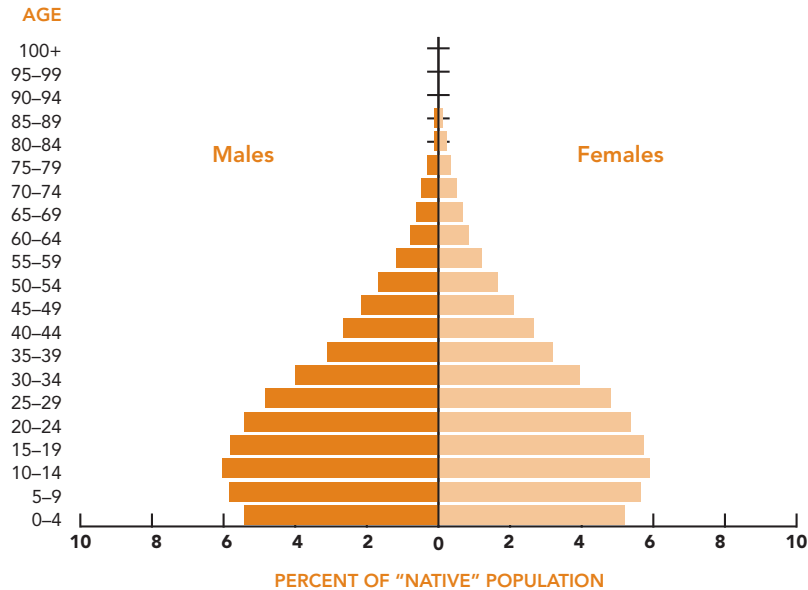
Saudis younger than this cohort—that is, those who were under 10 in 2010—represent smaller youth bulges because of recent declines in the country's fertility rate. For example, children aged 5 to 9 in 2010 made up 11.6 percent of the population, and all those younger, 10.8 percent.⁴

Most of my interview subjects, who were in their twenties, also belong to somewhat smaller youth cohorts. However, each of these successive cohorts was the largest to enter the working years at the time its members came of age. Those between 20 and 24 in 2010 represented 11.6 percent of the kingdom's population, and those 25 to 29 years, 10 percent.

This youth-heavy population portends immense changes in the kingdom during the next decade and a half.

Socially, expanding numbers of youths in their twenties will likely mean growing demands for less regulation and fewer restrictions in how young people live their daily lives, be it in the field of entertainment, recreation, dress, sports

FIGURE 1. Age structure of the native (citizen resident) population of Saudi Arabia as of 2010.



Data drawn from recent unpublished estimates from US Census Bureau's International Program Center. Figure by Richard Cincotta from his "The Arabian Peninsular States: A Demographic Perspective," presented at Youth in the Arabian Peninsula, Foreign Service Institute, Arlington, Virginia. May 23, 2012.

or education. Such demands will run up against resistance from many other Saudis—including some in the youth population—who regard any relaxation of their country's strict standards as affronts to its Islamic cultural identity.

Economically, the government's biggest challenge will be providing jobs for Saudi youths who already face a severe unemployment crunch. In 2009, unemployment among those under 30 was 27 percent and significantly higher—39.3 percent—for those aged 20 to 24.⁵ Two years later, the International Labour Organization reported that Saudi Arabia placed third among Arab states in youth unemployment, after Iraq and the West Bank and Gaza Strip.⁶

In 2014, the country's largest-ever youth cohort, those who are now 12 to 16, will begin seeking jobs as they start turning 18. According to the Saudi minister of labor, Adel Al Faqieh, there will be a need to create 3 million job opportunities by 2015 and 6 million by 2030 to handle the surge of youths looking for employment.⁷ With an already bloated public sector, most of those new jobs will have to come from the private sector.

But given the private sector's past and current economic growth rates, there is concern that it will not generate anywhere near the desired level of new employment opportunities. While private-sector GDP should grow at least 6 percent a year to achieve Faqieh's goals, it expanded only 3.7 percent in 2010.⁸ Moreover, the private sector is only now beginning to wean itself off cheap foreign labor and hire Saudi nationals, who demand much higher wages than expatriates. It still has a long way to go: In 2009, 90 percent of private sector employees were foreign nationals.

The kingdom's youthful demographic profile for the next 15 years will also be a factor in political developments. At some point during this time, Saudi Arabia will experience a major transition to a new generation of throne contenders. Since the kingdom's founding in 1932, the monarch has been selected from among the sons born to its founder, King Abdulaziz bin Saud.

But as that generation dies—King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz is believed to be between 89 and 91—the monarch will have to come from the second generation of princes, the founder's grandsons.

This transitional period from one generation to the other is fraught with possibilities of royal-family infighting and factionalizing that, under worst-case scenarios, could result in political instability or paralysis.

Whether contentious or placid, this generational transfer will play out against the continued unfolding of momentous events set off by the region's Arab Awakening. Just as significant, the royal transition will also occur against a backdrop of increasing political consciousness at home. Given current trends among Saudi youth, future twentysomethings will be well educated, globally connected, and politically conscious.

In recent years, some political demographers have looked at what happens to governing systems when large youth bulges mature and a nation's population becomes less youthful.

Demographer Richard P. Cincotta at the Stimson Center examined these connections and developed a statistical model that links political liberalization to the maturing of a country's youth population. He found that when a nation's population reaches the median age of 25, chances begin increasing that its political system will begin to liberalize and even become democratic. By a median age of just under 30 years, those chances become 50/50. His findings were reached by comparing the population-age structure of countries with their political-freedom rankings as determined by Freedom House. For "the past four decades," Cincotta wrote, "Freedom House has assessed about half of all countries in the 25-to-35-year median-age range as 'free.'"⁹

He argues that his model can predict with relative reliability when a nation is likely to become—and remain—a liberal democracy. In an interview, he explained that the model rests on two pillars. One is the finding, widely accepted in the demographic community, that very youthful populations—where the median age is 25 or below—generally have greater risk of experiencing violence, be it civil conflict, political insurgencies, gang activity or ordinary crime.¹⁰ As a result, the general population appears willing to accept a loss of some of its political and civil liberties to a non-democratic regime if it provides them with security against this violence.

"For property-owning, elite members of youthful societies, there are benefits to unconstrained executive power," Cincotta said. "When so many young men are unemployed and under-employed, individuals are easily recruited by whatever group strikes their ideological fancy and offers some way out—for some the military, for others an insurgent movement, a state-sponsored militia, or a criminal network.

"In a violence-prone environment, vulnerable elite don't really desire very high levels of democracy," he added. "Ask any shopkeeper in Baghdad—first and foremost, he wants security for his family and property. It's the old Hobbesian bargain. You [the ruler] give me security, and for this I sacrifice some of my political rights and civil liberties."

As youthful populations mature, however, reaching a median age of around 30, violence in society tends to gradually decrease. Therefore, the population sees less need to give up some of its civil liberties to a non-democratic system and begins to demand a more liberal regime.

“If you’re a commercial elite and you don’t see the problem with security anymore, why do you want” an autocratic government? Cincotta asked. “Why would you want a leader who provides his own family and their cronies with special privileges while his government constrains your activities? The bargain breaks down.”

Cincotta acknowledges that his model does not seem to apply to certain kinds of political structures, such as regimes led by a “charismatic founder figure” such as Cuba’s Fidel Castro, one-party states such as China, and regimes “beholden to a militarily superior, autocratic neighbor,” such as Eastern Europe before the fall of the Soviet Union.¹¹

Moreover, for Arab monarchies his model is largely untested, he noted. “However, there may be lessons that can be gleaned from Europe’s experience with kings and queens,” Cincotta said. “By the time that their country’s population had surpassed the median age of 35, all of Europe’s surviving monarchs had given up nearly all of their executive powers.” And, “like the European monarchies, the Saudi royal family itself has set in motion educational, social and economic changes that will amplify its citizens’ demands for political change.”

Based on these observations, he ventured a prediction about Saudi Arabia, whose median age—currently 22—is expected to reach 30 in 2026.

“One aspect of monarchies is obvious,” he said. “If they don’t stumble into a costly war and find themselves deposed, monarchies can guide and pace the process of political reform and the accumulation of civil liberties.” For that reason, it is reasonable to hypothesize that by the mid-2020s” the Saudi monarchy will be pressed “to distribute some significant portion of its executive powers to elected officials through a process of constitutional reforms.”

But even with that diminution of its domestic prerogatives, he added, “the monarchy’s vast wealth and corporate holdings are likely to ensure its domination of the country’s economy and its access to power.”

NOTES

1. The 64 percent figure is from demographer Richard Cincotta at the Stimson Center
2. U.S. Census Bureau: <http://2010.census.gov/news/releases/operations/cb11-cn147.html>

3. Saudi native population figure is from Saudi government's Central Department of Statistics & Information website: <http://www.cdsi.gov.sa/english/>. Expatriates living in the kingdom number around 9 million.
4. In the early 1970s, Saudi Arabia's total fertility rate reached a high of 7.30, according to United Nations population data. It has since dropped to 2.8, according to the Population Reference Bureau's 2012 World Population Data at : <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Datasheets/2012/world-population-data-sheet.aspx>
5. Sfakianakis, John, "Saudi Youth Struggle to Find Work Raises Urgency for Reform," *Arab News*, February 17, 2011. Sfakianakis uses official government figures for unemployment rates.
6. "Statistical Update on Arab States and Territories and North African Countries." ILO Department of Statistics, May 2011, p. 3
7. Rasooldeen, M.D., "50 job centers to be set up for women soon: Labor minister," *Arab News*, January 23, 2012; and "1m Saudis get unemployment compensation," *Saudi Gazette*, January 25, 2012
8. Sfakianakis, "Saudi Youth Struggle."
9. Cincotta, Richard, "Life Begins After 25: Demography and the Societal Timing of the Arab Spring," Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Notes, January 2012
10. For example, see Jennifer Dabbs Sciubba, *The Future Faces of War*, Praeger, Santa Barbara, California, 2011, p. 32: "We know that countries with youthful age structures have a higher likelihood of experiencing civil conflict than countries with more mature age structures, but they also have a lower likelihood of being fully democratic."
11. Cincotta, *opcit.* And see also, Sara Reardon, "Egypt: Arab Spring could be wasted in youthful nations," May 17, 2012, in which the author writes that if Cincotta's model holds, "Tunisia—with a median age of 30—is the Arab Spring country most likely to hold a democracy permanently. Egypt and Libya have median ages of 25 and 26, respectively, giving them a fighting chance of moving to democracy in the next few years, according to Cincotta. But Syria and Yemen—at 21 and 17, respectively—will be lucky to end up with even partial democracies, he says." Article at: <http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21428653.800-egypt-arab-spring-could-be-wasted-in-youthful-nations.html>

CHAPTER 3

Connected to the World and to Each Other

“If I’m not sleeping, I’m connected.”

—University student in Riyadh, 19

“My father even to now, he does not know what the Internet is. He thinks it is like a device...and he can complete his life without it. [But for me] Twitter is now very important. I can’t sleep without checking it.”

—Teacher in Buraida, 25

“Each young person today has his own tv station: You Tube. His own wire service: Twitter. And his own magazine: Facebook. When every citizen is a walking news conglomerate, you are going to hear and see things differently from the past. There are no secrets in the world today.”

—Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to Washington, Adel Al Jubeir

Saudi Arabia is no longer a closed society. Its ramparts were breached first by satellite television in the early 1990s, when Saudi families by the thousands flouted a clerical ban on roof-top dishes and brought the outside world into their living rooms.

Now, the Internet has reduced those ramparts to rubble. Most of my interviewees were on the cusp of their teenage years when the Internet debuted in the kingdom in 1998. Several recalled how, in those early days of molasses-slow, dial-up modems with scratchy connections, their families purchased their first PC and stationed it in the living room so everyone could supervise what was beamed into the cocoon of home.

Today, these youths tote two or three smartphones, laptops with portable WiFi, iPads and BlackBerries. Wired to the hilt, they are intimately connected to the world beyond their country's borders—and to all of its rewards and temptations. Even hidebound religious figures who strived so hard to keep outside influences at bay—because they believed them to be the devil's work—have conceded defeat. They are tweeting fast and furiously.

In December 2000, there were 200,000 Internet users in the kingdom. By September 2012, there were 14.7 million, representing a 50.7 percent penetration rate of the country's residents, who include 19.4 million Saudis and 9 million foreign workers.¹ This amazing expansion of access was made possible because of technological advances, especially Internet-enabled mobile phones, as well as the privatization of the kingdom's telecommunications sector—a move that greatly lowered costs for consumers.

According to a recent poll of 2,500 Arab youths aged 18 to 24 in 12 countries, daily Internet usage is highest—91 percent—in Saudi Arabia.² It has over 5.8 million Facebook users.³ And by mid-2012, Saudi Arabia ranked first of all Arab countries in Twitter users—estimated at 393,000, or more than triple the number in 2011.⁴ As for YouTube, a senior executive of the site told an audience in the kingdom in March 2012 that there had been a 260 percent increase in uploads and views in the past year, compared with an average 50 percent increase internationally.⁵

This connectivity to the outside world, and to each other, is bringing dramatic changes to Saudi society and its people. While all Internet users obviously are not young people, they make up a large portion of the kingdom's online population. Social networking sites—Facebook, YouTube and Twitter—along with precursors such as email, chat rooms, forums and blogs, have allowed young people to showcase their talents and ambitions. In addition, they have constructed a whole new dimension to Saudi life by creating a social and political space where Saudis are expressing themselves more freely than ever before.

“First of all, freedom of speech is an important factor that the Internet gave us,” said a 27-year-old female university lecturer with a master's degree in information technology. “We have a chance to discuss topics [online] that we could not discuss maybe four years ago.”

I saw this connectivity in the lives of young Saudis while living in the kingdom. It is making them more curious and more questioning. It is

nurturing critical thinking. And it is giving them doubts. Through the Internet, they are more aware of how Muslims in other countries live and the options they have, especially in entertainment and jobs. As a result, young Saudis are making comparisons.

“Previously, Saudi youth were thinking that they lived in the best place in the world, but when they see the Internet they discover that there is a much, much better world than here,” said a 27-year-old schoolteacher in Qatif. Also, he added, “Saudi youth have discovered that they have the same dreams as many other youths in the world, that they are not isolated.”

Several young people said the Internet had expanded their world view. “Here, because you’re not interacting with other cultures, you have a certain stereotype... about certain ideas, certain people,” said a 23-year-old female psychology major at a university in Jeddah. “But when you start interacting with those people [online] you understand why they are doing the things they are, why they believe in what they believe. And you start having a deeper understanding.”

A 27-year-old videographer said that “questioning is the biggest effect” of the Internet on young Saudis. “Now, everyone is questioning everything. They are getting out of the box.... They’re questioning the norms we’re living in, some rules we’re living in.... I think this is healthy, even if you are questioning some basic things” that were once taboo to discuss.

The Internet has provoked increased skepticism among youth “because it is well fertilized with ideas,” said a 23-year-old, bearded respiratory therapist in Riyadh from a religiously conservative background. “So if I see a hundred ideas and a hundred opinions [online] I have to ask: ‘Why does this one think this way? And why does this one think that way?’ and so on.”

As a result, he added, young people “have more ideas or opinions” about many things. “For example, in the past, when the government did something, [everyone accepted that] it’s the right thing. Now, it’s not wrong or right, but why do they do it? I have to discuss this issue with them.”

Today’s twentysomething Saudis are not the first generation to dispute or criticize their leaders. But as the therapist noted, their enhanced awareness of a multiplicity of views on any given subject has made them feel more entitled to question authority. And crucially, unlike with their predecessors, this questioning is happening in a forum that has no walls and is accessible

to everyone: cyberspace. Dissidence is no longer being aired to a limited audience in the privacy of a family living room, or in a *majlis* of like-minded Saudis. Today, the audience is limitless.

This questioning has begun to change the relationship between Saudi officials and their subjects. More than one official has already lost his job after his rudeness or ineffectiveness was recorded on a smartphone and uploaded to YouTube. When floods inundated Jeddah in late 2009, destroying hundreds of homes and leaving more than 120 people dead and at least a score missing, the public's anger was expressed in no uncertain terms on community forums, Facebook and Twitter. In response, King Abdullah promised investigations of the alleged corruption and mismanagement that had left the city without a proper drainage system. (Several former city officials and contractors have been criminally charged, but the public remains skeptical that the most important people responsible for the neglect have been punished.)

A TOOL FOR DISSENT AND PROTEST

Like youth in other countries, Saudis are finding the Internet a useful tool for organizing protests and making demands of their leaders. In March 2012, students at King Khalid University in the southwestern town of Abha staged three days of campus protests. They posted videos of their actions on YouTube and a chronicle of their grievances on Facebook, with the university rector's face covered by the bright red international 'no' sign. He was slammed for having a "closed and bureaucratic" personality.⁶

In 2011, a campaign to overturn the ban on female drivers was organized almost entirely online. The campaign's initiator, Manal Al Sharif, posted a video of herself driving on YouTube and explained why the ban should be lifted. When she was arrested and held for nine days, Twitter and Facebook lit up with demands for her release.

Supporters of the campaign publicized it with a Facebook page "Women2Drive." And women who participated in the June 17 launch of the movement uploaded videos of their driving to YouTube, then tweeted about it at the hashtag @W2drive. This allowed journalists to get a more or less accurate count of how many women participated in the first day of

the campaign, which was around 60. Opponents of the campaign used the same social media to lambaste the pro-driving women.

“Youth wants to say their new ideas, the things they like and don’t like in society that they are trying to change, and now they have the tools to say this,” said the 27-year-old videographer. “They are trying to change what they don’t like in this society and trying hard to convince the people and influence public opinion. Now they can change public opinion, whereas before, public opinion was [controlled by] the official media.”

He was “not sure,” however, if they had been able already to influence public opinion. “We’re at the beginning,” he said. “We’re experimenting now.”

One of the most striking online developments in Saudi cyberspace is how young people are using humor and comedy to express political dissent, satirize their society and provoke discussion on serious social issues. Public laughter was always discouraged under the ascetic Saudi version of Islam commonly known as Wahhabism. In addition to shunning music and most kinds of entertainment, a serious demeanor was extolled as the proper aspect for devout Muslims. Laughter and comedy were distractions from prayer.

That began changing with the Saudi television comedy show “Tash Ma Tash,” which appeared in 1993 and has been skewering Saudi taboos and pretensions almost every year since then during the holy month of Ramadan. But that once-a-year phenomenon has been overtaken by Internet platforms where young Saudi comedians are reaching international audiences all year long with something that their society had been sorely lacking up to now: comedic self-criticism.

Two of the most popular recurring satiric shows on YouTube are “La Yekthar” (“Keep a Lid on It”), produced by Fahad AlButairi, and “Aaltayer” (“On the Fly”), in which Omar Hussein portrayed a fake newscaster. Both men, who are in their mid-twenties, poke fun at Saudi officials, the media, government regulations and the national air carrier, Saudi Airlines.

“It’s a generational change that’s happening,” Peter Howarth-Lees of Smile Productions told me. His company organizes stand-up comedy shows in the kingdom that have drawn up to 1,000 people. “There is a need, a desire, a thirst for culture and for comedy, particularly among 18-to-25-year-olds.”

More subversive, however, are videos produced by young Saudis examining serious problems in the kingdom. “Monopoly,” for example, opens



Fahad Albutairi stars in his online comedy show, *La Yekthar*, on YouTube (Screenshot used with Albutairi's permission)

with a young man getting out of his Chevy van parked on the beach. As it becomes clear that the van is his home, he jokes that not everyone can live by the sea. Since he hopes to marry soon, he said, a friend has offered to tint the van's windows, because "you know how newlyweds need their privacy."

The film is a droll swipe at the lack of affordable housing—a serious concern for young Saudis. It got almost 1.4 million views in the first month after its YouTube posting in September 2011. Filmmaker Bader AlHomoud,⁷ also in his twenties, did not pull his punches. "Monopoly" includes an interview with a Saudi economist about the problem of so-called "white land." This is the term Saudis use for the massive tracts of undeveloped—and untaxed—land in and around major cities that are owned by big businessmen and princes. They hoard the land indefinitely, hoping to make a financial killing when they finally sell. The result, most Saudis believe, is a shortage of property available for housing projects, which drives up prices.

Other online social commentaries by young Saudis have eschewed comedy. One production that cut close to the bone focused on the dire poverty in the slums of Jeddah and Riyadh. Created by three young Saudis, "We Are Being Cheated" underscored a common complaint among my interview subjects: that poverty in their country is shameful, given Saudi Arabia's immense oil wealth. The sensitivity of the topic was evident when the three filmmakers were detained for interrogation for a couple of weeks after their documentary went online.

Another YouTube video opens with this startling statement: "Each year, thousands die in Saudi Arabia because of terrorism." It noted that 6,485 persons died in Saudi Arabia in car accidents in 2009, while 4,644 persons

died that year in Iraq from terrorist attacks. “We’re talking,” the video says, “about a different kind of terrorism: street terrorism.”

Produced by Alaa Maktoum, who is in his late twenties, the film takes aim at the appalling lack of road safety in the kingdom, where traffic fatalities are among the highest in the world. After Maktoum’s video garnered more than a million views, Saudi traffic police took notice, and they now use it as an educational video.

It is Twitter, however, that has become the most influential, volatile and popular frontier in the Saudi cyberworld.⁸

The site is used by many young people to chat with friends and exchange gossip on fashion, music, weekend plans and celebrities. But it has also become a virtual Hyde Park Speaker’s Corner, with raucous debate and dissent on politics and religion. Tweeting with remarkable candor, even impudence, Saudis are using this soapbox to vent discontent and anger, as well as discuss once-taboo topics such as princely extravagances, judicial misbehavior and the lack of political rights. Users include clerics, government officials and human rights activists.

“Twitter is our parliament now,” said Mohammad Al Ojaimi, 30, a Riyadh businessman and Islamist political activist.



Ahmed Al Omran @ahmed Saudi justice minister: we do not respect those who do not respect our constitutional choice [http://www.al-jazirah.com/2012/20120609/...](http://www.al-jazirah.com/2012/20120609/) · AR · What constitution?



Mohammed Alnasiri @alnasiri @ahmed it is just a fancy word that we want to use it to impress others and also to hide our problems.

TWEETING WITH PRINCES

Not all young Saudis like the Twitter experience, and several interviewees told me they prefer the more leisurely pace of Facebook. But those who have joined the tweeting bandwagon, both conservatives and progressives, are doing so with gusto. And few of my interviews passed without the word “Twitter” coming up.

"It is the most important media. I think its audience, most of them are young, and most of them try to know what is wrong with our country and how we can solve it, how we can change it," said the 27-year-old female university lecturer. "There are many hot topics on Twitter every day... Sometimes there are big fights on Twitter... Not fights, [but] hot discussions!" She approves of such discussions, she added, because they will lead to "improving people's minds."

"I'm active on Twitter," said a 19-year-old female majoring in Islamic studies in Riyadh who spent an hour texting in a corner of her cousin's sitting room as she waited for her friend's interview with me to finish.

"Of course, it's not completely free there, but there's open opinions. Everybody is starting to formulate their own opinion about what is going on. I also noticed on Twitter the range of opinions that people are putting out there that weren't usually spoken of or openly discussed [before]."

Part of Twitter's attraction, young Saudis say, is the immediate gratification of being retweeted with approval and discovering that others share your views. This experience encourages them to be more outspoken. Another appeal is how it levels the playing field among Saudis who would never meet or speak to each other in real life. "We have some princes on Twitter, and some people interact with them. Some people even make jokes about them," said a 25-year-old teaching assistant now studying in Florida.

The youngest son of the late King Fahd bin Abdulaziz is one of these princes, and his tweets have elicited waves of sarcastic, mocking retweets. "Even I retweet him with my comments," said the teaching assistant with a wry smile. Like "thousands" of other Saudis, he said, he uses his real name on Twitter.

One user of the site does not use his (or her) real name—with good reason. Signing on with the handle @mujtahidd, this person began posting secret and sometimes scandalous information about members of the royal family in late 2011, naming owners of "white land," accusing others of skimming millions from arms deals, and revealing how many millions of dollars are spent on royal palaces.⁹

While the tweeted allegations are impossible to verify, they created a tsunami of new interest in Twitter among Saudis and Saudi-watchers, no doubt partly accounting for the steep rise in Saudis joining the site in 2012. By October 2012, @mujtahidd had more than 680,000 followers.

These Twitter users were paying no attention to the kingdom's top religious leader, who denounced Twitter as "dangerous" because it is used "to spread lies by some people who seek fame by insulting and denigrating other people." Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Al-Asheikh, the kingdom's Grand Mufti, added that "people should be well aware of such dangers. The site should not be used to exchange accusations or to misquote people. Muslims... must instead engage in constructive criticism." He also called those who tweet "fools."¹⁰

Although Twitter has exposed Saudis' desire for more transparency from their rulers, the government, its religious establishment and the royal family remain as ultra-secretive about their inner workings and decision-making as ever. But this stance is going to be increasingly difficult to sustain, now that the Internet has dissolved the isolation in which Saudis once lived. Government efforts at censorship, mainly directed at pornographic and political websites, are relatively ineffective, since most young Saudis are technically adept at circumventing the censor.

So far, even the most outspoken Saudi tweeters have not faced official reprisals. But there is no guarantee that the government's tolerance for this explosion of unfettered political speech will last forever. (Unorthodox religious speech on Twitter is a different matter, as we shall see later.) For sure, the government is monitoring the site and even participating to steer the conversations to its advantage. Young Saudis say they easily recognize government tweeters, whom they call "egg people" because they don't post profile pictures, keeping the default white oval instead.

One of my interview subjects said he was optimistic that the new "margin of freedom" for Saudis on the Internet will continue. "It's hard to control everything, and listening to people is not harmful," said a 26-year-old Riyadh man, who plans to use his master's degree in information technology to develop content for Arabic websites.

The relationship between the government and the people could even improve, he added, "if the government really is concerned about what's written, and if the people understand that not everything you want, you get."

NOTES

1. For 200,000 users in 2000, see <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>.

For 2012 figures, see www.riyadhbureau.com which cites statistics released by the Communication and Information Technology Commission (CITC) found at: http://citic.gov.sa/arabic/MediaCenter/PressReleases/Pages/PR_PRE_078.aspx

2. ASDA's Burson-Marsteller, "After the Spring," Arab Youth Survey 2012, at www.arabyouthsurvey.com
3. Over 5 million FB users, see <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/saudi-arabia>
4. "Arab users of social networking sites surge in 2012," Al Arabiya online report, May 8, 2012 at: <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/05/08/212904.html>. The figures are based on data gathered by the Arab Social Media Report, issued by the Dubai School of Government's Governance and Innovation Program found here: <http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/home/index.aspx?&PriMenuID=1&mnu=Pri>. A graphic based on the data is found here: <http://mashable.com/2012/06/08/arab-world-facebook-twitter/>. The Burson-Marsteller survey [opcit] reported that "Saudi youth are the most active on Twitter, with 54 per cent [of polled youth] saying they are regular users, followed by their peers in Egypt (40 per cent) and the UAE (29 per cent)."
5. Walaa Hawari, "YouTube witnessing big leap in Saudi uploads," *Arab News*, March 22, 2012. Another article said that Saudi had the highest per capita use of YouTube in the world, noting that of 167 million views a day in the Middle East, 90 million of those views come from the kingdom. Laura Bashraheel, "YouTube raising the bar on Saudi entertainment," *Saudi Gazette*, September 23, 2012
6. http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=103185539764683
7. Alhomoud's most recent expose is Karwa, a half-hour YouTube "mockumentary" about the unemployment problem posted in September 2012 at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_xRty1IGFo
8. One of the kingdom's wealthiest and pro-modernizing princes, AlWaleed bin Talal, invested \$300 million in Twitter in December 2011.
9. In one of his tweets, the youngest son of the late King Fahd said he would have lived in a mud home until each Saudi owned a house. Many Saudis tweeted cynical replies to the prince, including this one from @mujtahidd: "When you were in power, you had vast authority that surpassed all ministers. Yet, you have done nothing about the housing issue." See: Roula Khalaf, "Daring Saudi tweets fuel political debate," *Financial Times*, March 16, 2012.
10. Mufti's remarks reported by *Gulf News*, January 30, 2012 : <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/saudi-mufti-pope-urge-caution-with-social-media-1.973016>. According to an October 2, 2012 blog entry on www.riyadhbureau.com, that paraphrases the mufti, he said that "Twitter and similar websites are founded upon lies and defamation, people who use them are fools and lack modesty and faith, and quackery is clear in their writings." Access at: <http://riyadhbureau.com/2012/10/saudi-grand-mufti-people-who-use-twitter-are-fools>

CHAPTER 4

Education Woes

“The education system has not met modern times. They are teaching us religion when we need IT.”

—Male youth in Qatif

“They don’t want you to think at all. They want you to memorize cover-to-cover.... I’d never had to write papers or sit down and research something and try to find the answer to something and ask myself questions. I’ve only had to do that here.”

—Riyadh woman after getting her master’s degree in the
United States, 26

Despite its massive oil riches, Saudi Arabia has had one of the worst education systems in the Middle East. Captured by religious conservatives in the 1980s, the highly centralized national system was designed to produce devout, submissive Muslims who would follow Saudi traditions without questions. Islam was the sole polestar of all intellectual pursuits, so that even biology and physics textbooks quoted from the Qur’an. Philosophy was not taught because it was considered dangerous to the faith; drama and music were banned as un-Islamic. Memorization was prized over creativity, and theory over practical application.

Today, the kingdom reaps the harvest of this misguided educational direction: Not enough skilled workers to meet the demands of the job market. An enfeebled intellectual life. A debilitated scientific research community. A university drop-out rate of around 30 percent.¹ And many high school graduates who have difficulty reading, no curiosity, and a disturbing ennui.

I asked my interview subjects what they thought about the education they had received, and for the most part got negative responses. They

complained of computer labs with broken computers; chemistry labs with no equipment; libraries with too few books; rigid, out-of-date curriculums; teachers who did not know the course materials; a lack of choice in what they were allowed to study at college; poor English training; and, even at some universities, no Internet access.

“When I came to the United States, my English was zero, though I had studied it in high school for six years,” said a 21-year-old engineering student in Massachusetts.

They are disappointed and frustrated by the realization that they have been left handicapped when competing for jobs, often against foreigners with better skills and training. In one recent survey of young Saudis, only 19 percent said their education had prepared them to find a job “to a large extent.”²

One 27-year-old told this wrenching story of his difficulties in a master’s degree program in Great Britain: “I struggled a lot, and no matter how much effort I made, there still was a gap between me and the other students. I studied 12 hours a day. But still, the method of thinking is different, the way we understand things is different.... There is that difference you feel but can’t recognize. Why are they better than me?”

The answer was not his English fluency, since he spoke better than many other foreigners in his courses. Rather, he concluded, it was because their educational preparation had been better.

“That’s the only reason.... How we write notes is different, how we listen to the professor and get the most important or the least important [points]—from the voice you can recognize what is important or not,” he explained. “We do not have the critical thinking.”

These experiences of young Saudis are all the more disheartening given the high value they place on education, which they see as their ticket to well-paying, prestigious jobs. Many interviewees said their appreciation of education is a major difference between them and their parents.

“When my father was my age, he wanted the job as soon as possible,” said a 26-year-old Saudi studying English in Florida. “He never thought about studying. He wanted money to get married, have children, have a house.”

This young man was among the minority I interviewed who said they had good university experiences in the kingdom. “I was taught in a good way,” he said of his education at King Saud University’s dentistry department in Riyadh.

But his high school years were “not so good,” he added. “The teachers were young. They didn’t care about the students. Also, the material in books was so weak. Compared to other Gulf countries, their students were better than us.”

EARLY REFORM ATTEMPTS FAIL

In 1998, Education Minister Mohammed Rasheed formed a 25-member national commission to come up with a plan for improving the education system. It met for three years without reaching a consensus. But to save face, it issued a report, which then died from neglect. “Nobody talks about this experience,” a commission member told me. “It’s as if it didn’t happen.”

Rasheed, who served as minister from 1995 to 2005, said in a 2010 interview that his reform efforts ran into heavy resistance from conservatives who feared that change would dilute the religious component of education. Bound to an insular, xenophobic and anti-intellectual version of Islam, these conservatives saw any reform as appeasement of the West, especially the United States.

They had already closed down a scholarship program that was sending Saudi students abroad for higher studies, stopped women’s sports activities in Saudi universities, and removed many books from school libraries. According to one assessment of the education system, they also had required the use of textbooks at some universities that described democracy, human rights, globalization and secularism as contradictory to Islamic values.³

When Rasheed campaigned for replacing rote learning with a more interactive teaching method, the kingdom’s 400,000 K-12 teachers objected, he recalled, because “they were not used to it.” And top officials in his own ministry, many of them hardline conservatives, would agree with his directives, “but then I found out they were implementing something different from what I wanted.”

Mohammed Zayid Yousef Al Yoldash, author of 13 books on education and a retired professor of educational technology, said that for years, about a third of high school students were channeled into religious studies at university. “It’s too much and very dangerous for society, because those

students will not find any job,” said Al Yoldash, who got his doctorate in philosophy in New York and met me in his Jeddah home in 2010.

In addition, he added, the heavily religious curriculum in Saudi schools was unnecessary because “Islam is very simple.” He recalled how “a person asked Prophet Muhammad, ‘What is Islam?’ And in one hour Prophet Muhammad explained to this man what is Islam.... And we teach students for 12 years [about] Islam?”

REFORM BEGINS

Al Qaeda's terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001 and two years later in Saudi Arabia boosted pro-reform forces in the kingdom. Critics at home and abroad pounced on its education system for contributing to a terrorist mindset because of its rigid, intolerant version of Islam. Moreover, Saudi policy-makers increasingly realized that if they were going to successfully diversify the economy away from near-total dependence on oil and on foreign labor, then they had to develop their own people into skilled workers.

With these winds behind him, King Abdullah launched a revamping of Saudi education after ascending to the throne in 2005. Since then, this effort has been a top priority of the government, which has been allocating a quarter of the national budget to education and training. In 2011, that amounted to \$40 billion.⁴

This project has included an expansion of higher education. A decade ago, Saudi Arabia had only eight public universities. Now there are 26, as well as eight private universities. In addition, an ambitious overseas scholarship program was started in 2005; by 2012, more than 145,000 Saudis were studying in some 30 countries.

Education officials also embarked on a curriculum overhaul, reducing the number of subjects in elementary and middle schools, combining religious courses, and introducing updated math and science textbooks. English, which used to be introduced at middle school, became a required subject in early elementary grades. Officials also began decentralizing the heavily hierarchical school system to give more authority and responsibility to principals and regional officials. And the system's teachers—now numbering around

500,000—began receiving retraining aimed at replacing rote learning and memorization with teaching methods more suited for today's globalized markets: critical thinking, teamwork and problem solving.

“Some people who do not understand Islam think critical thinking and scientific thinking is a contradiction with Islam,” said Ali Alhakami, general manager of Tatweer, a \$2.4 billion program to improve schools that is a large component of king's reform project. Like many other reform-minded education officials, Alhakami is U.S.-educated. “But if you know Islam closely, you will find Islam is a promoter of critical thinking and scientific thinking and against dogmatism,” he said in a 2010 interview in his Riyadh office. The Qur'an, he added, “always says look, analyze, question.”

King Abdullah also established a graduate-level research university with an endowment believed to be at least \$10 billion. The King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST), which was built on the shore of the Red Sea north of Jeddah, is the first co-ed university in the kingdom. Few Saudis attend because they do not yet have the educational background for the advanced scientific research projects that are KAUST's focus. But the idea is that as they become better trained, they will do so in the future.

The king clearly intended the university, described by aides as one of his pet projects, to be a lighthouse showing the way to a more open, vibrant and globally connected education system. “Humanity has been the target of vicious attacks from extremists, who speak the language of hatred, fear dialogue and pursue destruction,” he said at KAUST'S 2009 inauguration. “We cannot fight them unless we learn to coexist without conflict... Undoubtedly, scientific centers that embrace all peoples are the first line of defense against extremists. And today this university will become... a beacon of tolerance.”

The reforms taken so far, however, are baby steps. Turning around such a tradition-bound education system is a gargantuan, slow-moving task that will take at least a generation. Maybe more.

Changes initiated in Riyadh, the capital, have not yet trickled down to many communities around the kingdom. In an interview this year in Buraida, a town north of Riyadh known for its religiously conservative character, a 35-year-old high school religion teacher spoke as if nothing had yet changed. “The educational system has to change to comply with the

needs of young people today,” he said. “It’s old and outdated. It needs to be developed, and teachers need to be given workshops to be taught on how to teach. I’ve been teaching for 12 years and never had a workshop.”

Vocational and technical schools continue to be regarded as less prestigious than universities, and many students opt for studying humanities rather than the sciences. As a result, the system is not yet producing enough people with the right skills for the job market.

And little progress has been made toward developing non-academic activities on university campuses so students can learn leadership, organization and community responsibility. There are no independent, student-run newspapers, no elected student councils (except in some private colleges), and virtually no on-campus student life. When I interviewed the new debating club at Al Yamamah University in 2009, they told me they were the first such club in the country.

A 25-year-old teaching assistant who is getting his master’s degree in Florida said he was amazed at the large number of student activities on campus, as well as the fact that students stay so late at the library. Back in Riyadh, he said, “I studied for five years as a university student, and we haven’t done that community [volunteering] or club thing. We were just a couple of friends. We would call each [other]; sometimes we gathered and played football.”

RELIGION IN SCHOOL

The most sensitive component of education reform has been the push to moderate Wahhabism, the ultraconservative and austere version of Islam long taught in Saudi schools.

Even before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Saudi critics like Al Yoldash were concerned about the religious curriculum’s disparagement of non-Muslims and Muslims who did not follow the Wahhabi strain of Islam. This intolerance, he said, violated Islam’s “principles of dialogue and respect between Muslims.”⁵

Besides reducing the number of religion courses and deleting offensive textbook passages about Jews and Christians, the government removed

more than 2,000 teachers from classrooms over a period of several years because of their extremist religious views, according to officials at the Ministry of Interior.⁶ Another 400 or so were arrested for alleged sympathies toward al Qaeda. The ministry also put principals and teachers on notice that extremist ideas justifying violence or hatred toward non-Muslims will not be tolerated in classrooms.

Many Saudis welcomed these moves, but others, including clerics, teachers and a broad swath of the population, decried them as attacks on the country's Islamic identity. As a result, offensive textbook passages have been withdrawn only very slowly. And some Saudis say that new curriculum guidelines do not go far enough to underscore the Prophet Muhammad's open-minded approach to non-Muslims.

"Some things should be included in the religious curriculum, especially verses from the Qur'an [and sayings of] the Prophet Muhammad about how to treat non-Muslims" in a good way, said the 35-year-old teacher of religion in Buraida. "I feel outraged that these are not being taught."

Surprisingly, given the wide attention this issue has drawn in the West, my interview subjects were about evenly divided when I asked if they believed too much attention and time were spent on religion in Saudi schools. About half said they had not gotten too much religious instruction. But others said religion classes did take up too much time. A 24-year-old woman from Riyadh who is heading overseas to study law recalled how she studied a book written by Mohammad Abdul Wahhab, the 17th-century pioneer of Wahhabism, for six years at school. "Six years! We didn't need that!" she commented.

A DISTURBING ENNUI

I first became aware of what may be a far bigger problem for Saudi youth during an interview with a 23-year-old supermarket cashier in Riyadh. In the middle of our conversation in 2011, he casually mentioned that many young Saudis "don't care about anything." I asked if he meant they were depressed. He said no, he meant that they had "reached the carelessness point" because of life's "pressures."



Students sit for an exam in a government school in Riyadh (Fahad Shadeed/Reuters)

I decided to explore this observation in my focused interviews for this report. Responses from both youths and educators led me to the conclusion that youthful ennui is a real phenomenon, and that the education system itself contributes to it because students find classes dull or irrelevant, and are given few opportunities for self-expression through extracurricular activities such as elected student councils.

This malaise is a concern because it creates a pool of disaffected youths susceptible to nefarious adventures that could offer them a sense of purpose, even if misguided, such as joining criminal gangs or extremist religious movements.

“The most important thing I wish I could do is change the people here,” said a small-framed, wiry, 22-year-old Jeddah man who showed up for our interview at a hotel wearing jeans, a blue T-shirt and a black knitted cap with its brim to his back. Many young people, he added, “are lazy and they don’t think right. They don’t care about anything. They don’t know how to care. They don’t know how much this is important.”

By contrast, the youth said, “I want to build myself,” which is why he is improving his English at a language school and later hopes to study engineering or psychology.

Teachers and university professors I spoke to said they are troubled by the disinterest many students display toward learning. “I’ve never seen such a disconnect with the curriculum itself,” said the high school teacher in Buraida. “All [students] do now is memorize instead of understanding. They don’t try to understand anymore.”

A 25-year-old high school English teacher in the same city described his students as “sad” and “unenthusiastic” because they do not see a bright future for themselves. “Teachers are not enthusiastic; the students are not enthusiastic. There is a lot of absenteeism. When I ask them why [they don’t come to school], they say, ‘No need. When the next exam comes, I will take a summary and I will take good marks.’”

It is true that the country’s better universities are well populated with motivated high-achievers like most of my interview subjects. But many other students are on campus just to bide time or because they have nothing better to do. A professor of Islamic studies at Riyadh’s Imam Muhammad bin Saud University, a bastion of religious conservatism, described a widespread disaffection among his students, calling them “irresponsible” and “bored.”

“It’s not about religion,” he said. “They have issues in their heads.”

He recounted an incident in which he challenged a student who showed up late for a class to tell him one thing he remembered learning in the previous week’s lecture. The student could not name a thing. The student then pointed to the whiteboard where another professor had written something and said, “I don’t remember anything that professor said either.”

The professor was taken aback by his bluntness and that of another student, who told him he didn’t like the professor’s course. “I wouldn’t have said this to a teacher when I was a student,” the professor said. Most students won’t study unless they are given written quizzes every week, he added.

A professor at nearby King Saud University said many of his students seem lost. “They don’t know what to do. They don’t participate” in class, he said. “You ask, ‘Why did you choose this major?’ They say, ‘I don’t know.’”

One reason many high school and university students “don’t have any purpose in life” is because they have so little choice in what they can study, according to one of my interviewees who is a product of Saudi schools. Now 25, he is studying marketing on a government scholarship in Canada. If

students were allowed more say in what courses they take, he added, "that would lead them in the end to better education... because if I'm working as a physicist and I don't like physics, I'm not going to do anything great."

An American teacher living in Jeddah echoed his Saudi counterparts, saying of his students: "Sometimes it seems like they don't care" about their future. He laid the blame on stunted expectations for Saudi youth. "They're not trained to be ambitious; they're not given a lot of hope. Ambition is usually there due to hope," he said.

Whatever ambition there is, he added, always seems centered on the national obsession with soccer. "You ask them 'what do you want to do, what do you like to do?'" he explained. "Football. That's it. That's the only thing in his mind, because that's the only thing he's been given as an option or something to dream for." Saudi youths "are surrounded by people who don't care about them. Whether it be educators, administrators, family, friends," the teacher added, "the problem is that no one here ever talks about the real issues youths have."

The dangers of this alienation appear in newspaper accounts of vandalism and other crimes perpetrated by young Saudis.⁷ One paper ran a cartoon highlighting the problem of disruptive students. It showed an angry pupil brandishing a ruler and shouting at his cowering, frightened teacher.

And a Saudi sports television channel broadcast a segment on unruly behavior by students at a Riyadh high school that one Saudi called "scary" in a tweet that asked: "In Riyadh or Chicago?"

The video clip was a montage of different scenes showing what appear to be high school-age male students physically attacking a teacher, turning over his car, brandishing knives and making verbal threats against teachers to the television correspondent. In one scene, they are climbing over walls; in another, a student is dancing behind a teacher's back in class. The video, in which the students complain about teacher favoritism and not getting good grades, opened with the program's host describing the situation as "a bitter reality in need of an immediate remedy." A headline in the clip declared: "Weary teachers....and out-of-control students!"

The video also includes interviews with teachers. One told of a student who went to a principal's office with a machine gun, and another described how a teacher received an envelope with two bullets and a note saying that

“this time the bullets are in the envelope. Next time they’ll be between your eyes.” In sum, one teacher said, students just “don’t care.”

EDUCATING WOMEN

Except for medical schools, where men and women study together, education in Saudi Arabia is totally segregated by gender. Women face even greater difficulties than men, because they have more restrictions on their daily routines and fewer choices in what to study. The secondary school curriculum for girls’ schools remains heavily weighted with religious studies and Arabic. And at universities, women are only now being admitted to many departments once exclusively reserved for men, including law, engineering, computer science, business, architecture, pharmacy and nursing.

Women, who were not publicly educated until the 1960s but now make up at least 58 percent of students at all institutions of higher learning, also face humiliating rules at some campuses. At the very conservative Imam Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh, arriving female students are looked over by female guards checking for violations of the dress code. Underneath their abayas, the long black robe all females must wear in public, students are supposed to wear black, ankle-length skirts and long-sleeved blouses. T-shirts with faces on them are banned. Violators have to sign a form promising not to repeat the offense, and sometimes a fine is deducted from the \$266 monthly stipend that all university students receive from the government.⁸

Two sisters I interviewed attend the University of Dammam in the Eastern Province. They told me how they are forbidden to wear jeans under their abayas or to have more than a 5-inch slit in their floor-length skirts. To judge appropriate blouse sleeves, “you should hold your arm up and if your armpit shows up, this shirt is wrong,” said one of the women, who is 23.

“It’s so silly,” she added. “Every morning I have to wait 10 minutes at the gate, because it’s so crowded because security is passing girl-by-girl and checking their clothes.”

The sisters said they are also forbidden to walk around campus and must take shuttle buses from building to building so that male students cannot

see them. Women are generally confined to campuses until classes let out for the day and, to ensure that no female student is photographed, women cannot carry mobile phones with cameras to class.

"They control everything we girls do: how we dress, how we act, what phones we use," the 23-year-old student said.

Several female students at Qassim University in religiously conservative Buraida told me that Internet access on campus is limited to computer labs, where web browsing is only allowed under supervision. Permission also must be sought to bring a laptop onto campus.

"It's actually forbidden to use the Internet in Qassim University," said a 20-year-old woman studying Islamic law there. "Girls can only use computers under supervision of the teacher if they don't have the Internet at home and need to do research."

Strict gender segregation also means that male professors at many public universities teach female students by closed circuit TV. They are in a separate room from the women, who view the men on a large TV screen and communicate with them by phone. The professors cannot see the students. For many young women, it is an archaic, cumbersome set-up that inhibits the learning process.

"We had this particularly religious instructor who didn't like us to see his face for some reason," recalled a 26-year-old woman who completed her master's degree in New York. "I don't know if he thought it was a distraction. We used to only see the top half of his head.... We called him 'Batman Forever' because all we saw was his eyes."

A female professor at Imam Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh said she believed that the many restrictions on her female students helped explain why so many of them seem unmotivated and unambitious. "Some girls just come to socialize and get out of the house," she said. "They say, 'We don't have the same opportunities as men. What's the use of this university education?' Only about 5 percent are really interested in improving themselves."

Seeking to redress this feeling that women's education is an afterthought to men's, King Abdullah ordered construction of what is being touted as the world's largest all-female university. At his command, the \$5.3 billion Princess Noura bint Abdulrahman University went up in the record time of less than three years on the northeastern outskirts

of Riyadh. Formally opened in 2011, it is planned to eventually have as many as 40,000 students. It has 13 colleges, a 700-bed teaching hospital, a 5,000-seat mosque and a monorail—whose trains will be driven by women—to serve the sprawling campus.

When the king appeared at the formal inauguration of the university in May 2011, several Western diplomats were in the audience. Later, in separate conversations with me, they all used the same words to describe how he was received by women in the audience:

“They greeted him like a rock star.”

NOTES

1. Interview with Mohammed Zayid Yousef Al Yoldash, Jeddah, December 2010. Also, this article in *Saudi Gazette* refers to 30 percent drop-out rate: <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20111005109995>
2. Mona AlMunajjed and Karim Sabbagh, “Youth in GCC Countries, Meeting the Challenge,” 2011, booz&co’s Ideation Center, Riyadh, p. 16. The same survey found that dissatisfaction was higher among women, with more than one-fourth (27 percent) saying that their education had “not at all” prepared them for employment. Accessed at: http://www.booz.com/me/home/thought_leadership_strategy/40007409/40007869/49802007?pg=all
3. For the textbook requirement, see Mohammad Alkhazim, “National and Regional (GEO) Politics and their Impacts on Reforms in the Governance of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia,” unpublished essay given to author, p. 8
4. Sfakianakis, “Saudi Youth Struggle.”
5. Yoldash interview, Jeddah, December 2010
6. Press briefing with Abdulrahman Al Hadlaq, General Director, Ideological Security Directorate, Ministry of Interior Riyadh, June 2010. Also, Mutib Al-Awwad, “2,000 extremist teachers removed,” *Saudi Gazette*, July 13, 2010
7. Salim Al Juhaini, “Rising crime not all foreigners,” *Saudi Gazette*, March 15, 2010. The article stated: JEDDAH—Police were called to a shopping center late Friday after security staff were unable to contain dozens of youths who had reportedly turned violent and engaged in acts of vandalism as the mall celebrated the anniversary of its opening. Eyewitness said that numerous “young single men and teenagers” entered the site and fights broke out between them, forcing security guards to call the police who brought the situation under control.”
8. Interview with female professor at the university who requested anonymity, Riyadh, April 2012

Aspirations, Worries, Expectations

“I believe the youth today are very, very different from their parents, and I see this in my own sons and daughters. Although I try to get closer to them and get to know them better, and I am tech-savvy and connected to the youth... on electronic sites like Facebook and Twitter, nonetheless I feel like the kids have created a whole other world, separate from their parents’.

“They’ve created their private world. Even when they’re at home, they’re on their devices and their cell phones, playing and connecting with others—not to mention when they’re outside the home with their friends.

“I always ask myself this question, [why is it] that I as an educated person who remains up to date on day-to-day developments maybe even more than my kids (as is their mother, who is educated and is an educator)... still feel like there is a gap [between us and our children] that requires an initiative on our part to overcome?

“And I wonder then how it must be for most families where the parents themselves have problems; problems of separation or drugs or are psychologically defeated, which is not a negligible portion of the population, given life’s pressures or work pressures or economic difficulties. How can they connect with their children?

“It’s a big problem.”

—Salman Al Audah, Saudi religious scholar in Riyadh who has more than 1.9 million followers on Twitter

Young Saudis have more expansive and complicated lives than their parents. Their dreams and aspirations are bigger. But so too are their worries. And they hold high expectations of material entitlements as subjects of an absolute monarchy with monetary reserves of \$500 billion.¹

I asked my interviewees about these topics to gauge how they see themselves in relation to their parents and how they expect their lives to unfold—in other words, to discover how they view themselves in the context of family and career.

DIFFERENT FROM THEIR PARENTS

Most described themselves as “very different” from their parents, citing especially the difference in levels of education and professional aspirations. Life was simpler for their parents, many said, and people used to be satisfied with less.

“Everything has changed dramatically, so the horizon we have is different from what my parents had,” said a 25-year-old teaching assistant from the very conservative town of Buraida who is now studying for his master’s degree in Florida. “They came from a farming environment.... They cared the most about family relationships. Now we keep [those relationships] but we have more ambitious goals. For me, from intermediate school I was aiming to be a professor at university and now I’m working on this.”

All his father’s generation thought about was having more children, said a 22-year-old attending George Mason University. “They didn’t pay any attention to how they were going to raise those kids.... I’m not going to have seven kids. I’m probably going to have maybe two or three, because I want to teach them how to think and make sure they get a good education and succeed in life. So if I have seven kids, that’s kind of impossible.”

A 27-year-old teacher and writer from the Eastern Province said: “When my father was my age, in his twenties, he was just looking for a job just to [provide for] us, while myself, I’m looking to play a role in the political environment here in Saudi Arabia. How, I don’t know, but I’m looking to play a role.” His father did not complete elementary school, he added, “while I’m looking to get a doctorate.”

As the widely respected sheikh, Salman Al Audah, indicated when we spoke in Riyadh, internal family dynamics have altered, with lines of communication between parents and children more fluid and complex.

In the past, fathers always had the last word—sometimes in ways not fondly remembered.

“My father was very strict. He can slap you; you couldn’t have a good conversation with him,” said a 25-year-old teacher in Buraida. He intends to treat his children differently: “I will talk to them. I won’t do what my father did.”

Asked for her observations about young people, a 31-year-old assistant principal at a Riyadh girls’ elementary school said: “Their personality is stronger than [that of] their parents, they can express themselves more easily.... They are talking to parents more than before, and parents are accepting this dialogue. Before, it was, ‘No discussion, just accept what I say.’ My parents are listening to my younger siblings more than they did to me.”

A 21-year-old Saudi from Qatif in the Eastern Province studying accounting in Pennsylvania recounted how his adolescent sister is “always angry when you tell her to study. She doesn’t listen. My mom doesn’t know how to deal with her.... [Parents] don’t know how to deal with the younger generation.”

Family routines have also changed. In the past, everyone stayed home after evening prayers. Nowadays the local mall is a big draw until past midnight. And with family members coming home at different times of day, the traditional mid-afternoon family meal doesn’t happen as often.

“We used to get together around one plate and eat together with our hands,” said a 28-year-old from Asir Province working on his master’s degree in the United States. “Now, everybody eats by himself. I hate this. It means we are really following the Westerners, because I believe the Westerners are not united in family. They don’t eat together, usually.”

BIGGER ASPIRATIONS

Young Saudis are more varied and ambitious in their aspirations than earlier generations. Career-wise, they want well-paying jobs that are also professionally satisfying. Almost every woman I interviewed said she wants

to work outside the home after marriage. Many youths are eager to travel and learn about different cultures, something discouraged by Saudi Arabia's ultraconservative version of Islam because it involves interacting with non-Muslims.

"I don't want to get stuck," said a 23-year-old female college student in Jeddah. "If you look at my [older] brothers and sisters, they either had a career based on what my father had given them or they just got married after school. As for me, at the moment, what I really want to do after university is work for about a year or so to get experience and then get my masters." She also said she'd like to "go all over the place... to learn about people and cultures."

Several interviewees said they would like to achieve fame by doing something to improve society and humanity.

"I didn't want to just die and be forgotten. I have to do something," said a 23-year-old medical student in Jeddah who formed a support group on Facebook to encourage healthy lifestyles.

"I want my name to be mentioned with [an] invention. I have to introduce something to the world, to humanity... or come up with a solution for a problem," said a 23-year-old respiratory therapist in Riyadh. He said he was "shocked" when he read histories of Islam and discovered how the number of inventions by Muslims had drastically declined over the centuries. He hopes his own creativity will leave a "fingerprint" on society not just for himself, but also "for my family, for my tribe, for my society, for Saudi Arabia, for humanity."

A 26-year-old Riyadh resident with a master's degree in information technology said that he plans to start a company to develop content for Arabic websites "that is relevant to our culture, our religion," so that Saudi Arabia is not just "a receiver of content from the West."

And in what would be a revolutionary development in Saudi education, a 28-year-old getting advanced degrees in Virginia said that he plans to set up the first ever department of philosophy in a Saudi university. Philosophy is banned from the official national syllabus because Saudi Arabia's religious establishment believes it might undermine students' faith.

WORRIES ABOUT UNEMPLOYMENT

Despite their country's immense privately held wealth and the government's social welfare spending, Saudi youths are concerned about their financial future, according to polls and interviews. They do not fear the desperate, soul-breaking poverty of Egyptians. Rather, they worry that they won't be able to maintain the financial status they have enjoyed so far or improve it over the long run. Young men and women are postponing marriage to pursue higher education, but also because of rising costs. Once married, they face the problem of finding affordable housing.

In a 2010 survey of youths between 15 and 24 in the six Gulf nations, including Saudi Arabia, the "high cost of living" emerged as the number-one concern, followed by unemployment.² In 2009, Saudis under 30 faced an unemployment rate of 27 percent, according to government statistics. Those aged 20 to 24 were most affected, with nearly 40 percent [39.3] unemployed. Those 25 to 29 fared better, with an unemployment rate of 20.3. Young women experienced even higher unemployment; among female job-seekers aged 25 to 29, unemployment was 45.5 percent in 2009.³ Female youth participation in the labor force—10 percent—is the lowest of any Gulf country.⁴

Unemployment emerged as a major concern during a group interview with 14 youths ranging in age from 18 to 28 in the majority-Shiite town of Qatif in the Eastern Province. "Our fathers had a much better situation than us," said one youth. "When they studied, they got a job."

Another participant, who said he had been job hunting for several months, commented that when his parents were his age, "life was simpler then; they easily got jobs.... Our fathers could get their own houses, while we cannot."

A 22-year-old youth in Jeddah studying English said that one reason for youth unemployment is the large number of foreign workers in Saudi Arabia. "We are lazy," he said. "We let them do what they want to do."

His comments zeroed in on two major barriers to resolving youth unemployment: the work ethic and the 9 million expatriate laborers, most of whom are willing to work for much less than Saudis. Foreigners account for 90 percent of private sector employees.

In 2011, the government launched its most serious effort yet to penalize businesses that hire cheaper foreign labor instead of Saudi nationals. The Nitaqat initiative seeks to change hiring practices in private companies through a system of rewards and punishments, depending on how well the firms meet quotas for having Saudis on their payroll.

The government claims that Nitaqat has gotten results, freeing up thousands of jobs for Saudis. “We are not satisfied with the Saudization in quantity, but we are striving for quality Saudization, which also aims to enable Saudi youth to become better qualified and get good salaries,” Labor Minister Adel Al Faqieh said in June 2012 in what was described as the first-ever YouTube appearance by a Saudi cabinet minister.⁵

Also, in the wake of upheavals that ousted the longtime presidents of Tunisia and Egypt, the Saudi government inaugurated its first-ever unemployment compensation scheme in early 2011. A little over a year later, more than 750,000 unemployed Saudis, half of them women, were receiving \$533 a month for up to a year under the so-called Hafiz program. At one point, in May 2012, the number of beneficiaries reached 1.3 million and youth enrolled in the program were expected to number 240,000 by September 2012.⁶

In addition to monetary compensation, the Hafiz program trains Saudis and matches job seekers with work openings. These are not always jobs that young Saudis are willing to take, such as domestic workers and security guards. Having grown up in an environment where meek foreigners do most of the country's menial labor for puny wages, they regard low-paying jobs like these beneath them.

Even the government has begun to lose patience with such attitudes. In May 2012, a senior Labor Ministry official announced that Saudis who refuse to accept job offers would be dropped from the Hafiz rolls and job-training courses. And minister Al Faqieh noted that since most Hafiz enrollees were not highly qualified—around 95 percent did not have university degrees—they could not expect to be offered high-salaried jobs.⁷

While many young Saudis remain fussy about the kind of job they will do, more and more of them are altering their expectations in this regard. When I was in the kingdom, most supermarket cashiers were young Saudi men—and, occasionally, young women. Also, I noticed that young males

were increasingly manning the front desks at hotels, stocking shelves at IKEA and serving up lattes at Starbucks.

WEDDING AND HOUSING COSTS RISING

Another financial complaint, mainly from young men, is the rising cost of marriage. Wedding parties have become more lavish, and fathers are requesting larger dowries for their more educated daughters. Some young men incensed by high dowry demands started an online protest in 2009 called “Let her become a spinster!”⁸

Some young men take out bank loans to defray marriage expenses. But most depend on their extended families to help them pay for the dowry and wedding festivities, which are gender-segregated in Saudi Arabia; grooms and their male friends celebrate in one location, the bride and her female relatives and friends in another. One sign of the hardship of rising costs is the willingness of many grooms to participate in communal wedding parties paid for by charities, private businesses or members of the royal family.

But dowry and party are not the end of wedding expenditures. When told that a marriage is in the offing, “the first question is ‘Where is the apartment? Where are you going to live?’” recounted one of my interviewees, who married this year at age 26.

“Ten years ago, if you got married nobody asked you ‘Where will you live?’ Instead, it was ‘Take your time,’” said a 25-year-old high school English teacher in Buraida. “Now, the parents of your wife say, ‘You have to have your own house, you can’t live with your parents. Because if you live with your parents, you will have problems and it will maybe end in divorce.’”

Affordable housing is scarce in Saudi Arabia, and only about one-third of families own their own home.⁹ In July 2012, after a decade of debate within the government, the kingdom issued a law designed to ease the housing shortage by creating a new, regulated market for mortgage lending.

“What concerns me now as a father is I want a home [but] I can’t afford it. Everything is very expensive,” said a 25-year-old university teaching assistant studying in Florida. After marriage at age 21, he lived in his



Grooms take part in a mass wedding ceremony in Tabuk (Stringer/Reuters)

father's house, where he and his wife had a suite with two bedrooms. They now have three children. Though relatively well paid, his salary is not enough to buy or build his own home, he said, complaining that land has become very expensive "because the rich people are buying everything and they just keep it."

He was referring to the problem of so-called "white land," large tracts bought up by well-connected speculators. "We, the youth, we are asking the government to put some tax on these lands" so that owners do not hoard properties, the teaching assistant added. "My generation, their biggest concerns are jobs and homes."

FREE BENEFITS AND HARD WORK

Young Saudis I interviewed manifested a strong sense of entitlement to the material benefits of living in a rich kingdom and an equally strong sense that not everyone is getting their fair share of the country's wealth. "Everyone

would be a rich person if the budget was divided righteously,” declared a 20-year-old female university student in Buraida.

Such ideas are to be expected, perhaps, among youths raised in the world’s largest oil producer, which has long provided many free services, including health care and education, and has also been the number-one employer of Saudis. Nevertheless, the youths I spoke to were not impressed, saying that schools, hospitals and services are not as good as they should be.

“We have free education and health care, but they are not good enough,” said a 23-year-old engineering student in Los Angeles. “And Saudi makes a lot of money every year, so where does all the money go?”

In Jeddah, a 22-year-old studying English at a language institute complained that “everything is bad. The way teachers teach is not good.... The system is not good, in the hospitals, hotels and everything involved with the government.... The way they treat us, they don’t care. They just want to be in at 8 a.m. and leave at 2 p.m.”

There is a sentiment too that one-time financial bonuses, such as the \$130 billion package of benefits announced in 2011 after popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, are not adequate. Calling these measures “a temporary remedy,” a 25-year-old university teaching assistant studying in Florida added: “We need a long-run plan to improve the incomes. And we don’t want to stay waiting for a grant, a gift. No, we need something that we deserve.... And if the government doesn’t give me these things... I will not be silent. I will not accept it anymore.”

When judging their government’s performance, a common benchmark among young Saudis is their Gulf neighbors, particularly the United Arab Emirates. A union of seven small sheikdoms, including the free-wheeling financial hub of Dubai, the UAE has a conservative but more open society than Saudi Arabia, and a similarly undemocratic political system.

The UAE also has reaped vast riches from oil, which it has poured into modernizing its infrastructure and creating a generous welfare state for its 5.3 million nationals. Every weekend, hundreds of young Saudis fly to Dubai or Abu Dhabi to enjoy a more relaxed environment. Alcohol is easily available. Men and women mix freely in public, and there are nightclubs, movie theaters, music concerts, art galleries and film festivals to attend.

“We’re obsessed now with the differences between us and the UAE, [with] how we got a lot more than they have and [yet] they are better than us,” said a 27-year-old corporate lawyer in Riyadh. “We want to be like them.... It becomes an emotional topic to us.... Why not us? I mean, we’re a very wealthy country, we have resources [but] there are no similarities between the two except we speak the same language.”¹⁰

When I noted that the UAE does not have a free political system and jails opposition activists, he replied: “Fine. I can live under that, if I have my basic needs [met]... if I’m paid enough, if I live in a very developed city or country and, most importantly, when I feel proud of my country.”

The sense of entitlement is tempered among some young Saudis by their strong belief that they must do their part to earn benefits.

“Sometimes I talk with my friends [who say] that we are a rich country, the government should give people money like in Kuwait and Qatar and the UAE [where] from the day you are born... you are paid,” said a 25-year-old university teaching assistant from Riyadh working on his master’s degree in Florida. “I’m not supporting this.... Everyone should study. Everyone should work hard. Everyone should do his best. In return, we should get a lot of things, like medical insurance.”

A 21-year-old engineering student in Massachusetts from Qatif is also skeptical of cash handouts and says the government should use its wealth instead to create jobs by stimulating the private sector and launching large-scale infrastructure improvement projects.

“That’s what I want. If you go to Saudis, what do they want from the government? They want money. They say, ‘[In] Dubai, their president gave them many times more money [but] we are richer than the UAE, [so] why don’t they give us money?’” he said. “My thought is, we don’t need that money. My family, we are middle class [and] we don’t want to be rich, because money is not everything. We are living happy.”

POVERTY AND ‘WASTA’

Two common complaints about their society by Saudi young people revolve around their sense of fairness. First, several said they were upset by the

poverty they see. Official figures are difficult to find and imprecise. But by most estimates, between 16 to 18 percent of the Saudi population qualifies as poor, which means around 3 to 3.5 million people.¹¹

“What makes people here worried is that we have poor people, and we are Saudi Arabia,” said a 22-year-old engineering student at King Saud University. “If we had that money that we should have, there won’t be poor people.... I swear to God, if I see a poor woman and she is old and asking for money at a traffic signal, I cry. Really, I cry,... I want to collect them and make them live in my home. Why is she standing, asking for money, and she is Saudi woman? That is a reasonable question.”

This youth said that he had watched “We Are Being Cheated,” the YouTube video about poverty in the kingdom that led to its three young Saudi creators being briefly detained in late 2011. They were jailed, he said, for “telling the truth. This is it.”

My interviewees also criticized the pervasiveness of *wasta*. This Arabic word means “middle man” or “connection,” and it is shorthand for the behind-the-scenes favoritism often necessary to get a government service or a job. It disturbs many youths because they say it rewards the incompetent over the competent and sabotages efforts to create merit-based systems.

When I asked a tall, thin 27-year-old law school student in Riyadh what changes she’d like to see in her country, she did not think long about an answer. From behind her niqab, a full face veil, she said that “we have injustice in the kingdom when it comes to employment and other things—too many *wasta*.” She blamed the government, charging that it “is lax when it comes to these things, and the people [take] advantage of it.” Later, she added that “justice by the government is what would increase my loyalty” to it.

A 23-year-old medical student in Jeddah also complained about *wasta*, saying: “It’s definitely the key in everything. Everything. It’s a very, very bad thing. People don’t get their rights. I don’t know where to start. You just see things happen in a wrong way, and you can’t do anything about it. You see the wrong people in the wrong places just because they know the right people. I can graduate with a GPA of 4 out of 5, and my colleague with a 3, and he gets the job. It’s that bad. I’ve seen it. It outweighs any other problem.... Things will definitely be way much better if we just changed this one thing.”

The list of other concerns voiced by Saudi youth included worry over widespread corruption and a lack of transparency in how the public treasury is spent, fears about oil running out and a sense that society is not committed to uplifting the whole nation.

As the 27-year-old female law student said, “The regime does not care, so the people don’t care and do as they want.”

A 23-year-old medical student in Jeddah said what he fears most about his country is that it will not “live up to the potential it has. The way I look at it, we don’t have any excuse anymore. With our generation, the new mindset is away from the typical, traditional... path in life, and now we have a lot of new, spontaneous ideas.”

But a 21-year-old resident of Qatif, now studying in Pennsylvania, expressed sharper concerns about the kingdom’s future. “We are now in another economic boom, and if we let this money to be stolen by the monarchy and by the royal family, what’s going to be left for our kids, our children in the future?” he asked.

“The best way to use this money is to have a control over it.... But we can’t do that because we have no control over anything,” he added. “It all comes to politics.”

NOTES

1. In July 2011 they topped \$500 billion for the first time. <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/saudi-foreign-reserves-top-500bn-for-first-time-417696.html>. Bloomberg, August 28, 2011
2. AlMunajjed and Sabbagh, “Youth in GCC Countries,” Exhibit #1.
3. Sfakianakis, “Saudi Youth Struggle.”
4. AlMunajjed and Sabbagh, “Youth in GCC Countries,” p. 45 : “According to official ILO data, the highest labor force participation among GCC women age 15 to 24 is in Qatar, at 33.7 percent (2009), and the lowest is in Saudi Arabia, at only 10 percent (see Exhibit 25). In the Middle East as a whole, female youth participation in the labor force reached 21.5 percent in 2010, a rate that is half the world average of 42.4 percent.” Also, p. 40: “According to ILO official data, Saudi Arabia has the region’s highest female youth unemployment rate (45.8 percent in 2008).”

Young women cannot look to a better picture as they grow older. Saudi Labor Minister Adel Al Faqieh told *Al Riyadh* newspaper, according to an

October 3, 2012 article, that of the 1.5 million Saudis looking for work, 80 percent were women [of all ages]. He also said that 40 percent of the women getting unemployment compensation had college degrees. See <http://www.alriyadh.com/2012/10/03/article773278.html>

5. "Low salary of Saudis under Hafiz 'due to poor qualifications,'" *Arab News*, June 29, 2012. The minister also claimed that since the Nitaqat program was launched, it had led to 246,000 Saudis [of all ages, not only youth] finding jobs. See "Saudization On Course, says Fakeih," *Arab News*, May 28, 2012. By September, that number had risen to 380,000. See "Saudi Arabia says job-creation policy bears fruit," Reuters, September 17, 2012.
6. MD Rasooldeen, "50 job centers to be set up for women soon: Labor minister," *Arab News*, January 23, 2012. For 1.3 million getting unemployment compensation, see "Low salary of Saudis under Hafiz 'due to poor qualifications,'" *Arab News*, June 29, 2012.
7. For losing patience, see "Saudis who refuse employment to be taken off Hafiz aid list," *Arab News*, May 16, 2012. And for lack of high qualifications, see "Low salary of Saudis under Hafiz 'due to poor qualifications,'" *Arab News*, June 29, 2012.
8. Diana Al-Jassem, "Low dowry has its own negative effects," *Saudi Gazette*, February 11, 2009
9. For only a third of Saudi families own homes: P.K. Abdul Ghafour, "Easy-installment loans to leave no 'room' for woes," *Arab News* April 5, 2009 and <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/18/208537.html>
10. His sentiments are shared by many young Saudis, as underscored in the ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey 2012, accessed at www.arabyouthsurvey.com. The powerpoint presentation, on p. 36, states: "Young Saudis feel most strongly that they would like their country to be like the UAE, with 50 per cent [of those polled] agreeing with this choice..."
11. National Public Radio report of May 19, 2011 at: <http://www.npr.org/2011/05/19/136439885/poverty-hides-amid-saudi-arabias-oil-wealth> and Gulf News report of September 22, 2009 at: <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/poverty-alleviation-becomes-priority-for-saudi-arabia-1.540390>

CHAPTER 6

Politics

“We don’t want to hear the old monologue that ‘We’re safe and we have money.’ We want to politically participate in running the country. We young people are starting a new direction. We’re not religious, we’re not liberal. We’re just young people demanding their rights.”

—Medical school student in Abha, 24

“I was just having an argument with one of my friends about calling Saudi Arabia ‘Saudi Arabia.’ It belongs to Al Saud, so it’s like you are living in ‘Obama’s Country’... She was saying they own the country, it was their grandfathers and fathers that fought [for it], so it’s theirs. Really, people here... just seem to follow. Maybe it’s because of religion reasons. They don’t even know their rights. They don’t know that they have the right to be part of choosing a king... They think... they shouldn’t participate in any kind of political activities.”

—Female medical student from Khobar, 23

“I don’t know about the future. It’s ambiguous. It is not clear. It’s a mystery.”

—Master’s degree student from Abha, 28

On March 11, 2011, the broad avenues of downtown Riyadh were deserted except for extra contingents of traffic cops, strategically placed riot-control troops and a police helicopter patrolling overhead. It was supposed to be the so-called “Day of Rage” when, according to anonymous organizers on Facebook, thousands of Saudis would imitate Egyptians and Tunisians by demonstrating against their rulers.

I was part of a large contingent of foreign journalists being ferried around Riyadh in a bus supplied by the Ministry of Interior, which was intent on showing us that no protestors had appeared. We had stopped outside a courthouse and were milling about in small groups, bored by the empty streets. Suddenly, a man wearing black track pants, a white T-shirt and dark glasses approached me and another reporter. Before stone-faced policemen and ministry officials, he began shouting that Saudi Arabia was “a big jail.” In a flash, a thick phalanx of scribblers and cameramen had surrounded the lone protestor of the day.

“We don’t have a right to speak. If you speak they will put you in jail after five minutes,” he continued, adding that he wanted “a government of the people” and that he expected to be arrested. He gave us his real name, age and occupation: Khalid Al Johani, 40, Arabic teacher and father of four.

Underscoring the accuracy of Al Johani’s assertions, Saudi security police arrested him later that day at his home.

He was still being detained a year later when a different kind of protest occurred March 7, 2012, in Abha, a city in the southwest corner of the kingdom.¹ Scores of female students at King Khalid University went on an apparently spontaneous rampage, throwing water bottles and soda cans, and breaking campus furniture and windows. According to media accounts, they were angry about the poor quality of their all-female facilities, including non-working elevators, not enough chairs in lecture halls, and trash pile-ups. They also were protesting mistreatment by female security guards and, according to one report, a ban on using the Internet and smartphones on campus.² Two days later, male students began demonstrating, and by then, demands included an end to “corruption” in the university’s administration, hiring more competent faculty and firing the university president because of his “closed and bureaucratic” personality and “dictatorial” methods.³

The two events a year apart hold important messages about the political perspectives of Saudi youth. First is their absence from the kingdom’s most publicized event in the early days of the Arab Awakening. That the lone protestor on March 11, 2011 was 40 years old—twice the age of the youth of this study—is not a fluke. It reinforces what I observed during my three years in the kingdom: that the most politically discontented, rebellious and courageous Saudis are predominantly in their thirties and forties.

The Abha protest of 2012 suggests something else about the kingdom's youth: Dissatisfaction with material conditions is a more likely spark for protests than discontent over the lack of political rights and civil freedoms. The fleeting Abha protests made no political demands, and while they had faint echoes at several other Saudi universities in the weeks that followed, they did not spark a nationwide student movement.

Apart from the Eastern Province, where the heavily Shiite population has specific, well-founded grievances that will be discussed later in this report, Saudi youths have not taken to the streets to assert themselves as agents of historical transformation like their peers elsewhere in the Arab world.

This raises questions about the political outlook of Saudi youths. Why have they not responded in the same way? Are they being affected at all by the Arab Awakening, and if so, how? What are their political aspirations?

Answering those questions first requires a step back to consider two co-existing realities among Saudi young people that I observed in my focused interviews, as well as in many conversations I had while working in Riyadh. How these two realities interact in the coming years will determine the future contours of Saudi Arabia's political landscape.

UNINTERESTED IN POLITICS

The first reality is that there is a significantly large youth population that is disinterested in politics and displays a conspicuous lack of concern about acquiring political rights. They don't give much thought to being a "subject" of the monarchy versus a "citizen" of the state. "A lot of people still say 'Father Abdullah' rather than 'King Abdullah,'" noted one interviewee.

These youths are content with how things are now, as long as the state continues to dispense financial benefits and promote an Islamic national identity. Some in this group are open to political change, but when asked for details, they express a vague hope for "change" at some vague time "in the future."

A 19-year-old from Riyadh studying English in Florida said he had not given political reform much thought. "It's not a big deal because I know the government will choose the best thing for the people and themselves."

Several saw no need for changes. "If you ask me, personally, I like it the way it is," said a 22-year-old engineering major at Riyadh's King Saud University. "Everyone is satisfied.... So far so good. Maybe there are minor problems, such as women driving and poverty, but these" can be resolved. He has no desire for more say in his government and does not believe that an elected parliament "would work" in the kingdom "because we have a powerful royal family and [it] satisfies people. They give money, they provide things."

Young Saudis like him are against or ambivalent about elections, believing they would lead to incompetent leadership, civil strife or worse. "It would be like a mess. So we don't want that," said the 19-year-old youth from Riyadh.

A 26-year-old who got his master's degree in information systems abroad also said he was "happy with the way we are managed now, having a royal family." He is leery of national elections because people will vote along tribal lines. "I might elect a person because he is a doctor from my tribe. This is going to create a lot of problems. He might not be the best qualified person, but his tribe has the largest number in the country, so he will win."

A 25-year-old teaching assistant getting his master's in Florida said he "would highly support [elections] in the long run when people understand who to elect, not because he is from his tribe, not because he is from his school of religion. But now, I'd rather King Abdullah and any prince hire the person he wants instead of giving me the right to vote, because I know that the perspectives that Saudis have now are very bad and very unprofessional."

Another 25-year-old youth studying marketing in Canada also was unenthusiastic about elections. "I know it gives more democracy... but that will generate problems.... Then we will have five sides or three sides or two sides, at least," he said. Right now, he added, "everyone's thinking is the same and the system is kind of the same because we are following one rule, which is the Qur'an.

"If you want me to tell you the truth," he continued, "young Saudis don't really care about the politics.... They are living in a place where they have financial security, they have security for their own lives, their own future, their past, their families.... So whenever these kinds of elements are satisfied, it's really hard to interfere with political things."

And that's how the 19-year-old Riyadh youth studying English in Florida feels. "I don't care about politics," he said. "I just want to live my life. And have fun, of course." Asked if he'd followed the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, he replied: "No, because I don't know a lot about [Egypt's former President Hosni] Mubarak. It's not my problem."

SEEKING A POLITICAL VOICE

The other reality is that there is a notable segment of politically attuned Saudi youths who deeply resent their lack of political and civil rights and would like a say in how they are governed. This slice of politically conscious youth includes activists with an Islamist perspective, as well as progressive or liberal Muslims who see the West as a model adaptable to their country and culture.

They would like to see gradual steps sooner rather than later toward a more accountable and transparent government. Many young people "don't like what's happening now, the idea that people can't have their official way of making changes," said a 27-year-old videographer from Jubail. "Decision-making in this country is restricted to the people who are in the government, who are already picked."

A 23-year-old college student in Jeddah told me: "I see that in a lot of my friends—they want to make change. They want to develop the country.... Definitely we as students want to be part of that process of change-making. Hopefully now, with women voting, let's hope it actually does make a change."

These youths were mesmerized by events in Egypt and Tunisia in early 2011, sitting on their sofas for hours on end, with the remote in one hand and a slice of pizza in the other, as one of my interviewees described himself during that time. For them, these events were inspiring and uplifting, as they showed what might be possible even in their own country.

"I was very excited in those days because they were asking for freedom, justice, everything I was asking for," said a 25-year-old recent graduate of medical school in Abha. "I'm not very different from the Egyptian young men and women."

A 27-year-old university lecturer in Riyadh who is from an activist Islamist family expressed a similar exhilaration. "We feel excited to see youth change something," she said. "At least [now] they can choose the leader of their country." Citing the student protests at King Khalid University and other campuses, she added that Saudi student demands "are little now, but I think in the future they will be bigger" and will include demands for "elections for a leader of the country."

Another young woman in Riyadh from a very religious home said: "The most notable thing about the Arab Awakening is that it was done by youth and... it really affected us in the sense that we're youth." This 19-year-old student at Riyadh's Imam Muhammad bin Saud University added: "Even though the things that we want might be very little compared to [the] people who demanded so much and were successful in toppling down a president in other countries... it's made us feel that we're important, that we have a voice and could really make change happen."

These youths have specific ideas of reforms they would like to see. They envision moving from today's absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in which the prime minister is not the king; all people, including the royal family, have defined legal rights, and no one is above the law; and elected representatives share decision-making with the monarchy.⁴

"A constitutional monarchy is our dream; this is what we want. A country of constitution, this definitely will give us a voice," said a 23-year-old medical school student in Jeddah.

"I'm very much for the idea of a constitutional monarchy," said a 22-year-old Riyadh woman, a recent graduate of George Washington University. "If it works for Britain, then why can't it work for us? I hope it can happen within the next 10 years."

"We should not accept anything less than a constitutional monarchy. Anything less than that is a waste of time," said a 21-year-old student in Pennsylvania who comes from the Eastern Province.

Youths in this segment are more open to elections, but still want to see them implemented gradually. As a 26-year-old teaching assistant from Riyadh, now studying for his master's degree in Florida, stated: "You really need to hear the voice from the street... But it needs to be done step by step... so people adapt to the change."

Within 10 to 15 years, he expects to see “at least half of the Majlis” elected, he said, referring to the country’s top advisory council, whose all-male membership is appointed. “The king wants people to have their own choices and [make their] own decisions, but he needs to change one step at a time. He just can’t change it at once.” If elections were allowed suddenly, he added, “everyone is going to think about his group first, not about the good of the people or the good of the country. So it’s going to create chaos. So you need to take it one step at a time.”

Other reform-minded youths say voting is overdue. Elections for the Majlis “should have happened 20 years ago, because they are the representatives of the people,” said a 23-year-old Riyadh hospital worker who comes from a conservative religious home. “They have to represent what the nation is talking about.”

A 27-year-old female student of Islamic law who veils her face told me, “The government should open elections for choosing people—for all officials except the king.”

SHARED IDEAS

There are some important commonalities between youths uninterested in political reforms and those who favor them. First, both love King Abdullah, who is widely viewed as a benevolent ruler with his people’s best interests at heart.

Second, while this sentiment does not extend to all royal family members, both groups regard the Al Saud as necessary glue to hold their country together. “I like the Al Saud family. Without them, we will go back to pre-Islamic times of killing each other [because] we are tribes,” said a 28-year-old master’s degree student in Florida, echoing a widespread comment in my interviews.

Most importantly, perhaps, both groups of Saudi youth are evolutionary, not revolutionary, preferring gradual change initiated from the top, which they see as responsible and safe, rather than grass-roots protests which they regard as disruptive.

“Some people are trying to flare up a revolution” in Saudi Arabia on Twitter and Facebook, said a 22-year-old medical student in Jeddah who

favors a constitutional monarchy. “But I don’t support a revolution. I support change, because revolution means destruction. I want to build, I don’t want to destroy.”

A big reason for this sentiment is that Saudis appreciate the daily security they enjoy, compared with the chaos, bloodshed and economic disruptions they have seen in recent years in Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, Egypt and most recently Syria.

In addition, there is disillusionment with what has followed uprisings elsewhere. “At the beginning, I was admiring the protesters and I thought it was a positive thing. But after seeing what’s happening now in Egypt, I think it is a very negative way of changing the regime. Now the situation in Egypt is not stable, so at any moment you expect another revolution, another change, another protest,” said a 19-year-old sophomore at Riyadh’s King Saud University.

The 23-year-old respiratory therapist in Riyadh said he felt that the uprisings elsewhere have “affected the loyalty to Saudi Arabia—it became stronger because we saw how the economy in Egypt and Syria goes back 50 years and now they have to start from scratch.”

My interviewees cited other reasons why Saudi Arabia had not seen serious youth demonstrations. “Thanks to Allah,” said the 19-year-old English student. “We don’t want [protests] like that. I think the majority [of Saudis] is happy, like 80 percent.” The 22-year-old engineering student at King Saud University said people love King Abdullah so much that “no one has the bravery to ask for going out” in protests.

Religion also played a part. The ultraconservative version of Islam favored by the state teaches that open resistance to government, especially street protests, is forbidden. Criticism of authorities should be made privately behind closed doors, it states. “I have a religious friend, and she was against the protests” in other Arab countries, said a 23-year-old female studying medicine abroad. “She believes that they’re going against the ruler and against religion and that whoever rules the country should be followed.... It’s just the way they interpret Islam.”

The 19-year-old woman majoring in Islamic studies at Riyadh’s Imam Muhammad bin Saud University also believes in this approach. “There’s a very important part of our religion that always stresses unity, and so the

open kind of freedom to disagree with the government really contradicts with the idea of unity and creates room for chaos and disagreements among Muslims,” she said. “I do believe it’s important to follow that and to avoid conflict... and... advise the government in secret. There are a lot of ways of effecting change and influencing the government.”⁵

A not-insignificant factor too was the \$130 billion economic package announced by the king in February 2011. It targeted youths, who were offered unemployment compensation for a year and help in buying homes. “Money speaks,” observed the 22-year-old graduate of George Washington University.

“Economically speaking, there is still hope,” added a 29-year-old female writer in Riyadh. “People are feeling that there’s still jobs being created, there’s still increase in salaries... and scholarships.”

“We don’t suffer in Saudi Arabia,” added a 28-year-old woman now studying in Florida. “We have a good life.”

Finally, some youths cited the trump card of many governments. “Fear is the main reason” for no protests, said the 28-year-old master’s degree candidate. “We are afraid of the government.... If you get into the jail, you will never see the sun.... We know you will be thrown in a cell for maybe two months. No one will talk to you. You will hate yourself.”

He was referring to the harsh measures inflicted on dissidents and activists who go too far in the eyes of the state: arbitrary arrest, long-term detention, months of solitary confinement. Fear of this retaliation—along with the huge police presence in Riyadh streets—helps explain why protests did not materialize on March 11, 2011.⁶

NO REVOLUTION, AT LEAST NOT NOW

When it comes to politics, then, my interviewees reflected what I’d learned while living in the kingdom: that despite yearnings for political reform and a more participatory government in a significant segment of youth, there does not appear to be—for now at least—a critical mass of youth demanding the type of political reforms that threaten Al Saud rule. For the moment, and probably for a few more years, the Saudi government does not face a generation of angry, rebellious twentysomethings.

“I think the activists and people demanding change are very minimum compared to the wider population,” said the 29-year-old female writer in Riyadh. “We hear their voice because they are there on the social networks... but compared to the wider population they’re a minority.”⁷

It is clear, however, that the future will not be the same as today.

Forces beyond the government’s control, such as globalization and the Internet-led information revolution, as well as increasing exposure to other cultures and expanding educational levels, are affecting Saudi youth and will lead more and more of them to want a more participatory and more transparent government. They may not call it “democracy,” but they will want a political system that gives them more control. And if the growing numbers of young people heading into the workplace in future years encounter economic hardship brought on by unemployment, this desire for reform will only sharpen.

In addition, other factors that in the past had inhibited political awareness and mobilization are now diminishing. For the most part, my interviewees said they felt that tribal loyalties, while still important to their peers, are decreasing and nationalist feelings rising. “Their loyalty to Saudi nationality is growing over tribalism,” a 23-year-old Riyadh youth said of his friends.

This is important because tribalism is one way that the Saudi population has been compartmentalized. There are also regional differences, the Sunni-Shiite divide and the deep-seated gender segregation, which exaggerates differences in gender roles and impedes normal, workaday interactions between the sexes. All these divisions have created a stovepiped population in which alliances and coalitions among different constituencies do not arise organically or spontaneously, thus making political mobilization and consciousness-raising very difficult.

Even now, Saudi youths have few avenues to move across these divides, meet peers and generate friendships outside their own circle. School sports are not a major activity. There are few community recreational facilities. Student-led extracurricular activities in high school or university are practically nonexistent. And civil society is not highly developed. Furthermore, family members are expected to spend most of their leisure time socializing with the rest of the family; obligatory visits to relatives can often take up much of the weekend.



Saudi youths celebrate their country's National Day (September 23rd) on Riyadh's Thalia Street (Caryle Murphy)

But again, this is a condition in transition. The Internet is diluting Saudi society's divisions, allowing youths to contact others beyond their immediate surroundings. And if the government proceeds on its intended course of developing a diversified, knowledge-based economy, it will have to facilitate a much more dynamic, robust private sector. This will breed cross-fertilization and alliances across the many boundaries that now fracture Saudi society.

ARAB AWAKENING HAS AN IMPACT

Despite the lack of open protest, my interviewees contended that the Arab Awakening has affected both the Saudi people and the government.

Most cited greater freedom of speech and willingness by people to demand what they view as their "rights."

"There's more courage from the youth to just demand things, whether it's a right or a privilege or a dream," said a 23-year-old studying medicine in Jeddah. Referring to the King Khalid University protests, he added: "We

never heard of such things before. It makes sense. People just want things, and now they have more courage to demand them.”

The 19-year-old female majoring in Islamic studies at Imam Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh said she believed that the Awakening has “definitely” had an impact, “especially in the area of freedom of speech.... I notice it in how I interact with friends at school and how they’re beginning to discuss politics and the stance of the country on certain issues. My mom commented on it and said, ‘When I was your age... we didn’t know about these things.’”

Indeed, added another 23-year-old medical student in Jeddah, there is a big difference between his generation and that of his parents in this regard: “The previous generation is a very, very scared one. So they raised us not to speak. ‘Just go to your job. Wait for your paycheck. Raise your children. That’s all. This is life.’ Now, it’s different. Whenever you sit with anybody, we just speak freely.”

Several interviewees said that the government became more responsive to youth after the uprisings in other countries. “The government, they pay more attention to the people,” said a slim 23-year-old Riyadh man with a long, bushy beard from a religiously conservative background. “They are listening now more to the young people.”

University deans “now are being more attentive to students, and this is the result of students no longer being silent,” added the 19-year-old sophomore at King Saud University.

“The money that King Abdullah gave us, it’s not because they love us,” commented a 25-year-old master’s degree candidate in the United States. “To be honest, [it is] because they fear” us.

“You might think this is silly or funny,” said a 19-year-old female studying English at Imam Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh, “but the Awakening has not affected the people so much as the royal family itself. It made them really concerned and afraid that whatever happened [in Egypt and Tunisia] might reach them. So they’re beginning to voluntarily give us some rights”—for example, “more freedom of opinion.”

And a 26-year-old information systems manager who helped develop Saudi government websites said he’d observed something interesting since the Arab youth upheavals began. The “Contact Us” feature on the websites

“is the one thing they want to work perfectly. They’re saying, ‘Make people able to contact us.’ So I think there are effects.”

FEARS OF THE FUTURE

When I asked what they thought was the biggest danger facing Saudi Arabia, many interviewees raised the possibility of factional infighting within the royal family now that the first generation of princes is dying off and their sons will be contending for the throne.

“The whole destiny of the country is relying on a few persons, believe it or not.... [If] these few people started having problems between each other and fighting over power and money and whatever, the people will be obligated to take sides and it will be a disaster,” replied a 24-year-old medical student.

“Most Saudis are worried about the time after King Abdullah,” said a 21-year-old from Qatif now studying in Massachusetts. “Inside the royal family there is a fight.... Everyone wants to be the king.”

The 29-year-old female writer in Riyadh noted that the House of Saud has “so far been pragmatic. It sometimes...does some changes to its system so... it makes people [be] patient and believe that things are changing.” But she wondered if this pattern would prevail in the future. “Once you don’t have those wise people in the royal family who are doing things the same way their grandfathers and fathers did them, is the next generation going to be as wise?” she asked. “I don’t know.”

AL QAEDA UNPOPULAR

Conversations with many Saudis, as well as my focused interviews, indicate that the revolutionary rhetoric of al Qaeda, which seeks to topple the House of Saud, has little resonance among Saudi youth nowadays. Saudis say there was a large drop-off in sympathy for the terrorist movement after it launched a campaign of violence in the kingdom in 2003.

An indication of al Qaeda’s deflated support is that Saudi youths do not appear to be streaming over the border into Yemen to join the movement’s

affiliate there, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, according to analysts and Saudi officials. Although some youths may be taking that route, their numbers are not high. Clandestine networks supporting religious extremism are by nature difficult to detect. But for the present, they do not appear to be a major problem in the kingdom.⁸

However, a spin-off from al Qaeda's violent campaign—the large number of Saudis held for years without trial—is taking a toll on government support among young Saudis. Most of these prisoners were rounded up as the government sought to quash al Qaeda's violent attacks between 2003 and 2006, and the government alleges they are all sympathizers or members of al Qaeda.

In April 2011, after several demonstrations by relatives of the prisoners, officials for the first time gave an accounting of those being held. They said that more than 11,000 had been arrested since 2003. About half had been released, and the remaining 5,696 all were in some stage of a judicial process, they added. Saudi human rights activists claim that up to 30,000 political prisoners are being held.

Relatives of the prisoners want them either tried or released. Although the government has begun to bring the detainees to court, the proceedings are not fully open to the public and leave many questions unanswered. This has increased the disaffection and anger among some young people, particularly those from a conservative religious background who are critical of the government.

"They should free opinion prisoners," said a 25-year-old graduate student in Riyadh who comes from a family known for its Islamist activism. "They are many. Maybe every family has a prisoner and they haven't done anything wrong.... Just because of the 'War on Terror' we got a lot of difficulties. Many people are oppressed [and some of them] are young," she added.

No matter their degree of interest in politics, most of my interviewees believe that meaningful political change is not likely in the near term.

"There is a lot of tension now in Saudi Arabia," said a 27-year-old teacher from Qatif. "But how to express this tension, the way is not clear now.... There are a lot of elements that could make a 'Saudi Spring,' but it's not time yet."

Young people "are not empowered enough to participate in any change," said a 23-year-old female medical student from Khobar. "All the decision-

makers and everyone in higher positions is loyal to the [royal] family. So I don't think there will be change any time soon because the younger generations are not ruling."

A 22-year-old student at Virginia's George Mason University who is from the Eastern Province said he would like to see opportunities for greater citizen participation in decision-making, then added: "But of course it's not going to happen, because of the mentality of the royal family. They say 'We created this country... so this is ours. It's not yours. We rule and you just live here. You don't actually own this. We own you, your land, your money and everything.' So you can't actually go and say, I want to share the government with you.... They will not accept anything like that."

Young people feel this situation is "not fair," he added. "But they don't know what to do about it.... We don't have any leaders."

NOTES

1. Al Johani was released from prison August 8 2012, after enduring extended periods of solitary confinement, according to Amnesty International. He was brought before a special court for terrorism cases, where he was charged with "supporting demonstrations," "being present at the location of a demonstration" and "communication with foreign media in a manner that harmed the reputation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," the human rights group said, adding that the outcome of the trial and Al Johani's legal status is not known. See: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE23/019/2012/en>
2. Rob L. Wagner, "Saudi Students Stage Rowdy Protests," *The Media Line*, March 12, 2012 archived here: <https://sites.google.com/site/roblwagnerarchives/saudi-students-stage-rowdy-protests>; Reem Al Asiri and Abdullah Al Qahtani, "Ban on Internet and smartphones caused female students stampede," *Saudi Gazette*, March 10, 2012; YouTube videos of protests by men and women at the university: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMxpbBAcfdE> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FleKBlyHc0k&feature=related>
3. King Abdullah complied with this last demand three months later, firing the university's president, Abdullah AlRashid. "3 Officials Relieved of Services," *Arab News*, July 1, 2012
4. Saudi Arabia was ranked 161st out of 167 countries in the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2011 democracy index.
5. The kingdom's top council of religious clerics reminded Saudis in March 2011 that public demonstrations are forbidden, saying in a statement that the "correct

way in sharia (Islamic law) of realising common interest is by advising, which is what the Prophet Mohammad established” and that “advice should not be via demonstrations and ways that provoke strife and division, this is what the religious scholars of this country in the past and now have forbidden and warned against.” See “Saudi clerics condemn protests and ‘deviant’ ideas,” Reuters, March 6, 2011.

6. For human rights abuses in the kingdom see: U.S. Department of State Country Report on Saudi Arabia for 2011 released May 24, 2012 at: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>. Also see Amnesty International’s report, “Saudi Arabia: Repression in the Name of Security,” issued December 1, 2011 at: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/saudi-arabia-repression-in-the-name-of-security>
7. It should be noted that, contrary to my reporting, some surveys of Saudi youths have found *majorities* expressing a desire for political reforms. This may be the result of how the survey question was phrased, or it may reflect the possibility that those seeking more participation in decision-making do not necessarily call this ‘democratic,’ which for many very conservative Saudi Muslims is a Western idea inappropriate to the kingdom.

For example, the Arab Youth Survey 2012 by ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller [www.arabyouthsurvey.com], in which 250 Saudis aged 18–24 were polled, found that 68 percent said that living in a democratic country was “very important” to them. However, more youths chose “civil unrest” (55%) rather than “lack of democracy” (37%) as the “biggest obstacle facing the Middle East.”

Another survey of youths aged 15 to 24 done in 2010 by booz&co found that 63.5 percent said the government should “give young people increased access to [the] decision-making process and policy implementation at [the] local level.” More than half (58 percent) also would like to see the government create “local youth councils for effective participation in society.” See AlMunajjed and Sabbagh, “Youth in GCC Countries,” Exhibit #2.

8. Saudi officials have told reporters that they are aware of around 100 Saudis in the Yemen-based group, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. See “Saudi Arabia and the New US War in Yemen,” by Hugh Eakin, *The New York Review of Books*, May 21, 2012 and “After Underwear plot, Saudi officials cite headway against AQAP,” by Christa Case Bryant, *Christian Science Monitor*, May 9, 2012. Also, a Saudi-based terrorism analyst wrote in a May 24, 2012 email that the number of Saudis joining AQAP in the past two years “has dropped considerably” with only a few instances recorded.

On August 26, 2012, the Saudi Ministry of Interior announced that it had arrested several members of a terrorist cell in Riyadh after monitoring them for several months. Most of those arrested were Yemenis. Another cell was discovered in Jeddah and one of its members, a Saudi, was arrested. The U.S. embassy in Riyadh added in an email that “terrorist groups continued to pose a threat to U.S. Citizens” and they “may increasingly aspire to conduct smaller-scale attacks against Western targets.”

CHAPTER 7

Religion

“I have my own little sheikh inside.”

—Teaching assistant from Buraida, 25

“I have less interest in religion.”

—Jeddah youth, 22

“I listen to different [kinds of] music. My parents don’t listen to... any non-religious music. They’re very conservative.”

—George Mason University sophomore from Safwa, 22

“You remember the Dark Ages, the Middle Ages, when the church used to control the people in Europe and they used to kill the scientists? I think it’s the same way here. They’re using religion to control the people, and they don’t want them to know the truth so they can’t just have their own vision.”

—Medical school student in Jeddah, 23

Hamza Kashgari is an intense person given to intellectual exploration. In February 2012, he made the mistake of posting an imaginary conversation with the Prophet Muhammad on Twitter. The 23-year-old Saudi told Islam’s most revered figure that he regarded him as another human being with traits he liked and disliked and before whom he would not bow. “I shall not kiss your hand. Rather, I shall shake it as equals do, and smile at you as you smile at me. I shall speak to you as a friend, no more,” he wrote.

Within hours, Twitter was swamped by a tsunami of tweets from furious Saudis who regarded Kashgari’s youthful musings as an affront to their faith

and to the Prophet Muhammad. By one count, 30,000 tweets were sent over the next 24 hours, most of them demanding that Kashgari be punished.¹ Some labeled him an apostate—a very serious charge against a Muslim—and demanded his execution whether or not he repented. The country's highest religious body issued a statement suggesting that he was guilty of apostasy.²

The intensity of the reaction suggested an orchestrated campaign by religious conservatives to score political points with the population. Still, the vitriol and hatred expressed by Kashgari's critics shocked many Saudis, to the point that those who saw nothing wrong in what he said—or his right to say it—were afraid to defend him publicly.

"It was like McCarthyism.... You can't say you support Kashgari, because the hatred was too much," said a 21-year-old from Qatif now attending university in Pennsylvania. He said he did not "see a problem in what Hamza said" and believed that religious conservatives overreacted in order "to take revenge" against Saudi liberal thinkers.

A panicked Kashgari quickly deleted his tweets, went into hiding and apologized, saying: "I declare my repentance, and I distance myself fully from all the misleading ideas that had affected me and made me write expressions that I do not support. I bear witness that Mohammad is the messenger of God. I shall live and die firmly believing in it." He then fled the kingdom for Malaysia, where authorities promptly put him on a plane home at the request of Saudi officials. As of November 2012, he was still detained with no official charges.³

The episode illustrates not only religion's preeminent role in Saudi Arabia, but also the youth-driven currents affecting its contemporary religious scene and the hard-line opposition to those trends.

Changing attitudes among Saudi youth toward religion are posing a threat to the ultraconservative clerical establishment's influence and its puritanical, Salafi version of Islam known as Wahhabism. Since the House of Saud's political legitimacy is largely derived from its alliance with this clerical establishment, the religious views of youth are key to the kingdom's future governance.

The officially enforced religious uniformity that has been a hallmark of the kingdom for decades has always been a false facade because it obscured the country's religious diversity. This uniformity was challenged before, and today young Saudis are carrying that challenge forward, according to con-

versations with many young Saudis during my stay in the kingdom and the focused interviews done in 2012.

Though Kashgari's thoughts were extreme in straying from the norm, his reflections are emblematic of the questioning that many young Saudis are applying to their religious heritage. Increasingly, they demonstrate less willingness to accept this heritage without re-examination, as their parents did. They also are less deferential to and trusting of clerics employed by the state and more inclined to ignore a religious ruling, or *fatwa*, with which they disagree. "No one," declared a 2012 statement issued by young Saudis, "can claim monopoly of truth or righteousness in the name of Islamic law (sharia)."

Many youths disapprove of official religious scholars' preoccupation with trivial matters rather than focusing on what Islam's message has to say about morally perplexing issues of modern life. Additionally, the components of young Saudis' religious identity are changing, with diversity and tolerance increasingly valued.

These trends are likely to grow for several reasons, including youths' access to the Internet and their exposure to other cultures during study overseas. Also, young Saudis are being affected by the intensified debate about Islam's role in public life sparked by the Arab Awakening and the new pre-eminence of Islamist political parties, particularly in Egypt.

Young Saudis raised under a religiously based government approach this re-examination from a different starting place than their Tunisian or Egyptian peers, who reached adulthood under secular-oriented states. For Saudis, the dilemma is not so much Islam's leading role in governance and public life—which most are not challenging—but rather the enforced dominance of one sect, that is, Wahhabism.

One interviewee, a 25-year-old university teaching assistant who works in Riyadh, confided how he had mocked a 2011 conference organized by the Ministry of Interior at Imam Muhammad bin Saud University to boost support for Salafism. "I made fun of it on Twitter," he said. "I got an invitation letter, I took a picture of it, and I sent it to my followers saying, 'Oh if I attend this, I will be Salafi.' People laughed about it. What is Salafism really? What is the point? What is the idea?"

FREEDOM OF THOUGHT

The Kashgari case “was a huge eye-opener to young people as to what kind of restraints this country has over [them] and their opinions,” said Mohammad Al Ojaimi, a 30-year-old Islamist activist who has regular contact with politically attuned Saudis in their twenties. “A lot of them are upset that you can’t speak your opinion and if you do so, you’re going to get the death sentence.”

Almost all my interviewees considered Kashgari’s comments impious and disrespectful. Some thought he should be punished to deter others who might express similar ideas. Others did not consider what Kashgari said sacrilegious and believed that he should not be penalized. But they too said he should have shown respect for society and kept his ideas private.

Only one, a 28-year-old university teaching assistant, said Kashgari should be executed, though this person wavered and finally reached this conviction only after debating with himself. “If you don’t like the Prophet, just keep it to yourself, don’t mislead other people... They like their Prophet. They adore him. Why do you do this? Now, you should pay for what you did.” He initially suggested that Kashgari be flogged “so others won’t do the same,” then changed his mind, saying: “I want Kashgari to be killed... because we don’t need extremist liberals. We need peace. So you are inciting me to kill you. You are arousing me to hate you... Just keep silent.”

Another teaching assistant, 25, who lives in Buraida and is now studying in the United States said he would give Kashgari five years in jail “because we don’t want anybody to say a word about Prophet Muhammad or God.” He noted that “all Muslims were crying” when a Danish newspaper published satiric cartoons of the respected prophet. “Now, when it comes to one of our own citizens, this is more severe.”

A 26-year-old Riyadh-based university teaching assistant said he was “really shocked” at Kashgari’s tweets. “He shouldn’t have spoken about any prophet in any disrespectful way, and according to a lot of people he needs to be killed. I think he needs to be mentally assessed... I wouldn’t go to killing him.”

The most lenient view came from a 25-year-old teaching assistant studying in Florida. He said that he disagreed with Kashgari’s thoughts but disapproves of how he was treated. “If I punish him, would I convince him to love or respect Prophet Muhammad?” he asked. “Sometimes you have those

doubts. So we have to be patient with people until they get back to the track.... And even if he doesn't, it is his problem. Why kill him?"

"OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH RELIGION IS COMPLICATED"

Saudis in their twenties were born and raised in an era of extreme religious conservatism, uniformity and religiosity in the kingdom. They saw older siblings and cousins praised for joining a government-sanctioned jihad against "infidel" Soviet troops occupying Afghanistan. Many were teenagers when al Qaeda attacked the United States in 2001, and Saudi Arabia between 2003 and 2006. Several told me that they had been much more religious in high school, refusing to listen to music or watch television, praying a lot and shunning non-Muslims.

"I gave away all my pants because modest women are not supposed to wear pants. I covered my face [with a full veil]... and I remember I had one Shia friend and I boycotted her... It was really, really hardcore," recalled a 26-year-old female who got her master's degree in New York. "And I have to think it was my environment. My parents weren't like that. They were so nice. It was definitely not something I picked up at home."

For her generation, "our relationship with religion is complicated," she added, recalling how they were "growing up at a time where all these Afghan mujahideen were being praised as 'heroes.' And then we saw them condemned as terrorists in 9/11. I must say, speaking for myself, I fluctuated with religion so much."

This generation of young Saudis is also living at a time when the kingdom's religious orthodoxy has fractured and the authority of its traditional religious establishment eroded—developments that began when Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz bin Baz, the preeminent Wahhabi religious scholar for decades, died in 1999.

His successor, Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz Bin Abdullah Al-Asheikh, just does not carry the same weight or prestige. Moreover, he no longer is a solitary voice interpreting Islam for Saudis. He has competition from scores of independent-minded sheikhs, as well as Islamic televangelists on satellite television and YouTube.

A few interviewees said al Qaeda's 2001 assault on the United States deeply affected their religious views. A 28-year-old man, now studying

for his master's degree in Virginia, recalled how he was taking an English course with a teacher from New York when the attacks occurred. "This foreign teacher [was] crying in front of me because his home is near to 9/11, and he said 'My friends are dead,'" the man recalled.

"This kind of shocked me. So I started to think about the issue, going to the Internet, the [online] forums, and discussing with people what happened, why it happened. And I started having all these doubts about what we were taught in our schools and our society." He began reading intensively, and was particularly influenced by several Western philosophers whose biographies and books he is now translating into Arabic.

A 24-year-old Riyadh woman studying law in Britain said she was "astonished" by the events of 9/11. Before that date, "our idea of jihad was that it was sacred," she said. But afterward, "I said, 'This is not Islam. How could anyone interpret that as Islam? Is that my religion?'"

LESS TRUST IN SHEIKHS

Their teenage religiosity now moderated, Saudi youths show less deference than their elders for the official religious establishment, and less trust in their decrees. A 28-year-old teaching assistant studying in the United States noted how some religious scholars had done turnabouts and now say that listening to music and gender mixing in public, once forbidden, are permissible. "Now, [youths] do not trust any sheikh. For me, I do not trust any," he said. Even when the Grand Mufti Al-Asheikh speaks, "nobody says, let's do it, like in the past," he added. "Now they feel the mufti deceives. They are not telling the truth."

The grand mufti is an aged, old-school authority figure who closely follows the government's political line, and his ultra-conservative rulings demonstrate no recognition of changing times. He has called Twitter full of "lies" and dangerous for Muslims, sanctioned marrying off girls as young as 10, and declared that foreigners aiming to harm Islam caused Egypt's 2011 youth protests.

"He doesn't live in the world we live in," said a 23-year-old medical student in Jeddah.

Skepticism about religious sheikhs employed by the state is also found in conservative Buraida. A 25-year-old high school English teacher there, who said he'd been more religious in high school than he is now, told me over coffee in a hotel lobby that "before, if anyone talked about religious [things], I listened. But now, I don't trust everyone. Even if you are a religious man, I don't trust you because you always talk about things that are not very important for society. Sometimes society has a lot of problems and you are silent. I don't want that."

The 28-year-old teaching assistant agreed: "This is not the time to discuss [details]. Now is the time to discuss the main principles. Like our relationship with the West, the liberal demands... Not what should I wear? What should I do? Is this *hallal* [approved]? Is this *harram* [forbidden]? This is old-fashioned. Now, these are outdated. We should not spend our time discussing them."

Some sheikhs issue *fatwas* that "are not applicable to the new society, the new way of life," added a 27-year-old videographer from Jubail. "What I know and I'm sure about is that people are starting to question some muf-tis" and regard their *fatwas* merely as "a matter of opinion."

And unlike their elders, today's youths do not accept that a religious scholar is automatically an expert on all subjects. "When it comes to the economy, you are not allowed to talk about the economy because you don't have the knowledge. Let the specialists talk about it," said a 25-year-old teaching assistant studying in Florida.

POPULAR SHEIKHS

Their wariness of official religious authorities has led many young Saudis to seek spiritual guidance from religious scholars not employed by the state. By far, the two most popular clerics among my interviewees were Mohammed Al Arifi and Salman Al Audah. Like most clerics these days, both are accessible on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, as well as their own websites. Neither is part of the official religious establishment. Both have millions of Twitter followers.

Now in his 60s, Al Audah was a fiery fundamentalist in the 1990s who charged that the Saudi government was not Islamic enough. He openly opposed the U.S. military presence in the kingdom during the Gulf War of 1990–91, when a U.S.-led alliance used Saudi Arabia as a staging area from



Saudi religious sheikh
Salman Al Audah
in Riyadh (Caryle
Murphy)

which to eject Iraqi occupation forces from Kuwait. Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden cited Al Audah as a spiritual influence.

Jailed in 1994, Al Audah took more moderate stances on many issues when released five years later. Today, he remains a critic of the government and was among scores of prominent Saudis who signed a 2011 petition to the king demanding a constitutional monarchy. He also praised the shift to more democratic governments in Egypt and Tunisia, which led a nervous Saudi government to shut down his popular weekly television program and bar him from foreign travel.

Al Audah has a huge following in the kingdom, and may even be its most popular cleric, although his Twitter followers as of November 2012 (1.9 million) were fewer than Al Arifi's (3.2 million). Al Audah's admirers praise his piety, wisdom, moderate views and spiritually attuned sermons and tweets in which he promotes compassion and subtly criticizes injustices in the kingdom. His website, Islam Today, is in four languages, and he tweets in both Arabic and English.

Mohammed Al Arifi, a professor at Riyadh's King Saud University, is also extremely popular. Sometimes called the "Tom Cruise of Wahhabism" because Saudi women regard him as handsome, he appears to be in his forties and supports the government unreservedly. Lacking Al Audah's scholarly sophistication and credentials, Al Arifi instead is a charismatic showman. He uses humor, jokes and sometimes sexual innuendo to build his audience, especially among the young, who say they like his earthy style and the fact that he addresses their problems. He seems to be more popular among men than women, many of whom regard his jokes as vulgar. One woman I interviewed said she dislikes him because he endorses polygamy.

"He engages youth on a level where they're equal to him," said the 26-year-old woman who got her master's degree in New York. "So he's not talking down to them, rather talking to them or with them.... I remember once he said, 'There's a reason why God promised us rewards like a lot of

beautiful women in heaven, and that's because look at us guys—we love women.' I saw guys react to that."⁴

CONFUSION AND DOUBTS

The splintering of religious authority has led to confusion and alienation among some young people, according to a high school religion teacher in conservative Buraida. He said his students “are getting a lot of ideas, a lot of *fatwas* from all around them. It's making them not know what's right and what's wrong... so they would rather” ignore them.

But access to different interpretations of Islam through new media also is encouraging independent thinking, said a 31-year-old assistant principal in Riyadh. She noted that the Islamic legal school followed by the Saudi state—Hanbali—decrees that women must cover their face with a veil in public. “But now, young girls are discussing this and asking ‘Why should I wear it if I'm not wearing makeup?’” she said. And they are reading what other Islamic legal schools say about veil wearing to get authentic religious reasoning for their arguments, she added.

Although doubt is not an acceptable public stance in Saudi Arabia, where religious belief is the foundation of the state and society, there have always been Saudis who were not sure of God's existence or denied there is a God, as well as those who were indifferent to religion. Such ideas, however, were usually never uttered publicly. So it was a surprise to hear several interviewees contend that atheism and discussion of it are on the rise in the kingdom.

“People now think atheism is something interesting, something good,” said the 28-year-old teaching assistant studying for his master's degree. One reason for this, he added, is “because the Islamic teachers are not good enough.... They are backward.”

A 22-year-old engineering student in Riyadh said: “Now we have people who don't believe in God here in Saudi Arabia. For example, Kashgari was one of that group.... We have these people who are very rude with religion. As I told you, everything is changed dramatically.”

Other young Saudis are not upset to hear atheists speak publicly. “It's their right. If they don't want to follow a religion, it's fine. It's like you prefer rice

over pasta,” said a 23-year-old female medical student, who described herself as moderately religious. “You shouldn’t force people to follow religion because they might pretend they are following religion and deep inside they don’t.”

In separate interviews, two older Saudis who work with youth confirmed that there is more open discussion of atheism. One of them, a prominent Islamist political activist, blamed the trend on a lack of attention to youth concerns. “The youth have many difficulties. And no one is listening to them,” he said. “That’s why you hear the voice of atheists. It’s not a lot, but it’s a very alarming sign in Saudi society because nobody is expecting this. Because no one is listening to them, the youngsters go astray from the path.”

To be sure, not all Saudi youths are questioning their faith. Many are following the well-worn path just like their parents. And there are some who have questions, but are afraid to voice them because of what others might think.

“They have their questions, definitely. But it’s either you’re brave enough to ask them or just keep them bottled inside,” said a 24-year-old medical school student in Abha. “Mostly they will keep them bottled inside.... It’s fear that prevents them [asking]. But they have their questions.”

FAVORING MORE TOLERANCE AND DIVERSITY

Many young Saudis said they see themselves as less dogmatic and narrow-minded than their elders and would like to see greater tolerance for Islam’s diversity.

Among Saudis, “there is a big portion of people who are very rigid,” complained a 25-year-old teaching assistant studying for his master’s in the United States. People his age, however, “are more open-minded. Whenever there is something okay in Islam, we will... not prevent it,” he added. Since young people make up such a large proportion of Saudi Arabia’s population, he said he is “one hundred [percent] convinced” that the dominant Saudi version of Islam will become more tolerant. “What I want is that they have diversity of Islam” instead of enforcing “a Qassimi or Najdi way of Islam,” he added, using euphemisms for the state-enforced Wahhabi strain of Islam.

In the past, said a 25-year-old female in Riyadh working on her master’s in information technology, the diversity of interpretations in Islam

was hidden by the state. But now young people “are more aware about the diversity and accept it more, because it’s stated in the Qur’an that people will have different opinions.”

Evidence of youth support for religious diversity surfaced in early 2012 when two statements appeared online calling for greater tolerance for different opinions, especially in the religious realm. The statements appear to be the work of political activists influenced by the Arab Awakening, but signatories of both documents included many Saudis in their twenties.

The first, released in the wake of the Kashgari incident, was signed by about 40 people whose average age was 27, according to Islamist activist Al Ojaimi, who works with young Saudis and helped write both declarations. The statement decried how Kashgari was treated and affirmed that “the correct and religiously sanctioned path for dealing with thought is thought and nothing else, and that the basis of Islamic civilization is the development of ideas and beliefs on evidence... not on compulsion.” It also denounced the “incitement and hostility” emanating from “extremist liberal” circles and added that “the advancement of our nation depends on the ability of different factions to coexist, indeed to collaborate, and we are capable of that with God’s help.”

The second statement was issued online March 30 and was a more direct challenge to the Saudi religious establishment and its efforts to exclude all interpretations of Islam other than the Wahhabi version. Within two weeks, the document had been signed by more than 2,600 people, who included both Sunnis and Shiites and whose average age was 25, according to Al Ojaimi.

Titled “Statement of Saudi Youth Regarding the Guarantee of Freedoms and Ethics of Diversity,” it decried attempts by state clergy to maintain a “monopoly of truth or righteousness” and went on to state:

“We are a group of young activists who strive toward achieving the objectives of Islamic law (sharia), which we take pride in belonging to. We recognize our rights and obligations. We do not accept anyone questioning our adherence to Islam or our patriotism, and we do not accept it if any movement or faction speaks on our behalf in a manner that claims the right to teach, guide and advise us and act as our guardian under the pretext of protecting us from views that differ from theirs.... As young

Muslims, we reject this patriarchal guardianship that forbids us from practicing our God-given right to think and explore for ourselves...

"The generation that preceded us lived the past two decades in a whirl of those rival conflicts, where every movement was seeking the abolition of the other opposing movement using immoral and unacceptable methods. This has led to the deviation of religious and cultural discourse from core issues [relevant to] the welfare of the nation... [toward] narrow partisan issues that are partial and shallow.

"We, the young generation of today, deplore and strongly reject the return of this confrontational, exclusionary, aggressive culture, which does not believe in pluralism, responsible freedom, civil society and a unified nation that includes everyone in all colors and constituents."

The document demanded an end to "accusations of disloyalty and betrayal" against those with opposing viewpoints; the establishment of "civil society institutions fit to accommodate everyone, without favoring or empowering a specific movement or party over others," and the establishment of "a state of rights and institutions."⁵

A 27-year-old teacher from the majority-Shiite town of Qatif wrote in an email that he signed the declaration because he wants to belong to "a generation that determines its fate; where people are 'the source of authority,' not a single person who determines the fate of a whole nation and tries to make people look ignorant for the sake of protecting his authority and rule."

SEARCHING FOR AN ALTERNATIVE

For the past three years, young Saudis looking for an alternative to Wahhabi Islam have been meeting annually outside the kingdom, first in Bahrain in 2010, and then in Qatar in 2011. In a sign of the gathering's potential impact, the 2012 conference planned to be held in Kuwait drew intense opposition from conservative Salafi clergy in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, who lobbied for the conference to be cancelled. Despite their opposition, the event was held, though with a truncated agenda.

“Our concern is freedom, human rights, citizenship and how to connect them to Islamic thinking,” said Mustafa Al Hasan, 36, an assistant professor of Qur’anic exegesis at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran and an organizer of the initiative, known as the Ennahda [Renaissance] Forum.

In a 2012 interview in Khobar in the Eastern Province, Al Hasan said that younger Saudis, shaken by the events of 9/11, have been forming small discussion groups that don’t follow any particular sheikh, which he called a new development in the kingdom’s religious landscape.

“We look to ourselves as being from an Islamic background...We want to talk about how to change...So we created a forum to just talk and share ideas with a high ceiling of freedom of speech,” he said, adding that those involved in this search are mainly 18 to 30 years old and insist on one thing: no violence. “They don’t trust the old form of Islam, the old clerics,” Al Hasan added. “They are against the old and not yet to the new. They are thinking.”

Young Saudis have shown a great interest and enthusiasm for these exploratory discussions, said Mishari Al Ghamdi, another organizer of the Forum. He noted that even though participants had to pay their own transportation and a \$266 registration fee, around 500 people applied to attend the 2012 conference. Because of space limitations, however, they could only accept 120 participants.

“Young people want to attend to hear these new ideas,” Al Ghamdi said. If such a conference were allowed inside Saudi Arabia, he added, “I believe... it will host thousands of people.”

DEVOUT BELIEVERS

It would be a mistake to conclude from these new religious trends that young Saudis want a secular-oriented society. On the contrary, even those who favor more openness and diversity want a society oriented toward Islam and believe that Islam should guide public life. And for all their questions and doubts, Saudi youth remain extremely devout and observant.

“To be honest, I’m not doing everything perfectly. I did many sins. For example, just now *isha* [nighttime] prayers finished, but I didn’t go to pray,”

the 22-year-old engineering student in Riyadh told me in the middle of our interview. “But I will pray.”

They also want the Saudi state to protect, defend and spread Islam. One 22-year-old Riyadh youth studying English in Florida said he'd like more tourists in his country so they can “know the Islamic religion.” And like a few other interviewees, he regards Saudis as exceptional in their devotion and practice of Islam. “We learn the religion more than the other countries and... have a strong faith in Allah,” he said.

His 19-year-old friend and fellow student said the kingdom did not have an uprising like other Arab countries because of its religious orientation. “Saudi Arabia is based on the Qur'an and the Sunna. Because of that we follow the Qur'an for everything,” he said. “Because of that we don't have problems like Egypt, Tunis or Libya.”

One youth expressed concern that if Saudis increase their interactions with foreigners or become too open to the rest of the world, it “will affect the religion...The first thing that makes Saudis different is religion—in Saudi Arabia we are strict,” said this 21-year-old youth, now in college in Massachusetts. Although the Saudi brand of Islam declares that listening to music is sinful, he noted with some disapproval, “when you go to reality, most of the new generation listens to music now because they don't care, they are not that strict, they're open to the world. They forget something about religion.

“We need to be open, but with careful thinking,” he added, explaining that Saudis should adopt “new technology and new education” but not be influenced by other cultures and religions.

A PLACE FOR RELIGIOUS POLICE

Nowhere is the quest by young Saudis to construct their own unique religious path clearer than in their multi-layered attitudes toward the so-called “religious police,” formally known as the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice—“the Commission,” for short. These are the long-bearded men who patrol public places searching for violations of Islam—as interpreted by Wahhabi clergy—like illegal mixing of genders

and alcohol consumption. They also are on the prowl for clandestine worship services by non-Muslims that take place in private homes.

Seen by Westerners as an intolerable invasion of privacy, the religious police are viewed with more complexity by young Saudis. Some youths clearly despise them. But many others accept them—at least in theory—as a means for enforcing virtue in society, though they do not want to be personally confronted or questioned by them.

“I totally, totally appreciate” the work of the Commission, said the 22-year-old interviewee studying engineering in Riyadh. He especially likes their shopping mall patrols to keep unmarried boys and girls apart. “Yes, we have people that if my sister goes shopping by herself they will bother her... so I want them there,” he explained.

But if he were stopped by the police when he was with his sister, he admitted, “I’ll be upset.”

Very few interviewees supported disbanding the religious police, because they regard them as a hallmark of an Islamic society. However, many criticized how they operate, saying they need to be more polite and less confrontational with the public, and not focus on minor things like whether a woman covers her face. Several defended the Commission, alleging that the media exaggerated its mistakes in order to turn people against it.

It is impossible to scrap the Commission “because society likes it. If it’s gone, that means the country is Westernized, so we should keep it... but they should be nice to people,” said a 28 year-old teaching assistant studying for a master’s degree in the United States.

A 23-year-old medical student in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia’s most open-minded, cosmopolitan city, said that although “young people hate” the Commission, he “wouldn’t like them to be removed, because they definitely have a role. But they need regulations... because every single one of them is understanding the religion in his own way and trying to apply this on the people.” He supports their efforts to enforce the ban on alcohol, for example, but would also like them to investigate corruption.

Perhaps one of the most telling barometers of public opinion regarding the Commission is the video of an encounter between a 25-year-old Saudi woman and Commission members who asked her to leave a Riyadh shopping mall because she was wearing nail polish. One eyewitness said she was

also wearing heavy makeup and a see-through face veil, and was “reeling and swaying” to music in her earphones.

Instead of meekly complying with the Commission's request, which is the usual response, the woman began screaming at them to “mind your own business” and recorded the incident with her camera phone. She posted the video to YouTube in late May, and by mid-August, it had over 2 million views.

The large number of views testifies to the intense public interest in seeing someone defy the Commission. But perhaps more notable is that more viewers “disliked” the clip (10,294) than “liked” it (3,410). It is quite possible that the “dislikers” are part of an organized campaign by Commission supporters. But if not, the numbers suggest that many more Saudis disapproved of the woman's belligerent behavior toward the Commission than supported it.⁶

NOTES

1. Blogger Ahmed Al Omran reported the 30,000 tweets: <http://saudijeans.org/2012/02/08/hamza-kashgari/>
2. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/02/13/saudi-arabia-writer-faces-apostasy-trial>
3. According to Human Rights Watch, Kashgari was still detained as of November 2012 without formal charges laid against him. In April 2012, another person was arrested after tweets that criticized some interpretations of Prophet Muhammad's sayings. Mohammed Salama, a dual U.S.-Saudi citizen was still held without formal charges as of November 2012. See Human Rights Watch statement from Beirut October 31, 2012, “Saudi Arabia: Free Detainee Held Since April for Tweets.”
4. Besides Al Audah and Al Arifi, young Saudis I interviewed also mentioned these sheikhs as ones they paid attention to: Nasser Al Omar, Saleh Al Fawzan, Aaidh ibn Abdullah Al-Qarni and AbdulRahman Al Sudais—all of them ultraconservative. A few interviewees cited religious scholars outside the kingdom such as Jamal al Banna, younger brother of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan Al Banna, Tariq Suweidan in Kuwait, Amr Khalid in Egypt and Anwar Ibrahim in Geneva. These last four are far more moderate and open-minded than the first group.
5. The first statement can be found here: <http://alweeam.com/archives/107186> and here: <http://islamtoday.net/nawafeth/artshow-12-163609.htm>. The second statement is here: <http://youthpetition.wordpress.com/>
6. For witness statement, see: <http://saudiwoman.me/2012/05/25/the-immodesty-of-nail-polish/>. The woman's video was available here at least through November 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ULU0waNOU0&sns=fb>

CHAPTER 8

Women: Rights and Romance

RIGHTS

The three sisters received me in an ornate, heavily draped sitting room in their Riyadh home. They wore long-sleeved tops and ankle-length skirts but no makeup or jewelry, which they regard as inappropriate for devout Muslim women. The youngest, 22, is an undergrad in microbiology; her 25-year-old sister is studying for her master's in information systems; and the eldest, 27, is a university lecturer in information systems who wants to get her doctorate overseas, preferably at the University of California. They are Twitter devotees, download movies from the Internet, approve of women working outside the home, and hope one day to see elections in the kingdom.

They also wear the full face veil, the *niqab*, whenever they leave home. They proudly showed me a framed picture of themselves frolicking in the snow of an Austrian mountain outfitted in long winter coats and face veils. “We can enjoy our lives with respect for our religion,” said the eldest.

When I asked if they were happy with women's status in the kingdom, they were momentarily nonplussed. After a pause, the 22-year-old replied that they were satisfied and then asked: “What do you mean? What is it supposed to be?”

I noted that Saudi women face many restrictions. For example, they must be accompanied by a male relative or have written permission from their male guardian—usually husband or father—to travel abroad.

“But this is from our religion, and we respect that,” said the 27-year-old, recalling that the Prophet Muhammad “told us that women cannot

travel without a *mahram*, a guardian.” She continued: “I want you to get the point of this.... It’s not for preventing me from doing what I want. It’s to protect me, because the woman usually cannot defend herself and sometimes she’s weaker... [and] she needs someone to support her, not to prevent or control her.... We agree with that [rule] and I will not want to travel overseas without a man.”

At another point in our conversation, over hot chocolate and abundant sweet pastries, the 22-year-old said she was disappointed that some Saudi women take off their face veils and headscarves as soon as they board planes heading out of the kingdom. “I think they are affected by Western media.... I think God is everywhere, not only in Saudi Arabia,” she said.

Like these sisters, many young Saudi women have no problem with the pervasive controls imposed on them by “guardianship,” a system based on tribal culture and customs that have been sanctified by religion over the years. Under this system, every Saudi female must have a legal male guardian, usually her father or husband, give written permission for her to travel outside the country, have some medical procedures, make a police report, appear in court, rent an apartment and obtain some government business licenses. Up until 2004, women had to show their guardian’s written permission to work.

Other young Saudi women find these strictures on their personal autonomy intolerable.

“I like freedom, so one day I might go to Dubai or some country where women have more rights,” said a 23-year-old medical student who is considering a career in the field of tissue engineering.

We were sitting in the outdoor courtyard of a Riyadh hotel. A worker was hosing down the dusty stone patio, and birds were tweeting overhead. She wore black-rimmed glasses, and a tightly wound headscarf but no face veil. Her one accessory was a large, bright orange handbag.

“I’m lucky because I have a good father” who does not abuse the guardianship restrictions to make her life miserable, she said. “But I have some friends who don’t.”

Their lives, she added, are “very sad. Their father is watching them. They cannot travel. Some of my friends quit school because their father didn’t want them to continue in the medical [field] where they don’t apply gender segregation.... They’re intelligent, and they could have been in a good

position. But they're staying at home... Some actually chose to get married because they wanted to leave their father's house."

Some fathers refuse to let their daughters marry in order to retain access to their income. Tales of physical and sexual abuse are not uncommon, as are reports of girls being locked up at home for weeks or months on end.

If a woman's father is dead or she becomes divorced or widowed, an uncle, brother or son becomes her guardian. The thought distressed one of my interviewees. "My son suddenly is my guardian—that's so hard for women," said the 23-year-old college student in Jeddah. "I hope by the time I'm a mother they're going to stop it, because a 13-year-old boy as the guardian of an old woman, really, it's very humiliating."

Technically, women have the right to file a complaint in court against an abusive guardian. But this doesn't often work to her advantage, because Saudi judges are all male and more often than not, they side with the father and find the woman guilty of "disobedience."

"It's like you're a slave or something," said a 24-year-old Riyadh woman who is heading to Europe to study law.

She said that many women with abusive guardians do not complain publicly because they do not want to harm their family's reputation. "I will not tarnish that, so I won't speak... It's part of our culture. It's a family matter. Women do that all the time," she explained. "Culture is something very, very powerful in Saudi Arabia. As much as I love that, there has to be a limit because much of it is against women."

Apart from physical restrictions, there are also psychological handicaps from always having someone else make big decisions for you. "I really feel sad," said a 29-year-old female writer in Riyadh. "My birthday is in May, and I'm thinking about my mom and how maybe until now she has not become an adult... I don't know when this is going to happen [for me]. I really feel like it just goes on and on, where you're still not an adult, per se."

Having a professional career helps her submerge this sentiment, but it's a precarious solution. "A career gives me a little bit of a feeling that I am an adult so that's why always in my life and until now...I'm always looking for a career because once I am at work that is the the only time where I feel empowered. I feel like someone could be approving of what I'm doing, and will be trusting me with something that I'm doing completely. And that's

why, if I fail in my career, it impacts me really deeply because it sort of drags me back to the feeling that I am still not capable enough of being adult.”

A 26-year-old woman who got her master's degree in New York said that when she is in the kingdom, “I don't feel myself like a full person. I feel like I'm half a person, a person that belongs to someone else, always.”

She believes the guardianship system will never be scrapped. “We [women] will always be the bargaining chip. Always, always, always,” she said. “When liberals and conservatives are fighting, what they're fighting about is usually women.... It's the focal point of all arguments.... All the odds are stacked up against us.”

One reason why women's rights are so highly charged is that the ultraconservative clerical establishment has aggressively appropriated them as its bailiwick. And its official stance was on display at the International Conference on Women in Islam and Contemporary Women held in April 2012 at Qassim University in Buraida, a city closely identified with Wahhabism. I attended the opening ceremony at which three senior male clerics addressed the all-female gathering from a separate auditorium by closed-circuit television. Their remarks made clear that they regard proposals to reform or abolish the guardianship system as a Western plot to harm the kingdom and threaten its Islamic identity.

“We are the representative of true Islam, and we should not be like any other country,” said one cleric. “There should be more exposure of Western Crusades against Muslim women.”

Such views help explain why the Saudi government was so indecisive and self-contradictory when it was being pressed by Olympic officials to allow females to participate in the 2012 London Games, which these clerics and their followers view as a nefarious Western attempt to get Muslim women into skimpy clothing. After turning itself into a pretzel trying to please both its conservative population and Olympic officials, the government relented and approved the entry of two Saudi women who competed in judo wrestling and the 800-meter race. But it refused to give the women any official sponsorship or help.

The Olympic episode merely drew attention to the appalling lack of physical exercise classes and sports in the nation's schools for girls because ultraconservative clerics deem them unfit for girls. The reasons they offer for opposing them can only be described as daft: Physical activity is “against

female nature,” might cause a break in girls’ hymens and so technically mean they are not virgins, and will encourage lesbianism if girls see each other undressed when changing.

For the Saudi religious establishment, preserving Saudi Arabia’s Islamic identity means controlling women. And this has been a theme in boys’ education in the kingdom. One of my interviewees, a 19-year-old sophomore at King Saud University in Riyadh, showed me his high school religious textbook that he had been given for the 2009–2010 school year. It said that when men and women mix in public, there are more illegitimate children, more disease and more divorce. “The place of woman is in the home,” it added. “She only should leave home if she has a need, and she should not speak to a man unless she needs to.”

The student recounted how he had chosen “true” in an exam when asked if men and women in the West are equal and women have their rights. But his teacher told him it was the wrong answer.

And a 35-year-old high school religion teacher I interviewed said that most of his students “don’t really understand the concept of women’s rights. Among 30 students, you might find one who has a clear conception or idea of what they are... If they come from a conservative family, that idea of women’s rights is always attached to some idea of corruption, or freedoms that should not be given to a woman. And that’s the general view of a lot of students here.

“For instance, me sitting with you here, being a teacher of religious studies with two women who don’t cover [their hair and faces]. I feel like a lot of people are looking at us and asking ‘What is going on?’ And if one of my students saw me, it would be like a horror for them. Our teacher is sitting with two women who are not covering and having coffee and a nice conversation? That to them is not acceptable at all.”

THE RUBICON OF FEMALE DRIVING

The ban on female drivers makes Saudi Arabia a target of ridicule around the world. It also is the most contentious and politicized women’s issue in the kingdom. This was clearly spelled out by a famous cartoon in a Saudi newspaper some years ago showing car keys attached to a hand grenade.

For the ultraconservatives, female driving is the start of a slippery slope into a Westernized society where women can do what they want and, as a result, society becomes plagued by evil and sin. Female driving is therefore the Rubicon that shall not be crossed.

The June 17, 2011, protest movement, in which more than 60 women drove cars in defiance of the ban, demonstrated that many young Saudi women want it lifted. Indeed, as more women enter the workforce, there will be greater demands to let them drive because of the rising economic burden of having a driver.

Even women from traditional or religiously conservative families favor allowing women to drive. The three sisters I met in Riyadh, for example, would like to see the restriction gone. It's not so much that they want to drive themselves—they are chauffeured by the family's two hired drivers. But, as the eldest explained, many of their female friends have no male relatives to ferry them about and can't afford to hire a driver.



Used with permission of artist, Hana Hajjar.

Women driving “is a change we can accept,” she said. “There is no rule in Islam to prevent that.”

But some young females oppose lifting the ban. And for interesting reasons. I was invited to a girls’ private elementary school in Riyadh, where I had a group interview with several teachers, mostly married women in their twenties. When I asked about driving, only a minority said they favored letting women drive. One woman said she doesn’t want to waste time looking for parking. Another said she likes having the opportunity to talk and bond with her father and brothers.

Then, a religion teacher gave her reason for keeping the ban, and it drew positive responses from many others in the group, who said they didn’t want to let their husbands off the hook.

“Men in Saudi Arabia,” the teacher explained, “are looking for any chance to get rid of their responsibilities.... They want to spend time with their friends.... If women can drive, he’ll drop all his responsibilities” for doing such chores as shopping for food, getting the car repaired and chauffeuring family members around the city.

“Why should I take the responsibility of driving and let him be free?” the teacher asked.

Similarly, when I asked five women in their early twenties in Buraida how many would like the driving ban scrapped, only one raised her hand. This unlucky woman was then subjected to a verbal barrage of abuse from her peers and some older women listening in. “You’re not Muslim!” one of the older women shouted at her, adding that women driving “opens a way for women to sin. Just look at the rape statistics in the United States.”

Besides, the women added, driving is not a big issue because Saudis families are large with plenty of males to drive women around.

Women driving is such a third-rail topic that King Abdullah, who is sympathetic to letting women drive, reacted to the 2011 driving protest by saying: “Let them vote!”

Just months after the driving protest in June 2011, the king issued a royal decree in September announcing that women would be able to run as candidates and vote in the next municipal council elections in 2015. It also stated that he intends to appoint women as members of the all-male advisory body known as the Majlis al Shura in 2013. Both are toothless bodies

with little power. But it was an important symbolic step: For the first time, Saudi women were given political rights equal to those of Saudi men.

It was a clever move by the king. He was able to show women that he is on their side but at the same time not change anything that would immediately affect daily life, which would have been the case had he rescinded the driving ban. And since both steps will not be implemented for a while, he was able to postpone confrontation with the ultraconservatives.

In other words, it is easier for king to grant women suffrage than allow them to have drivers' licenses.

DRIVING CHANGE IF NOT CARS

Despite the seemingly entrenched status of the guardianship system, my reporting in the kingdom and recent interviews indicate that demands from young Saudi women for greater personal freedom and career opportunities are growing, and these demands will be a driving force for social and economic change in coming years.

Change will be slow, but it is inevitable because the restrictions on Saudi women are running into two obstacles: First, rising numbers of young, educated females are rejecting the guardianship system because they are increasingly aware that Muslim women elsewhere have more personal freedom than they do.

"Now women know their rights because they read more, they're becoming more intellectual," said the 23-year-old medical student. "They're no longer traditional and they can say no. They learned that through [television and the Internet], because they don't teach that at school."

In addition, more and more women are realizing that some practices involving women are not based on religion, as they were told, but merely on that all-important word in Saudi society: Tradition.

This is true even among young women from religiously conservative or traditional homes. Several female interviewees from such backgrounds insisted that their own study of Islam in high school and college had made them see that what pass for obligatory religious rules are often optional cultural traditions. And if they are unfair to women, then they should be dropped.

A 19-year-old woman studying at the religiously conservative Imam Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh said that “the major thing we need to change is some traditions that are not part of the Qur’an, not part of sharia, and not part of the sayings of the Prophet... If we fix those things, we’re going to be a much better society.”

For example, she said, the custom of giving boys authority over their sisters is tradition and has “nothing to do with religion.”

This woman, who wore her long black hair swept up in a bun and a headband with white flowers, also noted that the Prophet Muhammad’s first wife, Khadija, “was much older than him, and that was okay. Now, all of a sudden, just because of tradition, it is not acceptable for a man to marry an older lady... Personally, I wouldn’t like to marry someone younger, but that’s beside the point. People should learn to allow other people to have the freedom of choosing what they want to do even though they don’t prefer it.”

I asked if she thinks Saudi women should fight for more equality. “There are definitely things women should demand that maybe were forgotten because women got accustomed to not having them or accepted not having them for a long time,” she replied. In the past, women accepted that they could only work in limited fields like teaching, she noted. But then they began demanding work in other occupations, and now “we have a [cabinet] minister, female engineers and doctors.”

This woman’s friend and fellow student, an oval-faced woman of 19, was equally adamant about tradition. Gently pounding her fist on her thigh for emphasis, she said: “I want to be able to completely show the separation between religion and tradition so it’s clear, because some people have gotten them so mixed up—to the point where it’s the same thing... For example, in some tribes, a girl has absolutely no say in accepting her potential [marriage] candidate. She has no say in choosing or saying yes or no. And that’s because of tradition.”

Another woman studying for her master’s degree in Islamic commercial law said her parents “were led and society was ruled by tradition. But I thought about it a lot, and I saw that a few [traditions] are not Islamic so we don’t need them. Now, the rules of Islam control me. [Tradition] is nothing for me.” She added that “one of our bad traditions” is the idea that a man is free to approach a woman’s family to ask for her hand in marriage, but

women are not allowed to do that. “As a specialist in Islam,” this 27-year-old contended that “it’s okay for a woman to go and say ‘I want that man.’ It’s okay in Islam.”

Another difficulty for the guardianship system, and Saudi society’s strict gender segregation, is the realities of economic development. The government has stated time and again that it wants to create a more diversified, less oil-dependent and more globally competitive economy. It has also stressed that women should be part of the workforce that creates this new economy.

It is hard to see how these goals can be fully attained if half the population cannot study and travel freely and are not fully responsible for their actions. Rather, there is likely to be a female “brain drain,” with Saudi women opting to live abroad so they are not stymied in their career aspirations.

In the fall of 2012, women made up 51 percent of the freshman entering the kingdom’s public universities.¹ And many women intend to continue working after they marry. One recent poll found that 88 percent of female students “see a successful career as part of their life plan,” a finding the survey’s authors called “a small revolution.”²

THE ASPIRATION GAP

How young men feel about this “small revolution” is complicated.

I asked 20 male interviewees about women driving, and only eight approved of it. Six opposed, and six said it would be all right sometime in the future when certain conditions had been met. They cited the need for adequate preparation, such as training female police officers to respond to emergency calls from female drivers. They also said it is necessary to change male behavior patterns so that female drivers would not be harassed on the road. Clearly, such preparations are going to take years, and there is no sign that the government has even begun to take such steps.

As these attitudes illustrate, young men are ambivalent about greater opportunities and freedoms for their female peers. They do favor women being educated, having careers and participating in public life—but not to the same extent that women favor these things. And men are less convinced than women that the sexes should be equal in the workforce and the political arena.



Female cashiers at a Jeddah supermarket. Only families may pass through their register. Conservatives oppose women taking such jobs because they involve contact with male patrons. (Caryle Murphy)

In other words, there is a significant “Aspiration Gap”³ between young Saudi men and women.

Polls of Saudi youth demonstrate this gap. In one survey, 4,400 Saudi university students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that in regard to women’s rights, “there will be substantial changes within the next five years.” Seventy-five percent of women agreed, but only 49 percent of males did. Similarly, when asked if “the culture of my country should stay the way it is now,” a larger percentage of males [44 percent] than women [33 percent] supported this idea.⁴

While most young men nowadays are looking for women who will contribute to the family income—only two male interviewees told me they did not want their wives to work—a majority (23) said they would not allow their wives to work in a gender-mixed environment, compared with those who would allow that (14).



Rana Al Khateeb, 23-year-old member of a Saudi female soccer team, prepares for contact with the ball. (AP photo/Hassan Ammar)

“If I’m gonna get married with somebody, I have trust in them, so why would I care about that?” said a 22-year-old sophomore at George Mason University who does not object to gender-mixed workplaces. “The issue is do I trust her?... If she’s working in a good job, that’s legal and she’s not doing anything wrong.”

The male preference for gender-segregated workplaces is likely to limit women’s job opportunities, but many women also favor them, saying that technology can help retain that feature of Saudi society. The 27-year-old student of Islamic commercial law said she hopes to someday see all-female courtrooms where she can work. If it were necessary to deal with a male judge or attorney, she added, “it’s no

big deal. We have advanced technology. It’s easy to connect with any man without being beside him. There is a resolution for the problem.”

It seems likely that the coming decade in Saudi Arabia will be marked by clashes of gender expectations not just in society but also in families, as young women demanding greater freedom and opportunities come up against still-dominant patriarchal attitudes—although these too are changing.

One interviewee, a 28-year-old teaching assistant getting his master’s in the United States, recounted how his views on women’s roles had changed. “One of my friends from my village traveled to the U.K., and he started talking about women’s rights. I was against him [and said to him], ‘Why do you want our women to go outside and expose themselves to others?’”

Back then, he said, he believed that women who worked outside the home were of ill repute. He also thought that “if a woman applies some perfume, this means she wants to be a prostitute,” he added. After a pause for reflection, he said: “Maybe we are brainwashed.”

Prodded by his friend, however, he went online to research what other branches of Islam said about working women and became convinced that it was not contrary to his religion. Now, he added, he is encouraging his two older sisters to find jobs “because society is changing. It’s not like before.”

Still, he believes that the biggest obstacle to equality between men and women in the kingdom is “religious conservatives” who say that people like himself “want to Westernize Saudi women, expose her to adultery and make her a bad person.... Our problem is that we think the source of corruption is women.”

ROMANCE

“They don’t know each other before they marry. It’s like a scratch card. You don’t see the number until you scratch it. You buy it before seeing the number.”

—College sophomore in Riyadh, 19,
explaining why so many young Saudi couples divorce

He told me his secret in the middle of our interview.

“Actually, I have a girlfriend. I found her maybe a year ago,” said the 23-year-old from Jeddah. “When I saw her, I liked her from the first look,” he added, though all he could see of the fully veiled woman was her eyes.

Dressed in a T-shirt and casual trousers, he’d come to the lobby of a Jeddah hotel with a friend to meet me. He was small-framed and athletic, training to run in a half-marathon. He worked for a major Saudi telecommunications firm entering data into a computer. Surprised at his revelation, I was curious to know how he managed this romantic relationship in such a strictly gender-segregated society. So I pressed the young Saudi, whom I’ll call Yasser, for details.

Lightning struck at a local theme park. “When I saw her and she saw me, I swear to God, I was following her for five hours.... It’s so hard to make a girlfriend here—so, so hard. After five hours she said, ‘What do you want from me?’ I said: ‘I see you. I like you. I just want to get marriage from you. This is my number. If you want to call me, it’s up to you.’”

She waited two months to call. “Maybe we spent one week [talking on the phone]. After one week, she loves me and I love her. I chat with her. I call her. I do not meet her,” Yasser recalled, explaining that the woman, who had been vacationing in Jeddah with her family, was now back in her home town on the other side of the country. But she did send him a photo of herself without a veil.

She told him that she’s ready to elope, “but I said ‘No. This is a wrong way,’” Yasser recounted. Instead, he told her that he would try to raise money and ask her father for her hand. He doesn’t think her father will accept him because he is not from the same tribe as her family. She has not told her father about Yasser, he added, because if she did, “maybe he will kill her.”

If rejected, Yasser said he’d have to accept it because “this is the life.” In that case, he will revert to tradition and ask his mother to find him a partner. “I want a girl and her hair is long and I want her skinny.”

“Sexy, you mean!” his friend teased.

Yasser’s chaste relationship is risky behavior in Saudi Arabia. Speaking with someone of the opposite sex to whom you are not related—unless in a public venue on official government business or a sanctioned activity like shopping—is one of society’s strongest taboos.

But Yasser and his girlfriend are not alone.

Modern communication tools are undermining the rigid gender segregation that has been a hallmark of Saudi society. Years ago, guys and girls would throw each other tiny scraps of paper with their phone numbers as they rode escalators or brushed past each other in supermarkets and malls. Later, cell phones and Bluetooth facilitated these clandestine connections and the Internet greatly expanded them.

Chat rooms, online forums, blogging, “friending” on Facebook, texting, instant messaging, Skype, and tweeting offer young men and women multiple avenues to communicate. Even old-fashioned email is used to converse with and sometimes court a partner.

These online experiences are creating a younger generation more relaxed about cross-gender friendships than their parents.

“I have some male and female friends on Facebook,” said a 23-year-old female medical student, which is a huge difference from her parents. “I

think the only man my mom knows is my dad and the only woman my dad knows is my mother.”

A 25-year-old university teaching assistant getting his master's in the United States said men his age see women differently in part because of their online communications. “Now on Twitter I have friends, men and women, and we talk about a lot of things,” he said. “We joke. We talk in a serious way. We exchange information. They respect me. And I know some girls and they are married and they are interacting with me. This is what I like about the new generation, you know, being open-minded.... I'm not just seeing the women—sorry for this—as a sex machine.”

A 19-year-old female doing Islamic studies at Imam Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh said she exchanges “thoughts and ideas” with men on Facebook and Twitter but never gets into “private or personal matters” so that the other person does not “become disrespectful.”

For some very religious young people, breaking society's gender rules, even if only through keyboard strokes, can bring on a lot of guilt. A 21-year-old male student in Massachusetts confided: “I love my cousin. We grew up together.... After I became 15 years old, I didn't see her anymore.... So I contacted her by email. That is a problem for our culture and our religion. In the religion it's prohibited. You can't talk to women.”

She emailed him back, but they realized they had a moral predicament. “We said, it's *haram* [forbidden] and we shouldn't do it,” he recalled. But in the end, they decided it would be okay to email each other because of the many years they had already known each other.

Even today, “I strongly believe that it's wrong,” he said, and “when I look at other people when they do that, I strongly disagree with them.”

But “if I look at my case,” he added with a wry smile, “I say, like, oh well.”

Despite the online interaction, there is still a clear distinction between virtual relationships and real life. As the 23-year-old medical student noted: “We sometimes have lunch with our male colleagues... inside the hospital... [but] we don't even greet each other if we see each other in the mall.” She explained that to acknowledge her male colleagues and say hello could be misinterpreted by them as flirtation, marking her as someone undeserving of respect.

In Riyadh, said a 25-year-old marketing student in Canada, “I had a lot of friends of the opposite sex through the Internet, but still it's not the same

when you meet in person.... And mostly in Saudi Arabia, having a friendship with the opposite sex is almost considered like sexual intercourse. I'm sorry to say that, but that's really true."

CHOOSING A SPOUSE, NOT A CAR

Attitudes toward marriage and gender relations among Saudi youth are changing fast, in part due to these virtual contacts, as well as the exposure to other cultures they are getting through satellite television shows and Internet-streamed movies. Both men and women increasingly want a greater say in choosing their partners,⁵ women are more fussy about prospective husbands, and many of the young men I spoke with were adamant that, unlike their fathers and grandfathers, they won't commit to a woman until they have had a chance to assess her character, personality and appearance.

"I'm not buying something. It's not a bike. It's not a car," said the teaching assistant getting his master's in the United States, explaining why he wants to know a lot about his future spouse. "Things are different these days. It's not that bad if I talk with a girl, as long as I respect her and she respects me. I wouldn't get married to someone I do not know."

A few of my male interviewees, especially ones studying outside the kingdom, said they would prefer to select their own partner rather than have their parents do it, which is the traditional way. In the past, "because you don't meet [girls], you go to your parents and say, 'I want to get married,' and they find you someone," said a 22-year-old from Qatif attending a Washington, D.C.-area university.

He is "undecided" about whether to follow this custom or not, "because the old-fashioned way is not as efficient anymore as it used to be.... Right now, I meet a lot of people here and there, and I see a lot of girls here and there.

"Also," he added, "I have some expectations. I don't want to get married with [just] anybody." He prefers a woman who wears a headscarf, indicating that she is religious, he added, "because it's gonna affect my children in the future and how we raise them."

Inside the kingdom—where celebrating Valentine's Day is a clandestine affair since it is officially forbidden—dating is impermissible. So

opportunities for getting to know a future partner are limited. Engaged couples have to meet in chaperoned situations, such as the home, or talk on the telephone with their parents' permission. A minority of open-minded Saudi families permit engaged couples to do these things, but most families do not.

"That's actually the mainstream thinking: that you should not know the girl before marriage," said a 25-year-old medical school student in the southwestern town of Abha. "I think this is the most problematic social problem here... because in Saudi Arabia, talking to a girl could be considered a vice if you are seen alone and talking."

He said that young men "are trying to know the girl, trying to meet her wherever, in shops, and trying to call her, to know her better before they propose, before they go to their mother" to request that she approach the girl's family.

"I just had a friend, actually, who had a love affair for three years I think, and they just got married, and I was very happy for him. It was a first for me to know that two people married for love," the interviewee said. He explained how the couple met in medical school, one of the few places not strictly segregated in the kingdom, and how his friend "was struggling with his parents.... He spent a lot of nights in my house sleeping over, because his mother didn't approve of the girl... [and kept] asking 'Who is she? How do you know her? How can we just go and ask her parents for her hand?' He had a lot of problems. I tell you, he spent the last year devastated.... He was sad, he was depressed."

As for himself, now that he is about to finish medical school, his parents are pressuring him to marry. "They are saying, 'We wanna see your children, blah blah blah.' I said: 'No way. I'm not gonna marry someone I don't know.' They were shocked, actually. They said, 'How would you know someone?'... They don't know how I will meet a girl."

Most young Saudi men have so little chance of meeting, let alone talking to, women that they end up getting engaged "the old-fashioned way," which is how one 26-year-old interviewee studying for his master's degree in the United States did it. The first woman his mother picked out came from a very religious family, which wanted to know if he attended dawn prayer at his local mosque every day.

"I'm not religious, but I do my best, but I can't wake up that early," he said. "I told my mom: 'Don't lie about anything. Just tell them frankly so they will tell us frankly and we can get to an agreement.'" Once they heard he was not an early riser, the deal was off. But his mother's second choice turned out to be a better match, and the two are now married.

For some young Saudis, the magnet of tradition and the desire to please parents remain so strong that they follow customs in which they no longer fully believe. An unmarried 23-year-old hospital worker in Riyadh, whose long beard denotes a conservative religious background, called his ideas about marriage "complicated," explaining that if he had a son who found a woman to marry on his own, "I will allow that. I will help [him] to do that."

But as for himself, he said, "I don't like to upset my parents." So he intends to ask his parents to find him a partner. And prior to his wedding, he added, "I would follow the religious instructions.... In our religion it is allowed to look at your wife before you engage her... and talk to her with her family [present].... I will ask her, 'What do you like in a man?'... Just to see what she is thinking."

MARRIAGE IS NOT EVERYTHING

Women's expectations about marriage are also shifting, and increasingly they are delaying this step to further their education or launch a career. In the process, they are battling the traditional notion, still very strong in Saudi Arabia, that women's ultimate and only fulfillment is in marriage. There are regular laments by (male) newspaper columnists about the rising number of Saudi "spinsters."

A 23-year-old medical student from Khobar laid out in some detail her aspirations over the next several years, and they did not include marriage. "Well, it's not in the plan," she replied when I asked her about it. "If I fall in love, that's fine. If I don't, it doesn't make a difference. I'm still happy."

"Marriage is not everything as people think in my country," said a 28-year-old woman studying for her master's degree in the United States, adding that her views on gender relations are very different from her mother's. "Men in our life are our brothers, our fathers, but I don't believe that they have—what

do you call it?—that they are superior than women,” she said. “This is my mother’s thought.... I don’t like these thoughts. So when I get married I don’t want to have this, that my husband will be the superior, no, no.

“My mother always told me this is the way we live,” the woman continued. “I’m different from her. When I get married I won’t let my husband control my whole life. It’s not me. Because, you know, my father taught us to be independent persons. He told us: ‘If you want to study abroad, go abroad. You are my daughter. Do whatever you want.’”

Many young women also hope to select their spouse rather than have someone foisted on them.

“I will not accept that a man goes to my family. He must come to me” to propose marriage, said a 24-year-old Riyadh woman who teaches Qura’nic studies to high schoolers.

A 23-year-old college student majoring in psychology in Jeddah said that a few women have already called her mother wanting to know if she’s available to marry their sons, but she’s always declined. “I’m not ready for that right now,” she said, adding that “I hope I find the person myself, either through work or a friend. Even if my mom found a person [for her to marry], we [have] got to know each other beforehand, because I don’t like the whole concept of someone coming and seeing me and judging me upon it.”

Many women in their twenties report worries about finding a suitable man to marry. “As you know, in our society a husband takes a lot of my time, so there might not be time for writing, for education, for seeking the rights of people. It will be difficult to find the husband who understands my concern for society,” said a 27-year-old aspiring lawyer who wants to educate women about their rights under Islamic law.

“The one thing that I can’t control is finding a spouse, which is something my Dad is really, really worried about.... I hate thinking about it,” said a 26-year-old Riyadh woman who got her master’s degree in New York. Most Saudi men, she lamented, are “just impossible. They get so intimidated so easily by any woman who’s remotely ambitious.”

The 23-year-old female medical school student said women her age have higher expectations for a future partner. “Probably because of the media, now the younger generation has different standards,” she said. “My mom’s standards of what a man should be was not very high compared to the

younger generation. Now I have very high standards of what a man should be... not materialistic, but he has to be classy.”

Most importantly, she added, he must be someone who won't try to control her. “It's very difficult to find a man who would allow you to be free... He would definitely use the guardian system to control you at some time.”

RISING DIVORCE RATES

The inability to examine the personality of a partner before marriage is one reason for the kingdom's rising divorce rate, particularly among young Saudis. According to one report, 60 percent of divorces are occurring in the first year of marriage.⁶ My interviewees said there are several other reasons for the climbing divorce rate. For one, they say, young adults are raised in such strict gender segregation that they don't know how to act around the opposite sex.

“Guys are not used to treat or live with girls; we do not know them. We just see a black box walking in the street,” said the 25-year-old teaching assistant from Riyadh getting his master's degree in the United States.

Also, “most Saudi youngsters who get married don't know how to take care of a family, or how to be responsible for themselves,” said another master's degree candidate, 26. For example, he added, many young girls grow up with “a maid in the house [who] does all the housework. The girl would never go to kitchen unless she wants a glass of water.”

Finally, some young women marry men they hardly know just to escape overly suffocating parents or because they succumb to pressures to marry a cousin to preserve tribal or blood lines. The match soon proves unworkable, and divorce follows.

Many young people “are forced to marry a cousin, and there is no love between the two. Just because you want to satisfy your parents, you are marrying this person,” said a 19-year-old college sophomore in Riyadh.

It would be “impossible to even think of changing” this traditional approach to marriage, he added, “because it's a tribal thing.”

Another common reason for divorce in the past has been the appearance of a second wife in the household. But polygamy's acceptability among

young Saudis is declining, especially among women. “I haven’t heard anyone in past five years say I’m gonna go get two to three wives, because then you have to have two houses that are very distant, out of gunshot range,” joked a 23-year-old male medical student in Jeddah.

Only one woman I interviewed said she would not mind if her husband had another wife. The 27-year-old student of Islamic commercial law said polygamy is fine “as long as he is just to all wives.... There is no problem when there is justice between me and the other wife.”

But she is in the minority. Two other women studying at Imam Muhammad bin Saud University said they don’t like polygamy even though they recognize that Muslim men are entitled to have up to four wives simultaneously. “Nobody wants it. No woman would really want that to happen...but of course it’s allowed and to think about it in logical terms.... maybe his needs are like that maybe he needs more women,” said a 19-year-old woman majoring in Islamic studies.

And a 25-year-old Riyadh woman getting her master’s in information technology was not enthusiastic about the idea of sharing her future husband with another wife, but contended that polygamy was better than the situation “in Western countries [where] they have one wife and many girlfriends.”

NOTES

1. “Top marks for Saudi universities as new admissions hit record,” *Arab News*, September 5, 2012. The article quoted an education official saying that 258,617 students were admitted to 25 government universities for the new academic year. Of those, he added, 126,833 were male and 131,784 female. According to the US State Department’s 2012 human rights report on Saudi Arabia, more than 58 percent of university students are female. See: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>
2. Edit Schlaffer, Ulrich Kropiunnigg and Fawziah al-Bakr, “Bridging the Gap-But How? Young Voices from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” *Women without Borders*, Vienna /Riyadh, Funded by the Austrian Science Fund, January 2010, p. 4
3. The term “Aspiration Gap” was first used by AlMunajjed, “Youth in GCC Countries,” p. 40
4. Schlaffer, Kropiunnigg & al-Bakr, “Bridging the Gap,” p. 9-10. The survey was conducted between 2006 and 2008. AlMunajjed and Sabbagh, “Youth in GCC Countries,” also has poll figures illustrating differences between men and women

in their enthusiasm for greater participation of women in public left. See p. 40 onwards.

5. Schlaffer, Kropiunnigg & al-Bakr, "Bridging the Gap," p. 7. Sixty-eight percent of females and 77 percent of males agreed with the statement: "I care about choosing my spouse on my own."
6. Khalid Alshayea, "Saudi analysts warn of dire consequences of high divorce rate," *Al Arabiya*, Feb 15, 2012 at: <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/15/194847.html>. According to a study released in February 2012 by the kingdom's social affairs ministry, the Saudi divorce rate in 2011 increased by 35 percent, making Saudi Arabia's figure higher than the global average of 18–22 percent and the second-highest rate in the world. See: Sarah Abdullah, "Some Saudi Women Are Wedded to their Careers," *Arab News*, May 24, 2012.

Shiite Youth

When his fellow Muslims gather for midday prayers each Friday, the young bank employee should hear a comforting message from the mosque loudspeakers next door. But that is definitely not the case these days.

“When I’m at home, listening to the speech in the mosque next to my house, I can hear him cursing me,” said the 29-year-old Shiite. “It’s ‘God, curse the Shia!’ When I’m being cursed publicly like this, how do you expect me to feel? And recently we’ve noticed that it is across Riyadh, it’s not [just] in a specific mosque.”

What’s worse, he added, “the government is not doing anything about it. Until today, I’m still waiting to hear... an official statement banning the cursing of another sect. I’m actually disappointed in this.”

Experiences like this illustrate why Saudi Arabia’s Shiite youths feel rejected, disaffected and alienated from their Sunni compatriots and government.

When it comes to its youthful population, there are several flashing yellow lights on Saudi Arabia’s horizon, warning of an unemployment crisis, dangerously bored students, rising demands from women for equality, and a growing political consciousness among young people.

By comparison, the estrangement many young Shiites feel toward their countrymen and government is a flashing red danger signal. They are certainly not poised for violent revolt right now. But Shiite youth are increasingly angry, restless and susceptible to agents provocateurs aiming to accentuate sectarian tensions, according to Shiite community leaders and conversations with Shiite youths.

If left untreated, their anger and hopelessness that things will improve could someday boil over into sustained, intense violence much worse than what erupted recently in the Eastern Province, where most of the kingdom’s Shiite minority live atop vast oil deposits.

I made an extended visit to the Eastern Province in 2009 and went there again in 2012 to speak specifically with young Shiites. Some of the young men I met on my second visit had participated in the protest demonstrations of 2011 and 2012 demanding greater religious and political freedoms for Shiites.

Remarkably, I found a great deal of similarity between Shiite and Sunni youths. In large part, they share the same aspirations, worries and problems. Like Sunnis, many young Shiites are frustrated by the lack of employment opportunities. They complain that they can't afford to buy a house. They remain traditional when it comes to marriage. They love King Abdullah and believe the royal family plays a role in uniting the country. They want better services and are angry about corruption.

"All Saudis love King Abdullah," said a 21-year-old youth from the predominantly Shiite city of Qatif, the political and cultural hub of the Shiite population. The problem, added the youth, now studying in Massachusetts, is with "some of the people under King Abdullah."

Shiites make up an estimated 1.5 to 2 million of the Saudi population of 19.4 million.¹ Besides the Eastern Province, they have a sizable presence in Najran Province in southwest Saudi Arabia. Smaller Shiite communities live in the holy city of Medina and in Qassim Province in the central part of the kingdom.

My Shiite interviewees said they want to be accepted, integrated and trusted by their Sunni peers and leaders, rather than castigated as religious heretics and accused of being a fifth column for Shiite-majority Iran. They regard Saudi Arabia as their homeland and want to make it a better place, they added.

But the state-tolerated hateful rhetoric that comes mainly from Sunni religious clerics, whose Wahhabi version of Islam is virulently anti-Shiite, is having a serious effect on national unity. It has driven a deep wedge between the two groups and made it difficult for young Shiites to feel part of the wider Saudi nation. It has also made them more impatient than their Sunni peers for immediate, rather than gradual, political reforms. Generally, I found Shiite youth more politically astute, aware and committed than their Sunni counterparts.

The alienation Shiite youths feel toward the kingdom's Sunni rulers became evident after Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz, who also served as

minister of interior, passed away in June. In the streets of Qatif, protesters burned his picture and chanted “Death to Al Saud,” according to videos posted on YouTube.²

I had seen similar sentiments in Awwamiya, a rural Shiite village of narrow streets during my 2009 visit where graffiti on walls read: “Death to Wahhabi,” “Down with the government,” and “We will not forget our prisoners.”

When I asked Shiite interviewees how they view their relations to the kingdom at large, their responses reflected a ghetto mindset. “We feel we are a country inside a country,” said a 20-year-old student at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals as we sat in the small living room of a friend’s home in Safwa, another Shiite enclave.

“Not because we want that,” his 19-year-old friend quickly interjected.

Some youths said they only feel comfortable in majority-Shiite towns. “At the end, it’s my country, but I actually look at Qatif as my home. I feel I belong here,” said a 21-year-old female student at the University of Dammam. “And I think they have bad feelings toward us, so there is some negative emotion” when Shiites live among Sunnis.

Another 23-year-old student at the same university echoed those sentiments. “I think all Qatif feels the same. We really feel we belong to Qatif rather than to Saudi Arabia,” she said. “So basically... I don’t feel anything about Saudi nationality. It doesn’t mean anything to me.”

Anyone who has lived in Saudi Arabia for a time has heard a Sunni friend’s opinion of Shiites. It is rarely kind and often based on ignorance and derogatory myths. A 22-year-old engineering student in Riyadh said that Shiites attend his university, “but they are not friends of mine. Maybe they are good persons, but I didn’t talk to them actually.”

Sunni antipathy toward Shiites is aggravated by an aversion to the Shiite religious ritual of self-flagellation, which sometimes becomes excessively bloody. The rite is performed during the Shiites’ holy day of Ashura, when they commemorate the 7th century martyrdom in Iraq of the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson Hussein.

“Those people understand religion in a bad way,” said a 19-year-old from Riyadh studying English in Florida. “They have a lot of things against human rights. They hit themselves. What is that? How [can] you hurt yourself?”

THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT'S strained relations with its Shiite minority have been exacerbated by heightened Shiite-Sunni tensions throughout the Middle East as a result of recent developments in the region.

In Iraq, the U.S. occupation allowed the Shiite majority to come to power, overturning decades of Sunni-minority rule. In Bahrain, the majority-Shiite population is in open revolt against the island's Sunni monarchy. And Saudi Arabia's regional rival, Shiite Iran, is aggressively projecting its influence into Arab affairs, particularly in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.

Overall, Sunnis interpret these events as signs of ascendant Shiite power, and consequently, the Saudi government is even more sensitive to Shiite dissent at home.

But Shiites say local problems—not outside events—are driving Shiite frustrations and the street protests.

On the one hand, young Shiites told me that they have no difficulty getting government scholarships to study abroad or qualifying for unemployment compensation. They also can obtain business licenses; their religious books are easily obtained from street vendors. And personal relations with Sunni co-workers, once a friendship is established, are often good, many said.

But they complained of discrimination when applying for government jobs or seeking promotions. They also resent being excluded from the military. In addition, of the 150 all-male appointees to the Majlis al Shura, the country's top advisory body, less than half a dozen are Shiite, as is the case with the country's judges. There are no Shiite cabinet ministers or ambassadors, nor Shiite clerics in the Council of Senior Religious Scholars. And even in an overwhelmingly Shiite city like Qatif, all top officials are Sunnis except for a few in the elected municipal council.

Shiites also are dismayed by restrictions on their religious freedom, principally through limitations on the building of Shiite mosques and *husseiniyyas*, the community centers used for a variety of purposes, including worship. A huge Sunni mosque was built in a central plaza of Qatif, but Shiites have difficulty getting permits to erect their mosques in cities where they are not in the majority. In April 2012, a mosque in Al Khobar for Ismailis, a small Shiite sect, was demolished by the government on the grounds that it had no license.¹ Shiites generally are also refused permission to perform their Ashura processions outdoors, except in Qatif.

Another common complaint centers on the heavy hand of Eastern Province's governor, Prince Muhammad bin Fahd, who reputedly treats his Shiite subjects as if he were a medieval lord and is widely said to enrich himself by demanding a percentage of successful business enterprises.

Finally, Saudi Shiites were deeply angered by Saudi Arabia's March 2011 military intervention in neighboring Bahrain to help its Sunni royal family quell pro-democracy protests. There is no evidence that Saudi troops participated in the harsh crackdown that followed, but their presence provided key backup support for Bahraini military and police.

The tiny island nation, which hosts the headquarters of the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, is connected to the kingdom by a 16-mile causeway, and for generations there have been close ties between Shiite communities in both countries. This is why the youth protests in Bahrain, which began in February 2011, were more emotional and inspiring for Saudi Shiites than earlier uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, whose populations are mostly Sunni.

"People's anger was buried inside them, but after Bahrain's uprising... hope started to sprinkle.... People began to ask for their rights," said a 21-year-old female college student in Qatif.

Shiite youths began staging regular demonstrations in Qatif and surrounding villages to demand that Riyadh withdraw its military from Bahrain. They also called for the release of Shiite prisoners held for long periods without charges, an end to job discrimination and a halt to hateful anti-Shiite speech from Saudi clerics.

Usually held on Fridays, the protests turned violent in the fall of 2011 as protestors clashed with security police. The Saudi government asserted that police were fired on by protesters and that police stations and checkpoints were attacked. Many demonstrators said police opened fire first, but Shiite community leaders privately did not discount the possible presence of armed agents provocateurs seeking to escalate tensions.

The violence provoked the Saudi government to accuse some Shiite youths of "working according to a foreign agenda," an allusion to Iran.² But Shiites say that while Iran no doubt is seeking to cause mischief inside the kingdom, their protests also grew out of legitimate community grievances. Saudi officials "don't realize that these people are uprising up for a specific reason," said a 29-year-old bank employee. "There is a problem that is happening."

By September 2012, at least 13 Shiites and two policemen had been killed.³

According to a May 2012 report by ADALA, a Shiite human rights organization, 560 people, including 35 children, had been arrested since March 2011, and 149 were still being held. Scores of released detainees were hit with travel bans and cannot leave the kingdom for indefinite periods.

ADALA's report also said it had "documented several claims of torture," including "beating, kicking, electric shocks in sensitive parts of the body, hitting with hoses and being forced to stand with hands up for long hours."⁴

The Saudi government's fears and suspicions of its Shiite population have intensified because of deepening hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In Bahrain, for example, Riyadh sent in troops because it believed that Iran was fomenting the protests there and training Shiite saboteurs to target the Bahraini royal family. And Riyadh's decision to openly support rebels seeking to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al Assad was largely born of realpolitik, driven by a desire to sever the decades-long alliance between Iran and Syria. There also was a sectarian motive: the rebels are mostly Sunni, and Assad belongs to a minority Shiite sect known as Alawites.

The Saudi government's expedient stance on Syria naturally perplexes Shiites in the kingdom.

"Saudi youth say, 'Oh, if our government supports the revolutionaries in Syria, why do they say demonstrations are not allowed here?'" said a 20-year-old Shiite college student in Safwa.

"They even issued *fatwas* in the villages saying demonstrations are religiously prohibited," said his 19-year-old friend who is banned from traveling abroad. "Allowed there and prohibited here? It's something political."

NOTES

1. "Freedom in Shackles," a report by human rights group ADALA accessed at: <http://www.adalacenter.net/index.php?act=artc&id=666>
2. M. Al Sulami and Walaah Hawari, "Arrest warrants issued for 23 Qatif rioters," *Arab News*, January 2, 2012
3. The deaths of two policemen was confirmed by Interior Ministry spokesman, Gen. Mansour Al Turki, in an October 2, 2012 email to the author. He also reported that 32 policemen had been wounded. The number of deaths of protesters was tallied by the author from news reports.
4. "Freedom in Shackles."

“And they give children as a gift between them” for sexual pleasure, he added. “I heard that and because of that, I don’t like them. They use a child for bad things. That’s very terrible.... I don’t like to communicate with them, because if they don’t respect themselves and respect children, that’s against human rights and they have to get punished.”

His belief in this canard was strong, despite the fact that there is no evidence at all that sexual abuse of children is part of any Shiite religious practice or that child abuse is more prevalent among Shiites than it is among the rest of the Saudi population.

Even some of my Sunni interviewees who spoke of the need for increased religious tolerance in the kingdom displayed a blind spot when it came to Shiites. For example, a master’s degree candidate in the United States who said he expected the Saudi version of Islam to become more respectful of diversity in coming years had this to say about Shiite clerics: “What I know about them is that they don’t have any respect for us. They want to kill us.... They teach [their people] that if you have any chance to hurt any Sunni, you will take advantage of this.

“I think that Jewish in Israel are better than [the Shiites] in Qatif and in Bahrain and in Kuwait,” he added. “They are not having any love to the country they belong to. They love Iran. If they were loving Saudi and wanted only their rights, I would support them. They are attacking us and talking [negatively] about Prophet Muhammad... on Twitter and on YouTube.”

The idea that Shiites are more loyal to Iran than to their homeland is common among Sunni youths. “I have Shia friends; they are good people. But I hate them when I feel they are more loyal to Iran than to my country,” said a 28-year-old teaching assistant getting his master’s degree in the United States. “I don’t trust the Shia from a political perspective.”

Many Saudi Shiites do have a connection to Iran—a spiritual one. It is part of the Shiite tradition that each person should follow the spiritual guidance of a learned religious leader known as a *marja*. Because of the decades-long anti-Shiite climate in the kingdom, however, Saudi Shiites have been unable to build the religious schools that over years would have produced cadres of native Shiite clergy from which *marjas* arise. As a result, most Saudi Shiites follow *marjas* living in Iraq and Iran. But that does not mean

that Shiite youths are politically disloyal to Saudi Arabia, just as American Catholics who follow the Pope are not disloyal to the United States.

Sunni prejudices against Shiites are encouraged by Sunni clerics, including some employed by the state. One of the most popular religious preachers among young Saudis, Mohammed Al Arifi, stated in a December 2009 sermon, which is available on YouTube, that “the evil Shia continue to set traps for monotheism and the Sunnah. They try to spread their false doctrine to the ignorant among the Sunnis. We shall not forget their treachery throughout history—in Muslim countries in general, and in Mecca and al-Medina in particular—or their attempts to ensnare the Country of the Two Holy Mosques [Saudi Arabia].”³

And in February 2012, clerics were among the speakers at a conference in Riyadh devoted to demonizing the Shiite faith as a heretical religion with roots in Judaism. “Top clergy were present at the conference,” one of my Shiite interviewees said. “There was no objection from the government.”

Some young Shiite interviewees suggested that the government's failure to silence these anti-Shiite harangues is intended to frighten the Shiite minority into accepting the status quo. The clerical rhetoric “has been a tool for the government to scare the Shia from demanding any political rights,” said a 21-year-old Shiite youth studying in Pennsylvania.

A 23-year-old from Qatif studying in the Washington, D.C. area accused the government of intentionally arousing sectarian feelings between Sunnis and Shiites so they will not unite to demand political reforms. The government allows its sheikhs to “say things that would make Sunnis and Shia fight and have wars, so that we won't get together and think about our own common benefits,” he said. “They separate us with this little minor stuff” even though “we are all Muslims. We have minor differences, which is normal.”

Shiite youths I spoke to said that it is painful to hear their countrymen describe them as disloyal and unpatriotic and that they keenly feel discrimination when applying for a government job or seeking a promotion. “I can see the expressions from people when they know I am from Qatif. They refuse me from the beginning,” said a recent university graduate who “suffered this for six months” while looking for a job. “You know it from their eyes, from their excuses.”

Always, he added, the first question is “not about your qualifications” but rather, “Where are you from?”

The 21-year-old Qatif woman who attends the University of Dammam said that “it’s like there are two groups in the class. Even if we talk, even if we have an opinion, they won’t listen to us. It’s just, we feel the rejection. Daily. At the university, it was better last year but this year it’s getting worse and worse.”

The contempt for Shiites is underscored by the practice of accusing Saudi activists who demand political and social reforms—even if they are Sunnis—of being “Shiite sympathizers” or “Iranian loyalists” as a way to discredit their activism.

“Even I got accused of being a traitor and a Shia... because I asked for my rights,” said a 24-year-old Sunni medical school student in Abha with progressive political ideas. “The university and government, whenever I write an article or make a remark, if they don’t like what you are saying, they will accuse you of being loyal to Iran... Not just me, any activist... anyone who raises their voice and says, ‘I don’t like the country this way,’ they will [say,] ‘Don’t talk like that. Maybe we have problems but it’s not the time to discuss it. Come on, shut up! You’re a traitor. You’re loyal to Iran.’”

The Shiites’ minority status and the discrimination they face have made young Shiites generally more politically sophisticated than their Sunni peers, and more adamant about the need for reforms.

One afternoon I met a group of 14 young Shiite males, most of them aged 18 to 28, in an unoccupied house in Qatif. Two said they had jobs; others were studying or looking for work. Dressed in T-shirts and jeans, they were eager to talk.

Politically, the group consensus was that Saudi Arabia should have a “democratic” government delinked from religion.

“Just keep religion away,” said one youth.

“The main problem in Saudi Arabia is that there is no law, no constitution,” said another. “We need to reach that point, that the law will be implemented overall. That’s the kind of country we need.”

Six acknowledged that they had participated in some of the recent protest demonstrations in Qatif and nearby villages. I asked what they had been demanding as they marched.

“Our rights.”

“To release the prisoners.”

“More freedom.”

“Justice.”

“Unemployment solved.”

“End discrimination.”

When I observed that they seem to be trying to get the government's attention, one youth declared: “The government knows what is going on, but it is not able to change. It doesn't care.”

“This is a corrupt government, a corrupt royal family, and they spread a very bad impression of themselves and of the country throughout the world,” said another member of the group. “That's why as Saudis we do not feel proud even in front of other Gulf countries.”

The young men said they were happy about the student protests at King Khalid University in March 2012 because they underscored that Sunni youths also had grievances. “It will take the spotlight off Qatif,” said one, a 27-year-old writer and teacher. “It means other Saudis are moving.”

Another youth said the Sunni demonstrations “will prove that such demonstrations are not caused by remote control from outside, like they say about the protests in Qatif.”

Added a third: “It means the youth will lead the revolution in Saudi Arabia.”

Talk of revolution worries Shiite community leaders who have complained for several years that they are increasingly unable to control their impatient youths. They warn of rising militancy in the younger generation, which no longer believes in the elders' approach of petitioning Saudi authorities.

Having waited in vain all their lives to see improvements in their situation, Shiite youths now want wholesale change. “No one from the youth trusts the government... so changing it is the solution,” said a 19-year-old Shiite college student who is banned from traveling abroad because of his protest activity.

“Freedom of speech and freedom of choosing who's leading the country—those are the two things that would fix everything in Saudi Arabia,” said a 22-year-old from the Eastern Province studying in the Washington, D.C. area. “Any system other than our very old, backward system would be better. Any other system.”

The alienation and anger of Shiite youth is not a situation past saving. It would require a few steps by the government, including outlawing discrimination in employment; allowing more Shiite mosques and Shiite community halls, or *husseiniyahs*, to be built; and appointing Shiites to the upper ranks of government agencies and the military.

Halting the hate speech by the clerics could prove more politically difficult for the government, but that too could be done. In fact, King Abdullah took a baby step in that direction in May when he ordered a television channel off the airwaves for a month after it broadcast a program with insulting language against Ismailis, a Shiite sect living mostly in southern Saudi Arabia. The king also proposed a new center in Riyadh to promote dialogue among different Muslim sects.⁴

Meanwhile, there are signs that some young Sunnis recognize the problem and want to improve Sunni-Shiite relations. For the first time, Shiites were invited to speak at this year's Ennahda Forum, an annual gathering of pro-reform Sunni youth.

And some Sunni interviewees clearly rejected the anti-Shiite prejudice prevailing in the kingdom. "It's becoming a more globalized world, and you just can't be as closed-minded as you want to be," said a 22-year-old female graduate of George Washington University. "It might be easier, but in the long run it'll be more difficult."

As for the religious figures who are "spreading hate among people... if I had the power, I would put them on trial," said the 24-year-old medical school student in Abha. "I have a lot of friends who are Shia. They are great friends, they are great human beings. We should not categorize or put people in boxes because of their religion or race."

But for now, many young Shiites see only a bleak future. "It really is depressing," said the 29-year-old bank employee. "I don't see any solution unless there is a drastic change to what is going on.... Based on the ridiculous sermons we hear in the mosques, [the sectarian divide] will grow. I even see potentially what we see in Pakistan: Sunnis blowing up Shia mosques and Shia blowing up Sunni mosques."

A 21-year-old Shiite from Qatif now studying in the United States grabbed his phone during our interview and pulled up videos of the recent protests in Qatif. Events playing out back home, he said, "have politicized

me and I hope they politicize others.... The sacrifices of my people won't go away. These sacrifices won't bring changes now, but they will later on."

NOTES

1. Some Saudi government officials and political analysts dispute the estimate that Shiites make up around 10 percent of the kingdom's population. One analyst insisted to me that they only are about 8 percent.
2. For example, <https://twitter.com/ahmed/status/214347408820273154> and <https://twitter.com/ahmed/status/214348617689989120>
3. Jonathan Schanzer and Steven Miller, "Facebook Fatwa: Saudi Clerics, Wahhabi Islam, and Social Media," FDD Press, a division of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, Washington, D.C., 2012, p 49, footnote 27. The video clip Schanzer and Miller cite is "Saudi Cleric Muhammad Al-Arifi Exposes Shiites and Their History-Affairs," and accessible at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=3651za7DBN0&feature=related. Al Arifi's speech was translated by MEMRItv.
4. For tv closure, see Country Report Select, Economist Intelligence Unit, June 1, 2012 and <http://taghribnews.com/vdcd9o0j.yt0j96242y.html>. For new dialogue center, Siraj Wahab, "King Abdullah Proposes Dialogue Center to Promote Harmony," *Arab News*, August 15, 2012.

The hateful speech of Sunni clerics is publicly condemned by only by a few brave Sunnis. One such individual is Mekhlef Al Shammari, a Sunni businessman and human rights activist in the Eastern Province. Al Shammari so annoyed Saudi officials with his activism and his criticism of anti-Shiite sentiment that he was jailed without trial for nearly two years from 2010–2012.

To Be or Not to Be Like Everyone Else

“My father was really mad at me [for dropping out of college]. He actually told me, ‘I don’t want to see you again.’ It was bad. He stopped giving me money. And I tried to make him understand that this is not what I want to do. But to someone like my dad, life is not about choices. Growing up in the desert you don’t have much choice, you just gotta take whatever you have. And he never grasped that concept, that there’s actually choices in life.”

—Cartoonist Malik Nejer, 27

One sunny afternoon in December 2010, I arrived at the Hamra Sofitel Hotel in Jeddah. A twentysomething Saudi, dressed in the traditional red-checked headscarf and white robe, was at the reception desk. His name tag read “Jalal.” As soon as he realized I was American, an emotional dam seemed to break.

He told me he’d been a student at Northern Virginia Community College, how much he’d enjoyed it, how he’d had to leave after 9/11. And then a long, spontaneous lament poured forth about how he now had problems being who he wanted to be. In the United States, nobody had challenged the way he dressed—he said he wore jeans a lot—or what he did, or when he went out, or who he had as friends.

But now, his family and friends criticized everything he did. His speech. His clothes. How he spent his time. “I’m desperate,” he confessed, shaking his head. His distress was evident and poignant.

Jalal’s confession illustrates one of the biggest conflicts felt by Saudi youth, which is how to express individuality in one of the most conformist societies on earth.

If the West, and particularly America, goes overboard in glorifying individuality and the pursuit of personal freedom, Saudi Arabia is at the opposite extreme. Through its schools, media, and well-endowed religious establishment, the government seeks to regulate the lives of Saudis in myriad ways—and then enforce those rules through the so-called “religious police.”

“Basically, the government takes the role of parent,” said a self-employed Saudi businessman in his early thirties. “It’s trying to control everything in your life, even entering the personal domain of your life.”

What the government does not regulate, Saudi society does, through its resolute maintenance of tradition and its attendant, deeply rooted religious and cultural values. Family is the ultimate authority, the boundary-maker for all its members, who must always behave in a way that does not stain the family reputation. Usually, that reputation is circumscribed and defined by what “others” might think—even if what they think actually is unknown. “What would the neighbors say?” is not an idle or rhetorical concern when Saudis consider an unconventional course of action.

In such an environment, it is not easy to make lifestyle choices that deviate from the norm. But as earlier discussed, young Saudis are increasingly influenced by the outside world, where choice, flux and variety are far more prevalent than in their homeland. So they naturally want more and more to be their own persons and make their own ways. This means, however, that they must wrestle with their culture’s powerful undertow of conformity and its widespread disapproval of those who stand out from the crowd.

A 29-year-old female writer in Riyadh addressed this dilemma at length in an interview. “It’s very hard to be yourself... just because it’s a collective society and there’s always a feeling that a person who is different is a threat to the group,” she said. “From the point of view of a woman, it makes life easier if you’re part of the group. For example, if you go to a social gathering and if it’s for conservative people, you really have to dress conservatively, wear your abaya in a certain way. And there are certain conversations that you should carry or not carry... When you are mixing with a group of women whose value is that they always should stay home and take care of the family, you should not talk about yourself and your career, because you’re sort of hurting their feelings. There would be this sense that you are telling them, ‘I am better than you are.’... Then they

could attack that individual in some way or other or try to make their accomplishments seem really bad.”

She noted that it is a given that family members, acquaintances and co-workers can voice their opinion or criticism of an individual’s behavior if it is outside the approved pattern. “There is always this feeling that somebody, out of love or out of just nosiness, is going to tell you what and what not to do,” she said. “Your colleagues, your relatives, your mother and father... On a constant and daily basis, there is always going to be somebody telling you what you’re supposed to do or not do and where you went wrong and how you can fix it. And you feel like you really want somebody to just let you do it your way. And accept your failures sometimes as part of your growth.”

A 22-year-old female who recently graduated from a Washington-area university also spoke of the weight of cultural conformity: “We just need to give [young Saudis] the opportunity to be themselves. And a lot of people are not given that opportunity there. They’re just taught to conform and think the same way and act the same way and do the same things and go into the same professions as everyone else. Because that’s the guaranteed route of success, and that’s a safety net.”

There also is, she added, constant pressure to always be present to those who seek to influence your life, which means that solitude is undervalued. “In Saudi, you don’t have time to yourself. It’s an alien concept. Whereas here [in the United States]... I’m taking a day off for myself. It’s respected. Whereas there, it’s ‘What are you going to do with your day off?’ Well, I want to relax. I want to read a book, read blogs. I want to do whatever I want to do. Just spend time with myself,” she said. “In Saudi I feel like the void is filled with people, so you have to surround yourself with people just so you don’t think about the problems you have or the things you need to change.”

CONTESTING CONFORMITY

Of course, just because it’s hard does not mean that some young Saudis are not trying to follow an original path in their personal lives or introduce a novel idea to their society. Stand-up comics, filmmakers, abstract painters, photographers,



Maha Al Taher, an anti-poverty activist and a founder of Young Initiative Group, a volunteer non-profit, speaks with a resident of Hai al Jama'a, one of Jeddah's poorest neighborhoods (Caryle Murphy)

female basketball teams and girl bands are all now easily found in the kingdom—evidence of new and unconventional ventures by a vanguard of youth.

Some young people are non-conforming in a more serious vein. A good example is Young Initiative Group (YIG), a volunteer organization founded by Mohammad Al-Bakri and Maha Taher in Jeddah in 2010. The group has several projects, including distributing air conditioners to poor families, teaching English to children at orphanages, organizing medical care for needy cases and raising awareness about diabetes prevention and autism. During summers, its young volunteers also pass out cold water to street cleaners, who are foreign-born guest workers. Although the group has not expanded beyond Jeddah, for more than two years it has offered a youth-oriented and youth-run model of community service.

One day in 2010, I accompanied Maha and her husband, Hilal, as they visited Hai al Jama'a, a poor neighborhood south of Jeddah, to distribute food staples and diapers. It is a neighborhood pretty much ignored by the



Saudi youths active in Young Initiative Group in Jeddah (Oday Abid)

government because most residents, some of whom live in makeshift homes of corrugated iron, are illegal immigrants from Africa.

“Our group doesn’t care about nationality,” said Taher. “Whoever needs help, we help. We’re based on priorities and necessities.”

On the ride there, Taher, then 26, explained how her outlook on life had been challenged by visits she had made to several African countries while attending university in Switzerland. The visits were part of the curriculum for her degree in international management. On one assignment, she recalled, “I met a guy sitting under a tree and he was smiling.... I asked him if he needed money.... He said, ‘No, my children are healthy here in front of me. I have seven cows and sheep. I’m rich and I don’t need anything more.’... He was really happy.... And I realized that I had been complaining the whole day because my iPod was broken.”

When she moved back to Riyadh, she was struck by how unhappy most Saudis were, despite their wealth. “People are materialistic and we all live in a bubble. We think everyone is rich,” she said. “There are so many issues in Saudi that need awareness. A lot of families have autistic children and they don’t know what autism is. They think the child has an evil spirit.

“When we started [YIG] I really found happiness,” added Taher, who moved to Jeddah after her marriage. “By giving, I became happy. I didn’t want a new car or nice watches, but the only thing I wanted to do was give, give, give. The

more you give, the happier you become. And that's what I want everyone on earth to realize: When you give, that's when you become the happiest."

LOOKING LIKE AN INFIDEL

Religious police arrest 10 'emo' girls in eastern Saudi Arabia

Riyadh—Saudi religious police arrested 10 girls for being "emo" in a coffee shop in the eastern city of Dammam, after the shop owner reported them for wearing weird fashions and making a lot of noise, a local paper reported Saturday.

A source in the religious police, known as the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, said the customers noticed the girls "wore black and dark colours, and that they were trying to imitate men."

The girls were detained until their parents signed a pledge that they will not repeat "such violations" and will stay away from fashions that contradict "the conservative Islamic society," the source was quoted by al-Yaum newspaper as saying.

—Middle East News, May 22, 2010

The popularity of Saudi Arabia's national dress means that in public places, the human eye views a startling binary landscape. Men are in identical long, white robes called thobes. Women are in black robes, or abayas. The sight is a victory for conformity.

But that uniformity is increasingly being challenged by young Saudis. Women are splashing their black headscarves and abayas with sequins and colors. And men are adopting a different uniform: jeans.

My male interviewees said they easily slip back and forth between their white thobes and jeans, depending on the occasion or venue. They are not making a statement when they wear jeans, they said, except perhaps to women.

"It has maybe something to do with being open, being casual, being cool to attract women," said a 28-year-old teaching assistant getting his master's

in the United States. He said he donned his first pair of jeans in Jeddah airport before boarding his flight to the United States.

“Young people in Saudi Arabia like Western clothes more than Saudi clothes because it’s more comfortable,” said a 26-year-old Saudi studying English in Florida, noting that convenience is also a factor. A pair of jeans can be worn for a couple of days in a row, he said, but thobes have to be changed every day.

Still, jeans are rejected by the most conservative segment of society, and by many clerics, for whom they symbolize Westernization and therefore a drifting away from Islam. “If you wear jeans you are [seen as] Westernized,” said the businessman, adding that conservatives contend that Saudis should not “look like the infidels.”

A bigger, more recent annoyance to conservatives is the trend among youth to disregard gender differences in dress. “They say that jeans are men’s clothes,” said a 21-year-old female student at the University of Dammam. Every morning, she added, campus security checks what female students are wearing under their abayas, and if it’s jeans, they get a warning letter and must promise not to do it again.

In April, a Saudi newspaper reported that “[m]ale and female students who dress in a deviant manner have been banned from entering schools and universities according to government directives recently issued.... It was not revealed where the directives came from but... they were circulated to university rectors and school principals with the aim of tackling this rising trend.... The directives ordered guardians... to sign a written pledge that their sons and daughters will not dress like members of the opposite sex.”²

Despite such directives, the government is losing the upper hand in the clothing department. And the conservatives’ argument that Saudis should not dress “like infidels” is pretty much lost on many young Saudis. The younger they are, it seems, the more it is lost.

An English teacher in Jeddah said his students, who are mostly in their early twenties, want to be part of the culture and lifestyles that they see online. So they adopt “Western clothes, Western hairstyles, Western postures,” he said. “It’s not just the dress... it’s an entire culture they’re embracing, with the way they walk, the way they talk.... It’s funny watching them.... They have their beer and it’s non-alcoholic [and] they have their cigarette and [they think] they’re cool!”

A religion teacher in the country's conservative heartland said he sees the same aspiration among his high school students. "They are interested in looking more Western now than before," said the teacher in Buraida. "I don't want to exaggerate, but about 80 percent of them want to appear Western. They only sometimes wear the thobe when it's mandatory, for school and praying in the mosque."

Some young people are going further and rejecting the national dress—a stance that alarms one of my interviewees, a 26-year-old teaching assistant at King Saud University in Riyadh. "Basically, a lot of people now are against wearing the thobe and [headdress]. And not because they feel uncomfortable. It's just because, 'Do I have to wear it? I don't have to wear it. It's nothing to me. I'll wear T-shirts and jeans.'... They do not accept [the national dress] as part of the culture. They don't want anything to do with it. They hate it."

This attitude "really scares me," he added, "because you're nothing without your background."

The breakdown in sartorial conformity is perhaps greatest online. Many young Saudi men have profile pictures on Facebook and Twitter in Western dress. Young women are still reluctant to show their face and hair online, but increasingly more are doing so, though they often make use of oblique angles and shadows to obscure parts of their face.

NOTHING TO DO

Compelled conformity breeds boredom. And for Saudi youth, boredom is amplified by the lack of recreational and entertainment opportunities normally found in other countries. Due to gender segregation, and bans on alcohol and music, there are no movie theaters, discos or nightclubs. Restaurants and coffee houses are divided into a section for single men and another for families and single women.

Young single men are also forbidden to enter most shopping malls unless accompanied by a female relative. When Riyadh officials recently announced that young men could enter malls there unaccompanied, the gesture was followed by a stern warning that any young man "harassing" women would be jailed for five days. And in the Eastern Province city of



Signs on Applebee's Restaurant on Thalia Street in Riyadh to show patrons which doors to use. Families and single women are seated in the same room. Single men are seated in a separate room (Caryle Murphy)

Dammam, where families flock to the seaside on weekends, young single men congregating along Dammam's corniche are usually asked by police to leave, according to youths I interviewed.

As a result of these policies, many young men say they feel shunned by their society. "Society is against the single guy and his entertainment," said a 23-year-old supermarket cashier, who mostly spends his days off at home with family or friends. "The problem is there are no recreational opportunities for guys. That's why most Saudi guys have high pressure [on them]. They have no entertainment."

A 19-year-old college sophomore in Riyadh lamented that boredom "is a big problem. We have a lot of free time. We Saudi youth don't have sports centers. The only places we can go is... cafes for smoking sheesha. A lot of young people are there at night because they have no other place to go. These sheesha places are getting lots of money from us."

The high school religion teacher in Buraida called boredom "a huge issue. We're raising lazy young men. So many have too much free time, they are just using their Blackberry and... driving around and going into restaurants, trying to do something they think is fun when actually it's not."

The frustration is even worse for young people who have lived abroad. A 27-year-old corporate lawyer complained that in Britain, "I have my privacy, my freedom. I'm free. There are no restrictions. When I want to drink,

when I want to party, when I want to see my female friends. For God's sake, we can't do anything like that here."

A 22-year-old engineering student in Riyadh who "loves movies" said that he regularly flies to Dubai to see films and go clubbing, though he does not drink alcohol at the clubs "because, thank God, I am raised as a good man by my parents."

He thinks the government should allow cinemas in Saudi Arabia, and also permit nightclubs to be opened "very far away from the city, out in the desert" so that "bad people" who drink alcohol can patronize them. "The point is, young Saudis, when they travel to another country—I saw them by my eyes—they drink and drink and drink until they fall down in the street," he said. But if they could drink in legal nightclubs at home, they wouldn't overdo it when they travel abroad, he added.

A 25-year-old Riyadh youth studying marketing in Canada said that Saudi youths need "more freedom and activities" to fill up their time. "I was surprised when I came to Canada," he said. "I never met anyone here who didn't do volunteer work," and "everyone had worked at least in a small kind of shop, a McDonalds... in the summer. Wherever you go, you see people gathered in a park or doing some kind of activity—tennis, soccer or basketball, or any kind of sport you like.

"I'm saying, generate these activities in a way that makes people really like them, that will help people lose the time and not only get in the car and go round and round in the street without any purpose," he added. "If you want to follow the religion and tradition, okay, follow it. But follow it in a way that people can be entertained."

"I tried jogging in a public place, but people started staring at me as if to say I had an ulterior motive for being there. I really did not want to flirt or bother the ladies who were walking around. I just wanted to enjoy the sun and jog outdoors for a change."

—College student Ahmed Zaki, as quoted in *Arab News*, July 14, 2010

Although more soccer fields and jogging paths are popping up in Saudi cities, they are not yet widespread. And there is little community backing of the type necessary to support organized youth sports teams. Many

government schools still see physical education and sports as occasional “extras.” This dismal sporting scene, along with increased intake of fast foods and a preference for sedentary pastimes such as watching television or surfing the Web, are contributing to rising rates of teen obesity, perhaps as high as 35 percent.³

One survey of youths found that only 14 percent said they exercised more than five times in a typical week. Thirty percent said they exercised once a week or less. And 19 percent, or almost a fifth of respondents, reported that they did no exercise at all.⁴

The dearth of healthy, accessible leisure diversions, coupled with Saudi Arabia’s abnormally strict gender segregation, is leaving many Saudi youths frustrated, bored and susceptible to depression and delinquent behavior, including illicit drug use.

Official statistics on drug abuse are not available, but there is mounting concern in the kingdom that young people are increasingly turning to illegal drugs for recreation, as well as to alleviate boredom and depression, according to numerous reports in the Saudi media.

In 2009, the press reported that there were around 150,000 male and female drug abusers in the kingdom. About 65 percent of drug rehab patients are reportedly addicted to Captagon, the brand name of fenethylline, a synthetic stimulant manufactured in clandestine factories. After Captagon, popular especially around school exam time, hashish is the second most widely used illicit drug.

The problem is severe enough to have officials and medical personnel deeply concerned, judging from their comments and efforts to combat illicit drug abuse. The government has launched campaigns in schools to highlight the dangers of abusing drugs, and Saudi physicians have pleaded for more treatment centers for addicts.

Also, in 2009, the government set up the National Committee for Combating Drugs to coordinate different agencies in the fight against drug trafficking and abuse, with the late Crown Prince and Interior Minister Nayef Bin Abdul Aziz as its head. A year later, Prince Nayef hosted the Gulf region’s first regional symposium on drug control and information sharing. Organizers said the conference was intended to highlight “the seriousness of the drug phenomenon and the resulting threat [to] economic and social security.”

In 2011, Nayef urged Saudi universities to give students the skills needed to find jobs, adding: “Unemployment is an evil and a cause of crime in various forms, one of the most common being the dealing in and use of drugs.”

Another royal, Prince Nawaf bin Faisal bin Fahd bin Abdul Aziz, president of the General Presidency of Youth Welfare, said the “menace of narcotics is a national responsibility that should be shouldered by society,” adding that there was a “dire need” for narcotics prevention.

While the government is fairly lenient with drug users, offering them rehabilitation programs in government hospitals, it shows no mercy toward drug traffickers: They are beheaded. Despite this dire sanction, however, traffickers continue to smuggle in illicit drugs in vast quantities, which is clear from the Interior Ministry's frequent announcements about the huge shipments it intercepts at Saudi borders.⁵

In September 2011, for instance, Saudi officials discovered a glider at the Iraqi-Saudi border loaded with 700,000 Captagon pills. And between June and September of that year, 475 people—just under half of them Saudi—were arrested for drug dealings estimated to be worth \$450 million.⁶

NEEDED: SOMEONE TO TALK TO

Intense pressures from family and society to follow long-accepted patterns of behavior take a heavy psychic toll on some young Saudis. But because of widespread reluctance to talk about personal or psychological problems, and a still-strong taboo against therapy, these youths suffer through their problems alone.

There is little available research on the prevalence of psychological problems among Saudi youth, particularly depression, which Saudi women say is common among females. But a survey of 4,400 Saudi university students published in 2010 came up with some startling results. More than half (56 percent) of both men and women agreed with this statement: “I have a lot of personal problems that I cannot discuss with others.”

Majorities also agreed with three other statements:

“Psychological problems are common among my fellow students.”

Agreed: 63% of men and 65% of women

“There is a great need for psychological counseling among people my age.”

Agreed: 81% of men and 88% of women

“I would personally need psychological counseling or support.”

Agreed: 52% men and 51% women

Commenting on these findings, the researchers wrote: “While the majority of Saudi youth believe that their generation is in need of psychological counseling, only half would seek out counseling themselves. Rather, they are encouraged to heed advice gleaned from Koranic verses or the hadiths.”⁷

These results are supported by anecdotal evidence from educators who work with young people. The Jeddah English teacher said his male students “suffer from anxiety, low self-esteem and insecurity.” And a Riyadh academic who has done research on Saudi youth said he’d found that depression and “a fear of dying” are common problems. “You’d be amazed at how many young people have that problem, the sense of not feeling safe or secure in their own homes,” he said. They are also “worried about their future, what’s going to happen, where they are going to end up.”

Even youth in the religiously conservative town of Buraida are suffering from depression, according to a 25-year-old high school English teacher. “A big problem,” he said, is that most young people have no one to talk to about their problems. “I have a lot of friends, they change all their ideas,” he said. “You will see them very religious, [but then] after two months you will see them change.... Some people think their problems come from religion.”

NOTES

1. http://news.monstersandcritics.com/middleeast/news/article_1557688.php/Religious-police-arrest-10-emo-girls-in-eastern-Saudi-Arabia
2. “School, university students told to dress properly,” *Arab News*, April 16, 2012
3. According to a series of sample studies done since 2004 and supplied to the author by clinical nutritionist Khalid A. Al Madani, a former vice president

of the Saudi Society for Food and Nutrition, 29 percent of adult males and 36.8 percent of adult females are obese. Other studies done between 2005 and 2008 found 11.1 percent of Saudi children and teens obese. However, pediatric surgeon Aayed Al Qahtani told the author in a 2010 Riyadh interview that the real rate of childhood and teen obesity "is approaching 35 percent."

4. AlMunajjid and Sabbagh, "Youth in GCC Countries," Exhibit #27
5. For 150,000 abusers, PK Abdul Ghafour, "New Laws to Fight Narcotics," *Arab News*, April 14, 2009; For 65% addicted to Captagon, Adnan Al Shabrawi, "65% of Rehab Patients in KSA are Captagon Addicts," *Saudi Gazette*, May 27, 2012; "Naif heads new panel to fight drug menace," *Saudi Gazette*, April 14, 2009; Caryle Murphy, "Riyadh takes a tough line on problem of drug abuse," *The National*, April 29, 2012; "Prince Naif urges university strategy to match job market," *Saudi Gazette*, June 27, 2011; for Prince Nawaf quote, "Drugs Menace Is Society's Responsibility, says Prince Nawaf," *Saudi Gazette*, January 25, 2011. Also see, Al Dhyabi, "Drug-related crimes on the rise, warns study," *Saudi Gazette*, April 28, 2010.
6. U.S. State Department, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, March 2012, Vol. I, pp 270, 381
7. Schlaffer, Kropiunnigg & al-Bakr, "Bridging the Gap," p. 11

The Wild Card: Students Abroad

Most young Saudis “want to open to life, to reality, to the world. But at the same time, they want to keep their beliefs, what they think Allah has said is right to do... They are struggling to do both. They are trying to find the path that will lead them to be a good Muslim and at the same time to be a good human being able to communicate with others all over the world.”

—Farouq S. Alzouman, 34, Saudi motivational speaker

Raised in Riyadh, he has been in Canada for the past two years working toward an MBA in marketing. It has been an eye-opening experience for the 25-year-old Saudi. He loves that he can “take a bus and go anywhere I like,” and he wishes Saudi Arabia had a public transportation system. When he wears his national dress, he said, Canadians recognize it as Saudi “and that makes me happy.”

But it is what he discovered about himself that has made his sojourn in Canada most valuable. Living on his own in a multicultural environment has made him more mature and open-minded, he said. “I have friends now from many cities in the world... and all these people I’ve met, everyone has changed a piece of me... and I’m really happy because of it. Because now my mind is wider,” he recounted.

As a result, he will look at things differently when he returns home. “Although I’m not having the same freedom I’m having here, it will be much easier because things that I used to care about before now are secondary for me,” he said. “By living by myself and doing everything by myself, now I know how things should be done correctly in the best interests of me, not of other people who think about me.”

This graduate student is part of one of the boldest experiments in social transformation in modern Arab history. He is among more than 145,000 young Saudis now studying in 30 countries around the world. Almost half are in the United States, where for the 2012–13 school year, 71,026 Saudis are enrolled in language institutes, colleges and universities.

The majority of the 145,000 are sponsored by the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. Several thousand others are studying abroad on their own dime or on scholarships from their public sector employers, including universities, government ministries and agencies like Saudi Aramco, the state oil company.

In the United States, for example, 3,153 Saudi students are paying their own way and 6,600 others are on employers' scholarships.¹ The rest of the 71,026 are financed by the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, which the Saudi monarch launched in 2005, the same year he ascended the throne.

The elderly king had two goals. One was to develop a national cadre of young people with the skills necessary to create what the government calls "a knowledge-based economy." Engineers, marketers, scientists, accountants, economists, doctors, nurses, safety experts, business managers, human resource officers, computer experts and project managers are all needed for Saudi Arabia to move beyond oil to a diversified, expanding economy that will provide jobs to an burgeoning workforce of youths.

The king's second goal grew out of his shock at discovering how many Saudis sympathized with the intolerant, violent ideology of al Qaeda. This became evident after the terrorist group's attack on the United States in 2001, and then its campaign of bombings inside Saudi Arabia from 2003 to 2006, whose revolutionary objective was the downfall of the House of Saud.

In response, the king became a vocal proponent of "moderation" in Islam, and through the scholarship program he wants to open the minds of young Saudis by exposing them to other cultures, religions and societies.

The program, made possible by the billions earned by the kingdom in oil exports, is an unspoken but clear rebuke to the isolationist, narrow-minded brand of Salafi Islam, Wahhabism, that is propagated by the Saudi clerical establishment and some factions within the royal family.

It also lays bare the Saudi education system's disastrous failure. Dominated by religious conservatives for more than 30 years—a hold that is only now beginning to be broken—the system has failed to produce trained workers to match the needs of the marketplace; many college graduates can't speak basic English. Nor has it nurtured citizens who can easily navigate in a multicultural, global world where tolerance, an open mind and critical thinking are essential.

Unprecedented in Saudi history, the scholarship program aims to shape a generation that has the skills and mindset to modernize Saudi society and its economy. At least that is the theory—and for many Saudis—the hope.

The king's daughter, Princess Adelah bint Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, has a son who is among 3,000 Saudis studying in China. In a recent interview, she said that she believes the young Saudis now studying abroad will “absolutely” change Saudi Arabia “to the better.”

“I think the exposure is very important, seeing things from a different perspective, looking at their country from other nations' eyes is very important,” said the princess, adding that she is impatient for their return. “We need different ideas. We need new ideas. We need talented young people to deal with the challenges we face. It's always too boring and too monotonous to keep moving the same ideas, rotating the same ideas over and over again.

“Learning about other cultures and meeting people from different backgrounds,” she added, “will enrich our young girls' and boys' personalities, extend their knowledge, and make them more capable of contributing to the development of our country.”

Mody AlKhalaf, director of cultural and social affairs at the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission in Fairfax, Virginia, also believes the returning students will make a difference. “You can imagine the collective experience of 150,000 graduates, at least, coming back to a country and then holding positions, whether it's dean of a college, president of a university, minister, vice minister, CEO of a company or a bank. Their experiences and education are bound to affect all walks of life in Saudi Arabia.”²

But this grand project also could have unforeseen consequences, and the impact may not be as great as some wish to see, given the very conservative nature of Saudi society. This uncertainty about their future role is why these young students, indeed, are the wild card of the kingdom's future.

AN EARLIER WAVE

The last time the kingdom sent large numbers of students abroad for higher education was in the 1970s and early 1980s. Between 16,000 and 18,000 Saudis came to the United States back then, with the peak year 1980–81, when 10,440 were enrolled at U.S. schools.³

Returnees from that period helped build the state infrastructure, and they heavily populate the top ranks of government ministries.⁴ But they did not seek to moderate the conservative nature of Saudi social life nor did they lobby for political change. “A lot of my professors studied abroad but they didn’t do anything. They just go to their clinics and mind their own business. I didn’t find reform initiatives out of them,” said a medical school student, 24, from southwest Saudi Arabia.

After the mid-1980s, Saudi students abroad dwindled for two reasons: The kingdom had built its own universities, and religious conservatives, who gained influence during the 1980s and 1990s, objected to sending Saudi youths to countries where they would be influenced by non-Saudi ways.

At the time of the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, only 4,052 Saudis were studying in the United States. By 2004–5, they had dropped to 3,533 after Washington halted issuing student visas from the kingdom.⁵

Today’s scholarship program is non-discriminatory. Women make up nearly a third (29 percent) of its students in the United States.⁶ And Shiite youths say they do not have problems getting accepted into what is an extremely generous program—one that most American students would die for: Tuition, books, airfare to and from the kingdom, and health insurance are paid for by the government. Each student gets a \$1,900 monthly stipend to cover food and rent. The stipend is increased if the student is married or has children. Currently, the program envisions sending new students abroad at least through 2015.

In the spring of 2012, 6,000 Saudis graduated from American educational institutions. But according to AlKhalaf of the Saudi Cultural Mission, many of them will remain here to continue their studies for another, higher degree.⁷ In a few years, however, increasing numbers of stu-

dents will flock home bearing newly minted degrees and high hopes of finding a good job.

Providing employment for this influx is a major concern for Saudi government officials and economists—though not for many Saudi students, who say they believe their language skills and foreign degrees will make them attractive to employers. Of far greater concern is finding a job they will like. “To find a job that you really feel comfortable with, like you want to live for it—yeah, that’s what I’m concerned about,” said the 25-year-old student in Canada.

WESTERNIZATION WOES

The push to educate Saudi youth abroad has run into resistance from right-wing clerics who fear—rightly so—that their influence over Saudi society will likely diminish when thousands of students exposed to new ideas and cultures return home. The scholarship program has “dragged woe onto our nation,” ultraconservative sheikh Nasser Al Omar told a Saudi newspaper in May. “If the scholarships Westernize our sons, imagine how much they will Westernize our daughters.”⁸ Earlier, he denounced parents for sending their children “to the countries of the West... to study,” adding: “Ask cultural attaches, not me, what goes on in those countries.”⁹

The clerical jeremiads, which often imply that Saudi students overseas spend their time drinking alcohol and having extramarital affairs, resonate with some parents, especially when it comes to daughters. Their chances of marriage may diminish rather than rise if they live abroad among foreigners, some parents fear.

“My daughter wants to study in New York,” a senior government official, who himself attended graduate school in the United States, told me. “If I let her go, maybe when she comes back she will find a hard time finding a husband because people will say, ‘What did she do in those four years?’ Maybe they will say she had a relationship with a man.”

Clergy opposition, however, has not affected the students, said AlKhalaf. “In all honesty,” she said, “I heard that the students are more eager than anything else to prove themselves right and the conservatives wrong.”

Indeed, when the popular preacher Mohammed Al Arifi criticized the scholarship program, one of my interviewees now studying in the United States sent him angry feedback.

“I sent him a tweet saying, ‘You are living in a world by yourself,’” the student confided.

BREAKING THE MOLD OR BLENDING IN?

Returning students will undoubtedly bring badly needed skills, energy and creativity to the Saudi economy. But their lasting impact on other aspects of Saudi life is the great unknown. I asked youths both overseas and in the kingdom whether they thought the young people abroad would change Saudi Arabia when they all eventually came home.

Many believed that they would have a positive impact. But tellingly, they telegraphed some doubt about this by usually tacking on some variation of “at least I hope so.”

“I don’t see it as 100,000 people coming back and just sitting at home,” said a recent medical school graduate in Jeddah, aged 23. “Obviously, there will be a demand from them [for changes]. So who knows? They might even swallow up the system. I hope.”

The 25-year-old in Canada was confident that students like himself will positively change the kingdom “because I myself, I’ve changed. And I’ve seen that in other people—how they have been changed. They might not have the purpose in their minds to change Saudi Arabia, but it’s part of the general plan, if you know what I mean. If everyone is changed... he will change others.... It will take time. But yeah, it will change.”

Students coming home will make “a big difference. I’m very optimistic about that,” said a 23-year-old respiratory therapist in Riyadh. “They will arrive here with new ideas. I’m not talking about people coming from the U.S. and Canada, because they are modernized countries. I’m talking about those people who will be coming from China, Hong Kong and the developing countries. They will bring us ideas on how to develop the country.... I think the king wants to make change, but we don’t have those people [to implement change]. So he created that

program to send them to those countries and come up with solutions.... That's my opinion."

Some youths said Saudi society would have to become less restrictive to accommodate returning students' heightened expectations or run the risk of social unrest.

"These students who've gone on scholarships form a huge danger to the way we live our lives in Saudi Arabia," said a 29-year-old bank employee who got his master's degree in Britain. "I'm one of those students, so I'll say 'we.' We've seen a way of life that is hugely different from what we see here.... Living in the West, I didn't see any restrictions against... personal freedoms.... At the same time, I was not restricted from speaking my mind or seeking my rights.... I keep making the joke that in the U.K., as a foreigner I knew exactly what my rights were. In Saudi Arabia, as a national, I don't know what my rights are until the officer picks me up and throws me in jail. I'm in a nation where I don't understand my rights."

Returning students "will really struggle when they come back," he added, and if "you're limiting them to 10 or 15 percent of what they've experienced [abroad], of course they're going to explode at some point."

A 23-year-old engineering student in the Washington, D.C., area said that living in the United States, "you see how free people are, you see how different life is." The powers-that-be at home "just can't show you the freedom and not give it to you back there, you know.... So yeah, I'm sure there will be a difference.... I would say I'm more desirous to have freedom in my country."

Ultimately, the students' future impact "depends on the students. Some have gone abroad just to play around, others have gone to really learn and to come back and implement what they've learned, and the latter is what we hope for," said a 27-year-old, face-veiled female studying Islamic commercial law in Riyadh.

A 26-year-old Riyadh man studying English in Florida said he believes returning students will make the kingdom "a more open-minded country, but we will not lose our Islam. We will still pray, but we will be open to other countries. We will cooperate with other countries even if they are non-Muslim countries." He added that this should please religious hard-liners "because if we are open-minded, we spread Islam everywhere and the number of Muslims will increase."

A significant number of interviewees, however, expressed doubts that returning students would bring major change to the kingdom. They cited the strong conservative tendencies of Saudi society, a lack of seriousness on the part of many students abroad, and an unwillingness to get involved in politics. Beyond the economy and marketplace, they added, their impact is likely to be minor.

“The value system of people is not going to change enough,” said a 29-year-old female writer in Riyadh. “We are going to have a lot of people who are educated outside, and people are starting to develop their individualism some more. But still there is going to be more agreement than disagreement between them and the government.”

A 23-year-old studying engineering in Los Angeles agreed, saying that change-makers have to contend with the country's ingrained conservatism. “There are a lot of people in Saudi Arabia who don't like change, they are not open to change, they are afraid of change,” he said. “We [young people] are going to change [the country], but to what extent I don't know. This is a very hard question. I see it now on Facebook, all my friends, people I met here. They post articles about change. Most of them want change. But again, to what extent? And what kind of change do they want? That's the thing.”

A 26-year-old woman who got her master's degree in New York says the impact of returning students will be “none at all.” Too many students have been conditioned by their Saudi education, she said, to reflexively reject or resist many aspects of an open society and so will return home largely unchanged.

A 21-year-old attending a Washington, D.C.-area university agreed, saying that once home, returning students will “blend in more than I would like them to.” He decried the fact that many of them “kind of stay in their own little groups and don't mix with Americans. They're not exposed to the society, the culture as a whole.”

As their horizons expand, Saudi students are “starting to care” more about their lifestyle options but not necessarily about politics, said a 22-year-old female from Riyadh who recently got her bachelor's degree in Washington, D.C. “As long as they're economically secure, I don't think they would care about whether they're deciding on political decisions.”

Some interviewees warned about future tensions as increasing numbers of foreign-educated students return home. A 24-year-old youth in southwest Saudi Arabia said he foresees a scenario in which a returning student “will be described as a ‘Westerner’ and [asked] ‘Do you think you know more than me because you studied abroad?’ He will be discriminated against at work, believe me,” and subjected to pressure “until he will return back to being a parrot.”

A 26-year-old information systems expert who got his master’s degree in Australia said the return of thousands of students might further polarize Saudi life. In his experience, he said, Saudis who live overseas either do not change at all or become super-liberal. “I’m thinking over the next five years, when we’ll be having over 100,000 people come back, I’m really looking forward to see what’s going to happen,” he said. “People from different countries, different attitudes, they’ve changed.... No one is going to judge who is the best. Some are going to follow the open-minded people, and some are going to follow those who are less open-minded. So maybe there will be a fight between the two.”

CHANGES WITHIN

While their collective influence on their homeland remains an open question, young Saudis living overseas say their experiences have already changed them as individuals. Personal responsibility, relating to the opposite sex and practicing their faith are areas where some said they saw changes. Sometimes, changes were so subtle that they didn’t even notice them until they went home for vacation.

“I live in a village, and we have very strict traditions... like talking to men is not good or even to wave in the street,” said a 28-year-old female getting her master’s in the United States. But on a visit home after being away more than a year, she instinctively waved “thank you” to a male driver who’d allowed the car in which she was riding to pass. Her brother, who was driving, reminded her that she was forgetting her traditions.

“People say, ‘I will go to the U.S. I will keep my religion. I will keep my culture. I wouldn’t change anything.’ But in the end, something changed in

them,” said a 21-year-old youth from Qatif now studying in Massachusetts. He discovered this on a visit home, when he surprised himself by telling his mother that he didn't like what she had cooked. His parents were furious at his disrespect. “After that, I asked myself, why did I say it, because I respect my parents.”

Some Saudi students said their experiences overseas changed them in deeply felt ways. A 25-year-old university teaching assistant from Riyadh said “the big difference in my life” came when he spent six months studying English in New Zealand. “I met Japanese people, Americans, Europeans. I saw how people care about education, spending all their money on education. Back in my country, we spend money on cars rather than education. We spend money on things... that are secondary... This is the knowledge or information or culture that I want my children, if I have them, to be aware of.”

He also experienced his most spiritual Ramadan during that same visit to New Zealand. “I used to be a better Muslim outside Saudi Arabia, in New Zealand, because I have nobody to tell me what to do,” he related. “If I pray, it's me and God. What I do, it's me and God. No one knows about what I am doing. I am not going to the mosque because my father and mother tell me, ‘It is prayer time, go.’ No, I go because I want to. And it happened that I spent Ramadan in New Zealand and it was the best Ramadan.”

He fasted 18 hours a day, he said, “and I was happy about it.”

Others find that living in a non-Muslim country spurs doubts and challenges to their spirituality. A 28-year-old university teaching assistant getting his master's degree in the United States recalled how “when I first came here, I used to pray five times a day with additional prayers at the end. After six months, I only did the five prayers. Then I combined all five prayers at one time. I am becoming a weak Muslim.”

When he went home for a visit, his family called him on his slackness. So he complied with their wishes to pray in the more orthodox manner of five separate times a day at the mosque, even though “I found myself feeling like a hypocrite.”

A 22-year-old Saudi studying in Virginia commented on the initial difficulties many young men have when they live in a country where women

are not veiled and shrouded. “At the beginning it was kind of awkward,” he recalled. “You’re not used to seeing females or actually talking to them.... You’re not comfortable. But then over time it gets better. It gets easier.”

He believes that students should “go back at least once a year, so you don’t lose yourself here. I’ve seen a lot of people.... They got used to [living in the U.S.], and they like it and they don’t want to go back. But they have to.... They don’t like it back there because it’s very strict.... There’s a lot of things that are wrong there. But here, they’re not wrong. It’s a bit like a conflict in the beginning... and you feel guilty.... You have to decide. You have to make up your mind to do this or that.”

Even marital dynamics can be affected, as couples adjust to different schedules and different cultural expectations about the roles of spouses. One woman told a Saudi newspaper that while studying abroad she and her husband split household chores, but now that they are home there is less cooperation. “Our lives were 10 times more difficult than it is here, and we really never had time for anything, yet we still spent more time together than we do now,” she told the *Saudi Gazette*. “It’s as if coming back to Saudi Arabia means he has to be like every other man here, who leaves everything on his wife, doesn’t give her a minute of his time or take her out to dinner or spend quality time with his children.”¹⁰

FAMILY OR FLIGHT

The experience of living outside the kingdom can be more heady for women than men, because suddenly they have much greater freedom than at home. Many get their drivers’ license and enjoy the independence and personal autonomy that mobility offers. They also dress as they wish, free to wear a headscarf or not. Most remain modestly attired, though one female student I met in the U.S. was clearly pushing the fashion envelope. She wore denim shorts, boots, a top that draped off one of her shoulders, a row of silver earrings and a silver stud in her tongue. The “religious police” back home would have fainted.

It is certainly true that some Saudi women studying overseas are hoping to establish a perch from which they can escape, even if only temporarily, the smothering restrictions they face back home. Some will spend years

getting advanced degrees. Others will find a job, or marry a foreigner. But most Saudi women will not want to endure the family strife that would accompany a decision not to return home. Some may compromise and follow the scores of their sisters who have found jobs in Qatar, Kuwait or the United Arab Emirates, where they can be near family but have more freedom in their careers and personal lives.

As one 26-year-old woman who studied in the United States said: "I can't be me and say good-bye to Saudi Arabia. I just can't close the door forever, that's not an option. But I can't live there either, man. I really can't."

NOTES

1. Figures supplied by Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission in Fairfax, Virginia
2. Telephone interview with author, June 2012
3. Caryle Murphy, "Saudis Again Head to U.S. Campuses; Record Demand Ends Years-Long Decline, Notably Since 9/11," *Washington Post*, November 11, 2006
4. Today, 80 percent of the Saudi cabinet are U.S.-educated. See David Ottaway, "Saudi Arabia's Race Against Time," Wilson Center Middle East Program Occasional Paper Series, Summer 2012, p. 4
5. Figures from Saudi Cultural Mission and Murphy, "Saudis Again Head to U.S."
6. Since Saudi women are supposed to have a male guardian travel with them outside the kingdom, the government pays a stipend to her guardian or, if he academically qualifies for a scholarship, he is also accepted into the program. This practice means that many women from conservative families who would not otherwise be allowed to go abroad are able to have a scholarship. In reality, however, many women studying overseas do not have a guardian with them simply because it is often too difficult for a male relative to drop everything at home and move abroad for several years.
7. Interview, June 2012
8. McDowall, Angus, "Wider world opened to Saudis studying abroad," *Reuters*, June 6, 2012
9. Al Omar made the comment in an address posted to YouTube on February, 5, 2012 that was translated by MEMRITv and is available here: http://www.memritv.org/clip_transcript/en/3318.htm.
10. Doha Ghouth, "When the Going Gets Tough," *Saudi Gazette*, April 4, 2012

CHAPTER 12

The Future

“The youth has started thinking. Before, thinking was something forbidden in Saudi Arabia.”

—University student in Qatif, 20

“Young people have a lot of abilities. They have a lot of energy....We should use those abilities and that energy properly. If we don’t use it properly it will explode in a bad way.”

—Respiratory therapist in Riyadh, 23

“From what I hear and read and see on the Internet and in the news, I understand that Western people think that young Saudis are ignorant. And no one can blame them because we don’t have our own inventions. But I believe that Saudi men and women are creative; they have creative minds. They just didn’t get the chance or opportunity to show that.”

—Supermarket cashier in Riyadh, 23

“Youth, even in the Gulf, would like to have a say in their destiny. They have different goals and visions than their parents. Even my own son doesn’t listen to me. They want transparency, are against corruption, and are seeking role models.... I’m hoping God will give me enough time so I can see the fruits of their labor.”

—Khalid al Maeena, Jeddah newspaper editor

Saudi Arabia’s future is vitally significant to the international system because of its pivotal roles in the global oil market, the Islamic world, and the

historic developments now roiling the Middle East. The portrait of Saudi youth, mostly in their twenties, sketched in the preceding pages offers a valuable window into that future.

It suggests that the next two decades will be increasingly bumpy and challenging for Saudi political and religious leaders, who will have to accommodate the political, economic and social aspirations of the kingdom's youth.

Far more than previous generations, Saudi youth today are being shaped by forces beyond the government's control, such as globalization and the information revolution. They are poised to have dramatic effects on the kingdom in many ways: economically, politically, socially, religiously, educationally and recreationally. They will be decisive in whether the kingdom can transform itself into a competitive, globally connected economy and a dynamic, creative society successfully making its way through a turbulent, complex 21st century.

Change is coming to the kingdom, and its young people will be—in-
deed they already are—the crucible of that transformation.

Seen from the broadest perspective, most Saudi youths want their country to make steady progress toward a state of modernity in which what is useful and helpful from outside the kingdom is blended with what is comforting and affirming from inside. In other words, these youths want their country to develop at a rapid clip when it comes to technology, education, science, medicine and business. But they do not want this development to come at the expense of their safety, security, or economic wellbeing, including the generous state benefits they now receive.

“We have a really rich culture. We have a really rich religion. We need to keep that. And also to be with the world [in technical development]. This is what we need: to keep our culture, our religion, and to be with the world,” said a 29-year-old information systems expert from Dammam.

Looked at in more detail, what do Saudi youths want?

POLITICALLY

They do not want to overthrow the House of Saud. But a growing number want to freely express their opinions and participate in decision-making. They

want values that many regard as guaranteed by Islam to be respected by the government, such as justice, human rights and free speech. They want everyone, royal family or not, treated equally under the law. Their aspirations for political involvement are not as sharp as those of their peers elsewhere in the region. But as time passes, these aspirations are likely to grow.

“Saudi young people need more opportunities to participate in decision-making. The government should have more confidence in young people,” said a 27-year-old Riyadh student of Islamic commercial law, her face hidden behind a veil.

RELIGIOUSLY

Youth wants the kingdom’s commitment to Islam to remain firm. But they favor a religious practice that is both more voluntary and more respectful of differences among Muslims.

There is a crisis of religious authority in Saudi Arabia in that many young people have lost trust in state-employed religious figures who present their faith unchanged from years ago and fail to address the problems of youth. Not only are young people looking for replacement authorities, they are also searching themselves for new ways to interpret Islam, especially as it relates to *maslaha*, or the common good.

This search is in its infancy and only appears in a minority. But it too is likely to spread, not only because of the disillusionment with religion felt by many Saudi youths, but also because of the region’s tumultuous political developments, which have pushed the question of Islam’s role in public life to the forefront of debate and public consciousness.

“Among young people and the generations of tomorrow, I think religious people won’t have that much power over them,” said Al Ogaimi, the Islamist political activist who works with Saudi youth. “The flaws of being governed by religious principles are beginning to show now. It’s not really the right way to govern people... It’s just starting to [be accepted] that people should be governed not by religion but by laws in general, disregarding whatever religion has to do with them. Ethics are now mattering more than religion to people.”

ECONOMICALLY

Saudi youths want jobs that give them status, prestige and economic rewards. They want *wasta* banished from the hiring process and promotions. In other words, they want more transparency and meritocracy in the work arena.

SOCIALLY

Young Saudis are ready to cast aside some traditions that they judge to be no longer pertinent or necessary. But they do not want indiscriminate or wholesale abandonment of customs and traditions. Notably, in one survey of 200 Saudis aged 18–24 in 2012, 78 percent agreed with the statement that “traditional values mean a lot to me and ought to be preserved for generations to come.” Only Libyans (82 percent) and Emiratis (79 percent) had higher percentages.¹

Young Saudis also want more personal freedom, as well as more recreation opportunities and fun. “Some of the rules here are silly like the ‘family sections’ [in restaurants] and [single men not being] allowed to go into the malls,” said a 23-year-old medical school graduate in Jeddah. “When a young man feels unwanted, I think he would react very aggressively.... This is why you find him racing [cars] in the streets... because he has nothing to do.... What’s he supposed to do?”

GENDER ROLES

A preponderance of Saudi women will increasingly demand greater personal autonomy, more access to jobs and greater participation in the public sphere. More so than men, they favor setting aside traditions that limit their gender’s independence. And they are increasingly insistent on distinguishing between tradition and religion in Saudi culture. Their pursuit of these matters will be the biggest driver of social and economic change for the foreseeable future.

RETIREMENT OF THE ELDERLY

Saudi youth also want the older generations that now dominate society to step down and make way for younger people in all spheres of life. “Every king coming, he’s old. So how would the country improve? How can the country develop with these leaders?” asked a 23-year-old student of chemical engineering in Los Angeles. “We need a young mindset, fresh minds, to work harder, and be more creative.”

TWO DIFFERENT SAUDI ARABIAS

This being Saudi Arabia, it is necessary to recall that these aspirations do not extend to the entire youth population. Significant numbers of youth do not wish to see the same kinds of changes described above; some want no changes at all. As a result, Saudi society may very well become more polarized as youths seeking reforms are opposed by those who do not. In particular, the desire for wider latitude for personal choice may provoke pushback from ultraconservative clergy and their followers, including some in the royal family.

Many changes sought by youth will be interpreted by conservatives as assaults on Saudi Muslim identity. Even if they are religiously devout, youths who want a more dynamic, free-wheeling, diverse society will be opposed by religious conservatives who resent any imitation of what they perceive as Western manners and ideas. Indeed it is already possible to see “two Saudi Arabias.” One is progressive, outgoing, at ease with global interactions; the other is inward-looking, extremely religiously oriented and very conservative.

Polarization will be sharpest around women’s rights issues because they are seen by so many Saudis, including some young people, as a religious matter. In addition, young men and women disagree, and even women themselves are not in accord, on how fast and how far women’s rights should be addressed. This will add another layer to the polarization.

TEN YEARS' TIME

As noted earlier, Saudis in their thirties and forties are the most politicized and active in the kingdom's small pro-democracy opposition lobby. At least they are the most high-profile age group. It was from them that I heard the most frustration, the most complaints about corruption and the strongest desire for reforms to give ordinary Saudis a share in governance.

A good many Saudi twentysomethings have similar political aspirations, but they are not as vocal or activist as their older compatriots. Will they become more vocal as they mature into their thirties? And, although likely to grow in numbers, will they ever become a critical mass of opposition activists? There is no way to answer those questions with certainty.

But looking down the road ten years from now, it is possible to more confidently predict a very likely confluence of forces that will strain the religiously based structure of governance in the kingdom and foster increased political dissent.

For one thing, as my interviewees enter their early thirties a decade or less from now, Saudi Arabia will be in a crucial transitional period during which the royal family's second generation of princes will be vying to succeed the older generation on the throne. This transitional period is expected to be an unsettling time as royal family factions jostle and negotiate. Tribal feelings, always near the surface, may be amplified, exacerbating social tensions.

How the royal family will handle this transition—fractiously or peacefully—is unclear. So is its outcome. Will it leave the royal family more divided or more united? Will the second generation's first monarch be politically and religiously progressive, or conservative? And how old will he be? The answers to these questions will indicate whether the royal family intends to share power with its subjects or not.

Also, in ten years' time, the kingdom will be in the midst of a huge influx of students returning from study overseas. They will bring new ideas, new skills and desire for good jobs. Will the private sector have expanded enough by then to create those jobs? And will oil exports still generate enough revenue for the government to finance its generous benefits schemes? Most of the twentysomething youths studied in this report will have settled into their careers by that

time. But an ever larger age cohort—those now aged 12 to 16—will be 22 to 26 years old and marching into the national labor market. They won't remember a time without the Internet, as most of my interviewees do, and are likely to be even more connected to and influenced by a globalized culture.

The passage of a decade also will give greater clarity to the unfolding Islamist-led political experiments set off by the Arab Awakening. If Egypt and Tunisia make successful transitions to sustainable democratic governments, young Saudis who favor similar reforms will be encouraged to press their demands. But if those Arab countries are in a political and economic mess, pro-reform Saudis will lose ground.

Finally, a decade from now Saudi society likely will have loosened its social restrictions to accommodate rising calls for greater personal freedoms and more recreational opportunities from youth. If not, there will be greater levels of frustration among young people.

MILITANT CONSERVATISM

The Saudi government has been confronted with violent revolt three times in its eight decades of rule. In the 1929 Battle of Sabilla, the country's founder, King Abdulaziz bin Saud, militarily crushed his erstwhile allies, the warrior tribesmen who had helped him unite the kingdom. In 1979, Islamic radicals laid siege to the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Islam's holiest site, and were only ousted after a sanguinary counter-assault that left hundreds dead. And from 2003 to 2006, al Qaeda's insurgency left 164 civilians and police dead and 1,114 injured.²

All three revolts were rooted in religious-based ideologies that grew out of an intolerant, anti-intellectual climate fostered by puritanical Wahhabism. That environment is being undercut by Saudi Arabia's new connectivity with the outside world and by the royal decision to send thousands of youths overseas for higher studies. But the lesson of these three episodes is that a minority can cause a substantial threat to the governing elite and upset a nation's sense of security.

For now, the appeal of extremism among Saudi youth appears to have pretty much evaporated and sympathy for al Qaeda gone way down. But

there is no guarantee that it would not make a comeback if the employment aspirations of youth are unmet, or if the economic situation drastically deteriorates. In such scenarios, some youths could take refuge in extremist or reactionary versions of Islam that would be manifested in a resurgence of al Qaeda, or more likely, in a movement of militant conservatism.

In addition, the government is holding thousands of young men for their alleged sympathies with al Qaeda. These prisoners will have to be released at some point in the future, and their impact on a younger generation could be negative.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In large part, Saudi culture is designed to create new generations that are just like the ones preceding them. Children and youth are seen as passive vessels to receive the culture and then replicate it.

This project is no longer tenable to the same degree as before. Young people want to maintain tradition. But they also want greater control over their own destiny.

A new template is needed for how the government and society relate to their youth. A new approach is called for—one that gives more autonomy and avenues of self-expression to young people and that treats them as partners in the ongoing process of the nation's cultural formation.

Other measures are needed:

- Education reform should be speeded up. Teachers should display higher expectations of their students to encourage them to excel. Critical thinking and teamwork should be stressed. The work ethic expected in the business world should be inculcated in students, and guidance counselors should be part of school staffs in order to introduce young people to more options for future careers.
- Youths should be given more freedom through opportunities for self-direction, self-expression and personal responsibility, starting with elected, student-led bodies in schools and universities.
- Since the private sector will be the future career outlet for most

Saudis, the government needs to nurture a robust private sector by creating the framework for a more level playing field, more equality of opportunity and more guarantees of freedom for intellectual creativity. This framework would include a transparent, enforced legal code; an end to royal cronyism and extra-judicial privilege; more guarantees for freedom of expression; and less censorship.

- Role models of high-achieving, successful adults should be more widely publicized to inspire young people.
- There should be greater public discussion of personal choice and social conformity from an Islamic perspective and how these values can guide Muslim societies as well as complement each other. The freedom to choose one's path in life should be seen as a cultural value.
- The government needs to be more transparent about what youths should expect to receive in their adulthood as far as state benefits. The sense of entitlement to financial benefits needs to be adjusted downward, and the value of self-reliance given more stress.
- More recreational opportunities should be available for those who seek to patronize them, including cinemas, gyms, athletic fields. Community-supported, local sports teams should be encouraged for both genders. And youth-run volunteer organizations should be supported and mentored by business and government.
- The government should halt and stigmatize sectarian speech and move to fully integrate Shiite youths into the mainstream through employment and educational opportunities, as is already being done with the King Abdullah Scholarship Program.

FOR U.S. POLICYMAKERS:

I did not examine in detail the attitudes of Saudi youth toward the United States because they are well known and predictable. There is a minority who regard the United States as a predatory power bent on destroying Muslim nations. But most young Saudis like the United States for its culture of personal freedom and for the high quality of its educational institutions. They have confirmed this by choosing to come to the United States in large numbers for overseas studies.

At the same time, almost all Saudi youths strongly disapprove of U.S. foreign policy because of its strong bias toward Israel, its lack of support for an independent Palestinian state, its occupation of Iraq and its military operations in Afghanistan, another Muslim state.

There is no doubt that U.S.-Saudi relations will be affected by the changes that Saudi youths are bringing and will bring to their country. Without doubt, they will be more outspoken in their criticism of U.S. foreign policies.

If young Saudis demanding political reform and civil rights ever reach critical mass, the United States will surely find itself having to choose between its long alliance with the House of Saud and this new opposition. So far, it has been spared that choice.

To a degree, the good will that the United States now enjoys among the Saudi population will grow or shrink depending on how it responds to the aspirations of Saudi young people, particularly as regards education and employment. U.S. policy-makers should therefore strive to:

- Design creative programs for job training that can be done by Saudi individuals and companies as well as by American firms operating in the kingdom.
- Encourage the U.S. private sector to open businesses in the kingdom that create jobs.
- Assist and encourage women's empowerment by speaking out for women's rights and human rights and stressing their compatibility with Islamic values. U.S. government and NGO efforts to help Saudi women in job training or community organizing are not acceptable to the Saudi population unless requested by Saudi women and implemented in a behind-the-scenes manner supportive of efforts already being made by women in the kingdom.

HISTORY NOT A PERFECT GUIDE

The Saudi ruling class is a gerontocracy that has shown no inclination to significantly alter the political structure in which the royal family offers little accountability and transparency while enjoying excessive privileges and riches.

But barring unlikely developments such as a devastating war, a precipitous, drastic decline in the price of oil, or armed conflict among factions of the royal family, the Saudi monarchy likely will remain in power for the next decade and perhaps longer.

Partial reforms may be undertaken that will dilute its absolute powers, possibly as a result of civic unrest such as strikes or demonstrations or because of demands for power-sharing from a growing segment of youthful Saudis. Even if these youths do not form a majority, they will have to be heeded so that their talents can be pressed into the national project of creating a diversified, job-creating, knowledge-based economy.

If history is a guide, the House of Saud will pragmatically and slowly adapt to the demands of young people, but also will try to co-opt many of them in order to preserve its ultimate authority. Severe economic difficulties and the example of successful political reform elsewhere, however, may cause young Saudis to resist being co-opted to the same extent their parents were. This would leave the royal family with distasteful options: further suppressing dissent or giving up some of its prerogatives.

History, however, is never a perfect guide, and it does not always duplicate itself.

Events that no one foresees can tripwire major, even historic, developments. We need look no further than the example of Mohamed Bouazizi, the fruit and vegetable vendor who set himself on fire in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, in December 2010.

NOTES

1. Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey 2012, at www.arabyouthsurvey.com
2. Caryle Murphy, "Saudi plans to put 991 on trial for terrorism," *The National*, October 21, 2008

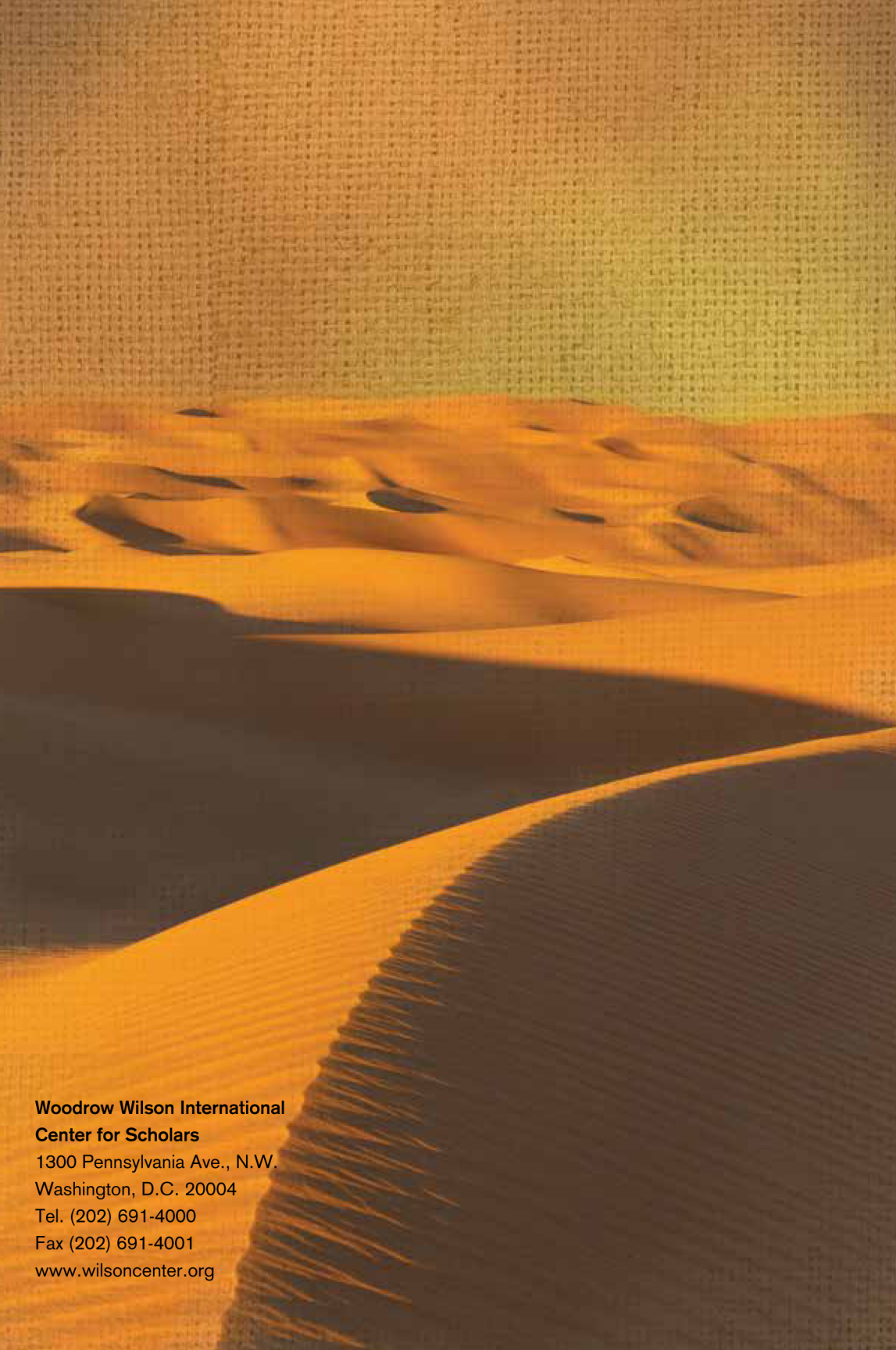
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