

Research Paper

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Middle East and North Africa Programme | March 2015

Civil Society in Saudi Arabia: The Power and Challenges of Association



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The Royal Institute of
International Affairs

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Summary

This paper examines the importance of meetings and association in Saudi Arabia. The kingdom has no formal democratic process, but has some traditional representation and consultation mechanisms, chiefly through the traditional meetings, the *majalis*.

However, Saudi Arabia's population increase means the *majalis* cannot absorb the numbers wishing to take part in government policy discussion. As a result, it is hard for citizens to make their views known – and even harder to influence government policy-making.

Apart from the *majalis*, civil society, associations and meetings are in effect the only means by which Saudis can keep the government informed.

However, the Saudi government frequently bans meetings and closes down associations. It has delayed publishing a long-promised civil society law, and has made registering an association very difficult.

Saudi Arabia has a very considerable number of media-savvy, educated young people, many of whom are unemployed and frustrated, who wish to be part of government decision-making but are currently barred by the absence of formal channels.

State ambivalence towards associational life suggests that traditional interests among the authorities fear the potential for challenges to the status quo. Such conservatives have not, however, adapted to see the contemporary shifts in the way society and individuals relate to each other, the need to provide an outlet for the energy and aspirations of the younger generation, and the utility of civic activism in helping to build a stronger sense of national identity in a young, diverse and rapidly developing country.

Introduction

Associational life, that is to say meetings and formal and informal gatherings of people, is a core part of any society. This paper considers to what degree people in Saudi Arabia can meet, discuss their views and represent their opinions to the government. It examines meetings as a core part of civil society, taking civil society to mean the informal area of interactions and mediation between government and people, whether the authorities see this as a cohesive force or an irritant.

In an autocratic state such as Saudi Arabia, which has virtually no formal, structural representation of the public (only the debating chamber of the Majlis al-Shura), people have no means to influence decision-making. In this context, the associational side of civil society becomes very important as the main channel by which people convey their views to the government, in the absence of the formal political structures seen in a Western democracy. It has become even more important now, when young people – who make up some 60 per cent of the population – have no formal voice but are social media-savvy, often unemployed or dissatisfied with their job prospects, and wishing to have a say in their country's social, domestic and foreign policies.

Yet getting together or association with a common objective is often illegal in the kingdom and carries heavy penalties. This paper will argue that Saudi Arabia needs to create more channels for discussion, let people meet more openly (despite fears of Islamist influence), and give people, young and old, a say in the running of their country. The process of building nationhood is arduous and slow, but it can only succeed if people are brought into policy-making – and that requires associational life.

The paper assesses to what extent, how, why and where people can meet and discuss in Saudi Arabia. Conclusions on youth unrest or politics may emerge from the text, but these are not the central theme. The paper discusses citizens' attitudes to a government in whose activities they currently have no part, and by which they are often forbidden from holding meetings.

The analysis is drawn from two visits, in 2011 and 2014, and from previous work in the 2000s on the Saudi charitable sector.¹ Each visit, of about 10 days' duration, took place in Jeddah, Riyadh and the Eastern Province, and at least 30 interviews were conducted per visit. Interviewees ranged from business people, government officials, professionals, activists, lawyers, academics, media and other friends.

At present associational life in Saudi Arabia is mixed. Associations registered with, and approved by, the government exist within limited mandates. Other associational life is difficult, often illegal, often 'virtual' and often banned. Pressure groups and activists push the frontiers out, while many government-sponsored associations exist in parallel. Indeed, when reformers start a group, the government often starts a parallel body: for instance, a state human rights institution was formed after a human rights NGO was formed.

Saudi Arabia is a particularly community-focused country. Associational life is deeply implanted, with differing loyalties often running in parallel. For instance, someone may belong to a particular tribe, live in a particular community, be part of a tribal family subdivision, belong to a particular school

¹ Montagu, Caroline, 'Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Journal*, Winter 2010, p. 67 onwards.

of jurisprudence, come from a particular region, use particular vertical patronage, have a particular ethnicity, be part of a specific type of Islamic practice, or have particular traditions. Such integrating or, sometimes, divisive loyalties mean that Saudi Arabia is a rich and deeply interwoven society.

Naturally, Saudi Arabia thrives on associational life. This has to take the place of open political discussion and free speech, and must also sustain, contain and restrain dissent so as not to bring the wrath of the Al Saud or of the interior ministry down on the participants.

Country Overview

Saudi Arabia is an amalgam of disparate regions that were mostly brought together in the 1920s by the tribal ruler of the central Nejd region, King Abdulaziz bin Saud. Some regions accepted Nejd overlordship without a struggle, but in others the Al Saud used force; none could refuse, and none had the right to secede. Overall, the many regions that make up the political entity of what is now Saudi Arabia (named of course after this dynasty) have no intrinsic loyalty to Nejd, but nationalism has taken some root. In the words of one interviewee, ‘We are very nationalistic when we are abroad or when we talk about Saudi football.’²

The regions and the minorities in Saudi Arabia are very diverse. Its topography ranges from the mountains of the south to the northern Nefud desert, and its culture and traditions vary widely. At times, the government seems to want to allow more recognition to the diversity of its regions and to give some room for local custom and history. Some of the peoples of Saudi Arabia have different ethnicities; and while Sunni Islam is the religion of the majority, the Shia population in the Eastern Province is estimated to number some 1.5–2.5 million (the figures vary according to the source), and there is an Ismaili community in the south – neither of which is represented in the Supreme Council of *Ulema*.

Unlike most other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Saudi Arabia is a huge country, not a city state. It is a rentier economy, with a population that has massively increased; however, from a 5 per cent average population growth rate in 1980–90, the rate of growth slowed to some 2–3 per cent in recent years.³ It is a country that is trying to keep its traditional and religious culture intact while dealing with the physical, political and social implications of conservatism. Combining – often dysfunctionally – modernizing and traditional policies, the kingdom validates itself on its religious authority and yet has promoted some western values in its society.

Socio-political background

Saudi Arabia’s status as a religious and conservative society has its roots in the 18th-century alliance of religion and state between the first Al Saud king, Muhammad bin Saud, and the Muslim reformer Muhammad Abdul Wahhab. Perhaps 60–70 per cent of the Saudi people are conservatives, who do not want the change or reforms that the government has been attempting. For many, the continuing pact between the *ulema*’ (clerics) and the government has provided a stable environment in which to practise the Islam that they have inherited, and adhere to the practices and rules to which they are committed.

Saudi Arabia became more rigid in its practices from the beginning of the 1980s, after a small group of young Saudi wahhabi zealots, led by Juhaiman al-Utaibi, took over the Grand Mosque in Makkah at the end of 1979. In response, the government sought to strengthen the status of religious scholars who supported a conservative interpretation of Islam, and gave the *ulema*’ more control over the educational curriculum.

² Interview, Eastern Province (EP), February 2014.

³ Data from Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA), *Forty Ninth Annual Report*, Annual Statistics Section 11, Table 38, June 2014; see <http://www.sama.gov.sa/sites/samaen/ReportsStatistics/Pages/AnnualReport.aspx>.

The government's handover of education was a poor strategy in terms of the country's social and economic development. The ensuing educational system has resulted in a generation of conservative, badly educated and unemployable young Saudis. Many of these are resentful of their lack of opportunities, and such disaffection provides a fertile breeding ground for Islamists and jihadis. It is partly fear of this section of the population that has led the government to hold back even on municipal elections.⁴ The government fears that Islamists, who are well organized, would win at any election and that their conservative policies would set back the existing reform programme. The legacy of the 2011 'Arab Spring', and the election success of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, has compounded these fears.

It would appear that the longer the country continues without any form of elections, the greater the discontent of some of the country's young people will be.

The municipal elections scheduled for 2015 may offer a controlled opportunity to test allegiance to Islamist elements, as the municipalities have only a limited remit and half the members are appointed. Otherwise, it would appear that the longer the country continues without any form of elections, the greater the discontent of some of the country's young people will be. On the other hand, many young Saudis have little interest in politics and are apathetic about their role in their conformist society.

Civil society

The arena for Saudi political engagement and civil society has expanded since the end of the 20th century; social reform, initially encouraged in the late 1990s by the then Crown Prince Abdullah, has gained some momentum; and charitable organizations and the country's formal and informal associations have moved forward. The domestic voluntary sector in Saudi Arabia is broad and deep, and is made up of charities, NGOs, not-for-profit organizations (NPOs), chambers of commerce, and professional and informal associations and groupings.

Statehood in the Middle East is the subject of much analysis – in terms of where the state begins or ends, the shortcomings of authoritarian governments, the use of coercion, the lack of representation, and the overarching structure of Islam. In the Saudi context, those who use a narrowly Western definition of civil society can claim that Saudi Arabia has none. Since the late 1990s, however, civil society has been seen more as a more informal process of associations and activities than as a concept requiring an enabling political structure, and this is the case in the Middle East.

In Saudi Arabia it is perhaps the absence of a constitution that most hinders the formation of civil society socio-political groupings. The country runs on the Basic Law, promulgated by King Fahd in March 1992, underpinned by the *Shari'ah* (Islamic law), using *Hanbali*⁵ jurisprudence and royal decrees.

⁴ Municipal elections were held in 2005; elections due in 2009 were delayed, eventually taking place in 2011. Voting was restricted to men in each case. The elections due in 2015 will be the first at which women can stand as candidates and vote.

⁵ The *Hanbali* school is one of the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence.

Economic issues

With around one-sixth⁶ of the world's oil reserves, Saudi Arabia has experienced very rapid development since the mid-1970s. Gross domestic product (GDP) reached \$749.5 billion⁷ in nominal terms in 2013, taking GDP per head to \$24,953.⁸ In real terms, GDP has tripled over the past 30 years.⁹ The oil price crash in the latter part of 2014 could affect development plans, but the country's total reserves of over US\$700 billion¹⁰ will cushion the overall impact. Oil typically accounts for some 90 per cent of export earnings, 45 per cent of GDP and 75 per cent of government revenues.

Over the last 40 years the population has expanded to about 20 million Saudis, with another 9 million foreign workers; some 60 per cent of Saudis are under 30 years of age. In the same period, neither Saudi Arabia's physical nor its systemic infrastructure has expanded fast enough: there are not enough jobs, implementation of decrees is poor, and there are shortages of trained personnel and management. Job shortages and inappropriate training are compounded by a shortage of housing. Despite the expansion of education, the most pressing problem is youth unemployment and with it possible disaffection.

A recent report¹¹ has highlighted unemployment in the kingdom, emphasizing the high number of unemployed males: some 261,000 were jobless in 2013, compared with 217,000 in 2012. Among women, unemployment reached 361,000 in 2013, up from 358,000 in 2012. The average unemployment rate for 2013 was 11.7 per cent, with rates of 6.1 per cent for men and 33.2 per cent for women. Overall, national data on unemployment vary considerably and reflect the objectives of the particular institution behind the statistics. Unemployment (and underemployment) is usually much higher than national statistics suggest.

Economic issues are a source of great discontent and criticism in the country. For instance, a woman interviewed in Riyadh noted: 'Children are poorer than their parents were. Salaries are the same as 20 years ago.'¹² An Ismaili interviewee stated: 'People in Qatif are working manually – plumbers, mechanics.' He was commenting on Shias, not just Ismailis, and pointing out that people in the Qatif area feel deprived, marginalized and ignored by the government. Many interviewees in both 2011 and 2014 talked about youth unemployment, but at the time of the later visit people were referring more to social media – this being the locus for young people's dissent and dissatisfaction.

Type of government

Government in Saudi Arabia is a monarchical autocracy, with no political parties and an appointed consultative assembly, the Majlis al-Shura. Voting for representatives in the municipalities took place in 2005; another round of municipal elections due in 2009 was postponed, apparently because of fears of an Islamist win, but took place in 2011; the next round is now scheduled to be held in 2015, this time with women participating. Little power is vested in the municipalities and half the candidates are selected but the forthcoming polls will point to the allegiances and interests of Saudis.

⁶ Saudi Arabia's proved reserves were 265.9 billion barrels, or 15.8 per cent of the world's total, at the end of 2013, according to the BP *Statistical Review of World Energy 2014*; see <http://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/about-bp/energy-economics/statistical-review-of-world-energy.html>.

⁷ SAMA, *Forty Ninth Annual Report*, Annual Statistics Section 9, Table 1.

⁸ SAMA, *Forty Ninth Annual Report*, Annual Report Section 9, Table 6.

⁹ Real GDP at constant 1999 prices was SAR409 billion in 1985 and SAR1,274.3 billion in 2013. Source: SAMA, *Forty Ninth Annual Report*, Annual Report Section 9, Table 2.

¹⁰ SAMA, *Forty Ninth Annual Report*, Annual Report Section 1, Table 9.

¹¹ World Economic Forum, *Rethinking Arab Employment*, 2014.

¹² Interview Riyadh, February 2014.

Political institutions

Political institutions in Saudi Arabia are limited to the king and his court, the council of ministers and its committees, senior members of the royal family and a small number of advisers. There is little distinction in practice between the government and the judiciary, since the judges and *ulema*' are paid by the government and *Shari'ah* and the Qur'an are the source of the Basic Law. The *ulema*' have been described as partners in government, traditionally exerting authority over education, justice and family law, but leaving foreign policy, oil policy, economic management and security matters to the Al Saud and their ministers.

The trouble-free transition from the late King Abdullah to King Salman and the confirming of Prince Muqrin as crown prince in early 2015 have shown the stability of the Al Saud family. The transition to the next generation has begun, with the interior minister, Muhammad bin Naif, named as deputy crown prince and second deputy prime minister; and King Salman's son, the young Muhammad bin Salman, taking the defence ministry, as well as being head of the Royal Court and president of the newly formed Council of Economic and Development Affairs.

The executive is in effect an amalgam of ministries, institutions, civil service organizations and Al Saud diktat. The late King Abdullah pushed through government reform as well as human rights reform. For instance, he replaced the conservative heads of the judiciary and of the *hayya*' (Committee for the Promotion of Good and Prevention of Vice, or religious police) and other figures seen as opponents of change. None the less, the conservative wing of the *ulema*' has considerable traction, while the reforming sheikhs (such as Sheikh Ahmad al-Ghamdi, formerly head of the *hayya*' in Makkah) are only beginning to make their voices heard. One key issue that is now being addressed is the difference between *ikhtilat* (men and women together in an open space – permissible) and *khilwa* (man and woman together in enclosed space – not permissible). For women in the workplace this distinction is extremely important.

The Majlis al-Shura took a political step forward when 30 women were appointed to the assembly. In discussion of political issues in Riyadh during the author's visit in 2014, one female deputy talked about the Shura's 'constituencies', notably bringing the language of democracy to Saudi Arabia. The women in the assembly are quoted and admired because they have spoken out on issues of youth and unemployment, for instance, and on social and domestic abuse, as well as on driving. One female deputy, Dr Hanan al-Ahmadi, has for example criticized the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) for not implementing regulations on child abuse.

Foreign affairs

The foreign affairs policies of Saudi Arabia, and wider events in the region, are beyond the scope of this paper, but the influence of the Arab Spring on Saudi Arabia's socio-political life is important. The 2011 uprisings in the region helped to encourage petitions for change in Saudi Arabia (see below), but the subsequent turbulence in Syria, Yemen and Egypt has heightened fear of change. Echoing a widespread view, one journalist interviewed by the author commented: 'Now it's a problem of survival in the Middle East due to the Syrian civil war.' As a result, she considered that women's issues are taking second place, 'because women are very concerned about safety, security and stability'.¹³

¹³ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

According to another journalist, ‘People are greatly concerned about the government meddling [elsewhere in the region] ... stability in Egypt means stability in Saudi Arabia, so the Saudi government supports the military regime ... Iran is the enemy; Israel and Saudi Arabia are allies. Some imams are still promoting jihad in Syria. They have been sacked but they still go on. Saudi Arabia is shocked at it all; it’s not good Islam. Islam is being perverted.’¹⁴

¹⁴ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

Political Activity and Political Community

In general, Saudis have no formal means of influencing government policy, and find loyalty to central government hard, because few of them come from the Al Saud stronghold of Nejd and many consider their loyalties to tribe stronger than their loyalty to government. In the words of one activist:

People have been isolated for so many years, but now with social media they are opening up. But the government isn't; people still cannot go to a foreign conference without permission or they will go to prison ... There's a disconnect of the two generations – the rulers and young people ... The speed of virtual change is too fast and the physical changes too slow. If the government rules and regulations were eased up, NGOs and civil society would just take off.¹⁵

Although there are no legal political parties, there are some forms of political coordination, both virtual and physical. In the 1980s and 1990s the reformers in the Sahwa (a local conservative Islamic movement that mixed political and religious activism) created forms of political coordination, but in the 2000s campaigners for a constitutional monarchy were dealt a number of blows by the authorities.¹⁶ In 2007 10 such lobbyists were arrested after 99 pro-reformers signed a petition titled 'Milestones on the way to constitutional monarchy'. Subsequently, 11 others established the country's first human rights NGO, the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA). It has been argued that the growing use of social media helped these activists to communicate their ideas, while the soaring numbers of Saudis sent on scholarships abroad made for a receptive audience – the result being a new generation of activists in their 20s or early 30s.¹⁷

Petitions have long been a channel – although not necessarily an effective one – for Saudi citizens to demand government change and reform. Since 2011 there have been several petitions urging political reform. Among the most significant petitions have been: 'Towards the State of Rights and Institutions (from Dawlaty)', the 'Free Youths Coalition', the 'Hunayn Revolution (March 11)' and the 'Saudi Revolution (March 20)', the 'Jeddah YouTube Letter to the King', the 'Islamic National Party', the 'Saudi Women Revolution', and, from the Islamist standpoint, the 'Statement of a Call for Reform'. The main demands within the petitions are respect for human rights, freedom of expression, constitutional monarchy, transparent elections, social justice, an end to discrimination, an independent judiciary and ending of corruption, and for women to have full rights as citizens.

In addition, there are groupings of people, usually unannounced to the authorities, like the Sahwa or the Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood – now classified as a terrorist organization and outlawed in Saudi Arabia), or Shia or Sunni groupings ranging from large Islamic ones, to smaller and non-Islamic ones. Such groupings can be physical or virtual, but they usually have a physical meeting at some point each year.

The National Dialogue, established in 2003 as a forum for discourse between diverse Saudi citizens, remains a good framework for people to meet and network with others from all over the kingdom, but is not particularly effective on specific issues. It has a poor record of implementation, but has served

¹⁵ Interview, Riyadh, February 2014.

¹⁶ Lacroix, Stéphane, *Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring*, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, May 2014.

¹⁷ Ibid.

a valuable purpose in bringing people together, raising matters of mutual concern and encouraging a culture of debate.

Meanwhile, the *diwaniyyat* and *majalis*, social gatherings and cultural forums held in private houses, are forms of substitute for political parties and are of increasing importance.¹⁸

The presence of political dissent has recently caused the government to crack down on activists and reformers. Several petition organizers have been arrested, as have several campaigners from ACPRA, among them Muhammad al-Qahtani. The counterterrorism law promulgated in early 2014 could, if fully applied, variously prevent groups meeting, groups meeting foreigners, and individuals meeting foreigners with a foreign agenda. As with so many laws in Saudi Arabia, this is a cover-all; but also as with many laws in Saudi Arabia, it is likely to be implemented only selectively. It will target the Sahwa, the *salafi* and the other Islamists (such as the Muslim Brotherhood), and in effect represents a message to the conservative *ulema*.

None the less, the counterterrorism law gives too much power to the Ministry of the Interior, and allows for people to be arrested and held in detention without court authorization. Its effect has been felt in the Shura, a member of which is asking for courts to prosecute people who use social media to criticize officials. One female activist commented: 'Now human rights, freedom of speech, even asking to drive is a criticism of the government and is within the terms of the new law.'¹⁹ Driving can now be regarded as a form of demonstration in a country where demonstrations are theoretically forbidden. However, demonstrations do occur: female teachers protested in Makkah to urge the education ministry to give them permanent contracts; and prisoners' families have demonstrated in the past five years a number of times – in Buraidah as well as in Riyadh.

Debates in the Majlis al-Shura

The Majlis al-Shura is another area of association, very important but without executive power. The female members of the Shura have been active in areas such as human rights, civil society, women's rights and women driving. They point out that while they are not initiators, under Article 23 of the Shura by-laws they can come up with a new topic for consideration. According to Article 23, any group of 10 members of the Shura has the right to propose a new draft law, or an amendment to a law already in force, for submission to the chairman of the council, who can then submit the proposal to the king. If the Shura accepts a topic, such as women's driving, it will get discussed. Women have been asked already to head committees, and one female member is vice-chair of the foreign affairs committee.

As previously noted, the women Shura members talk, in the language of democracy, about constituencies. One commented: 'We are trying to get the civil society law out of the council of the ministers. We are listening to people. We would like to have civil society gatherings. Civil society organizations that represent various constituencies are demanding physical meetings.' The need for civil society gatherings is being discussed in the human rights committee and in other relevant committees of the Shura, such as those covering health or education.

¹⁸ See for example Matthiesen, Toby (2009), *Diwaniyyahs, Intellectual Salons and the Limits of Civil Society*; <http://www.mei.edu/content/diwaniyyas-intellectual-salons-and-limits-civil-society#edn>; Matthiesen cites a Shia cultural journal describing such forums as 'amongst the most important cultural platforms in Saudi Arabia, because they are a true mirror of the social street in the wake of the weakness – or absence – of other platforms'.

¹⁹ Interview, Riyadh, February 2014.

None the less, women in the Shura say that changes in the kingdom have to come from within, and that they come at a snail's pace. 'The mindset of Saudis has to mature. The next generation is far more aware.'²⁰ Given the size of the youth population, the female Shura members are of course looking at unemployment, and have working groups on population strategy, distribution of age and the characteristics of the population.

Calls for constitutional reform

The need for a constitution has frequently been articulated. Campaigners for a constitutional monarchy have acknowledged the benefits of gradual reform, in the interests of building social consensus and avoiding instability. One interviewee sketched out a set of possible milestones:

The first step would be to announce 70 per cent of Shura should be elected and that the Shura would have legislative powers. After some years then 100 per cent would be elected. After four or five years the Shura would write a constitution having got legislative experience, then there would be a referendum ... This would lead to the creating of a nation and would be part of the building of the country.²¹

The same interviewee argued that a constitution, guaranteeing women's rights and minorities' rights, would encourage different communities to feel that they are part of the Saudi nation. In the mean time, 'Now many people feel a greater loyalty to their tribe than to the Al Saud family, who have never given the people any choice to fund wars or not, to comment on foreign policy decisions or to share in oil wealth policy.'

Economic grievances

The problem of unemployment, despite considerable investment in training, is of profound concern to the government, and in the view of informed expatriates in the kingdom is the greatest focus of people's complaints and of government political concern. Notably, the private sector is insufficiently developed: only 20 per cent of employment of Saudi nationals is in the private sector, compared with a targeted 30–40 per cent.

The cost of living and affordable housing are two major grievances. According to one female Saudi architect,²² living costs had gone up by 30 per cent in the two-year period 2012–14. For instance, she said that a part-time maid and driver have to be paid before paying for water, electricity, gas or other services. While there are no formal taxes, many hidden taxes and costs have risen; the cost of employing a maid – regarded as an essential by many professionals – has gone up, because of a shortage of supply; drivers' salaries too have risen.

A standard remedy for labour-related issues over the past 10–15 years has been to send foreign workers home. This has not been successful in practice, because foreign workers accept a lower salary structure than do Saudis. Under the *nitaqat*²³ scheme, however, the labour ministry is making employment of foreigners less financially attractive for Saudi private sector companies; the private sector claims that it is losing some \$5 billion from the scheme.

²⁰ Interview, Riyadh, February 2014.

²¹ Interview, EP, February 2014.

²² Interview, Riyadh, February 2014.

²³ The *nitaqat* scheme, initiated in 2011 by the labour ministry, compels private-sector companies to employ more Saudi nationals. It has been more successful than previous Saudiization programmes, and can penalize companies that do not comply with its conditions.

Box 1: Interview with young Saudi musician

A young musician interviewed in Riyadh as part of research for this paper^a returned to Riyadh, after a period in the UEA, in 2003, then again in 2006, then went to the UAE and came back. He said that Riyadh was a culture shock for him as a teenager, especially with regard to women. In his words, the state sees women as ‘bad for the mental health’ of teenage men. ‘People believe mixing the sexes is only sexual but it isn’t; it’s healthy.’

Back in 2012 I knew live music entertainment would be in a house but it’s become almost impossible now. There really is nowhere to go. Malls will hardly let single men in at weekends unless they are in traditional Saudi dress because the religious police are looking out for anything strange and will pick up people just wearing jeans. Then we are guilty until proved innocent. Saudi youth is desperate for attention from women.

Where do young people go? The only safe haven in Nejd is outside the urban limits of Riyadh – *shisha* cafés on huge tracts of land owned by companies. They’ve built little booths, each with TV, PlayStation, deck of cards for men who want to see their friends, as it is difficult for young men to bring men friends home as they might see their sisters. It’s in Thumama, north of Riyadh. In theory there’s no music but I have jammed there with acoustic guitars.

In the late ’90s Riyadh was horrible; for instance, in the pool hall if you were playing billiards the *hayya*’ would come in and shave your hair then and there. Now at least you can ask for the *hayya*’ to identify themselves – because there are many fly-by-night preachers – and if the *hayya*’ get it wrong they are in trouble.

Now I know my rights. I can decline identification if the *mutawwiyin* don’t provide identification. He can’t ask me to go to the police station unless there’s a felony. He can’t arrest me without a policeman. This generation knows their rights better than the previous generation.

Young people now don’t want to get married until they have a career and can establish themselves. There is an emerging middle class that needs to make money. The hundreds of thousands of students abroad are coming back and I meet a lot. There is more questioning now.

There is no live western music in Riyadh now and the western mentality of performing has gone. In Jeddah Western style bands sort of exist; there are two bands with mixed Saudis and expatriates which have done a few shows in halls and rented venues. Recorded music is OK. Saudi Arabia has a lot of recorded music.

^a Interview, Riyadh, February 2014.

Less publicized is the ‘brain drain’. The living conditions in Saudi Arabia have, for example, led to some 100,000 business people and professionals living in Bahrain, just over the causeway, while genuine migration of active young Saudis from the kingdom to other GCC states, especially to Dubai, has apparently reached more than 12,000. Socio-politically, these professionals see a more stimulating working environment in other GCC states. International companies, too, are recruiting and encouraging this one-way brain drain. Other young Saudis have gone to Dubai for what they perceive to be a better life.

Within Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, young people try to engage in what entertainment they can (see for example Box 1) Students in particular are impatient for change in their own country, especially those returning from study abroad. One good example of this cultural shift is the ‘No Woman, No Drive’ YouTube video, which went viral in 2013; this was produced by a young Saudi who attributed his appreciation of satire to the time he had spent in the United States; exposure to a globalized environment altered his perception of issues within Saudi Arabia.

Some Saudis say Western observers should be more understanding of the challenges of a tribal society in a fast-changing global environment, but if it really is a global market Saudi Arabia has to be able to compete.

Identity and political community

The sense that national identity is unformed, or lacking, is widespread in Saudi discussion.

Regionalism and tribalism

The issue of regional identity is becoming more prominent. The government uses the narrative of *tawhid* (unity) for the nation, but is also trying to recognize regional diversity. In creating a country, King Abdulaziz could not forge a nation. The kingdom is made up of very disparate regions; huge differences exist between Al-Jouf in the north and Jizan in the south; and it is still hard for Saudis to know to whom to be loyal. On the whole, interviewees considered that tribal loyalty was on the increase, despite the best efforts of the Al Saud family and the government.²⁴

One reason for this is the large number of internet-savvy, often unemployed, young people (some 60 per cent of the 20 million Saudi nationals are aged under 30). These young Saudis see big discrepancies in wealth and opportunity. Most have been educated, but there are insufficient jobs. The country is very rich, but there is a shortage of housing. The government makes all the policies, and young people have no say in decision-making. For them, the tribe is a more immediate and more responsive social and political unit, which supports its members financially and socially.

In the words of one interviewee:

Young people are finding living conditions harsh and they are asking, where has the money gone? The younger generation has started to use social media and it is they that will cause human rights problems, as they want to be part of government decision-making. It is the young people who are going back to the tribes because they cannot see anything to be proud about in central government. The older generation is content with the government but they are richer than their children will ever be and have benefited more from the country's development of the last 40 years.²⁵

Along with an apparent renewed focus on tribalism, there is an increasing sense of regional identity. One interviewee commented, for example: 'People in Jouf are not like the Nejd; they even make *arak*.'²⁶ Some disaffection is driven by economic marginalization, but socio-political drivers also contribute. The Nejdi heartlands of Buraidah and Unaizah, and to a lesser degree the Hejaz, have seen considerable economic and social development, while development in other areas – particularly in the southern provinces – has lagged far behind.²⁷

One Hejazi noted:

People are suddenly doing their family trees and looking for their origins. Their family lineages are being revived and they have family *diwaniyyat* every week with all the family who can come. This is happening right across Saudi Arabia, not just in the Hejaz. Tribalism is back now.²⁸

²⁴ Interviews, Riyadh, Jeddah, EP, February 2014 and May 2011.

²⁵ Interview, EP, February 2014.

²⁶ Interview, EP, February 2014.

²⁷ Hertog, Steffen, 'National Cohesion and the Political Economy of Regions in Post-World War II Saudi Arabia', in Bernard Haykel, Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix (eds), *Saudi Arabia in Transition: Insights on Social, Political, Economic and Religious Change*, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

²⁸ Interview, EP, February 2014.

Many regions of what is now Saudi Arabia had no early loyalty to the Nejdi Al Saud family and tribe. King Abdulaziz appropriated the territories by war, through their weakness or through their sense of Islam. They are regions with different tribes, customs, history, racial and cultural background, jurisprudential pillars and, in some areas, forms of Islam. For example, the Ismailis of Jizan may be more loyal to their Al-Ya'am tribe than to the Al Saud who have tried to assimilate them. One young Ismaili suggested that given a constitution, elections, some role in decision-making and less obvious corruption, this group might show greater allegiance to the government.²⁹

The government has been subsidizing the tribes, but the system is breaking down as a result of urbanization and institutional bureaucracy. One interviewee commented, "The government would always rather the tribes fought against each other, rather than against the government, but it will backfire because the army and the national guard are tribal. People say there will be no more tribal fighting but it is understood there was fighting near Al-Ha'il earlier in 2014 and trouble in Jouf and Tabuk."³⁰

Box 2: Interview with tribal chief

A tribal leader and investment banker in Riyadh, talking about the Anizah tribal group, of which the Al Saud is a part, said it is spread across Saudi Arabia from the Empty Quarter to Jordan, although it cannot follow its old migration routes. While it keeps its contacts, it must modernize its traditions.

Most tribes, like the al-Qahtani or al-Utaibi or the Anizah, are in military or public service, such as in the National Guard. The 2005 municipal elections were an interesting moment for the tribes, as their leaders encouraged members to vote not for the tribal candidate but for the most qualified individual.

We are citizens and we are Saudis. Since King Abdulaziz's day we are one tribe and have become Saudi citizens, unlike the old days of fighting for water and land; our interest now is to maintain peace and security. We need to think how to improve the standard of living in the kingdom. This is complicated because each part of the country is different, with different needs, but we are confident about the cross communications in society and that we all have equal opportunities to see the king.

Now we have to create the blueprint of a modern tribal chief chosen on qualifications, nationalist, honest, a solid link between tribe and society, a moderate Muslim, who gives a flow of continuous and transparent information between the tribe and the nation.^a

^a Interview, Riyadh, May 2011.

Even in Saudi Aramco, a company with a reputation of hiring the best person for the job, tribal affiliations apparently have an impact. One interviewee stated that nepotism is always present, with people constantly coming to ask for jobs on a tribal basis.³¹

According to one Hejazi interviewed:

Yes, there has been a strong rise of tribalism in the last 10 years. Saudi Arabia is at least united under one government; it has shared resources. But when I go to the Hejaz I see that Hejazis forget there is more to Saudi Arabia than the Hejaz. We Hejazis don't relate to people in the south. It is such a vast country and I know Hejazi families who don't even know Nejdi families. But on a positive note we're all behind the Saudi football team; and abroad, all Saudis from everywhere get together. We unite when we're attacked.

²⁹ Interview, EP, February 2014.

³⁰ Interview, Riyadh, February 2014.

³¹ Interview, EP, February 2014.

Some of the regionalism is positive: people endorse the activities of their region, and come together to talk and try to do things. For instance, in the Eastern Province people encourage the local towns and cultural events. People come together for these events, especially from proud Hasa and the new cities, Dammam, Al-Khobar and Jubail. And for oil, people have come from all over Saudi Arabia to work; after all, these cities were fishing villages before oil came.

The indigenous people of Hasa and Qatif stay in their own communities and have a mutual lack of trust. Hasa has a long history as the largest oasis in the world. But at Saudi Aramco, Sunnis and Shias have mixed at work, though they don't visit as families; a couple of Sunni colleagues will go to a Shia funeral. There are very few mixed marriages.³²

A Nejdi interviewee commented:

The issue of tribalism is increasing. Earlier, the issue of Sunni and Shia was in the forefront and the government left them to fight it out and keep busy. Now the conservatives of both wings are in opposition to the government and in a few years they will ally together.

It was around 10 or 15 years ago that the government started to raise the issue of tribal values and they are now keeping the young generation busy with tribal issues. For instance, there's a Saudi TV programme: *Shaer al-Milyon* – The Million's Poet; it's a programme from Abu Dhabi, and it raises the profile of the tribes as no poet without a tribal background can get on to it. Often the winner comes from tribal discussion. Then there are the tribal camel beauty contests. Every tribe will have a special camel. One contest is overseen by Prince Mishael bin Abdulaziz and is held at Um Rugaibah, near Hafr al-Batin, on the east coast near the border.

Islamism

There appear to be mixed views concerning whether members of the Sahwa are becoming influential again. Liberal elements in Saudi Arabia, however, are hoping for a greater number of sympathetic *ulema*'s, and are looking to forge contacts with what they already call the *tanwiriyyin* (derived from *tanwir* – enlightenment) sheikhs. Their ambition is that the liberal *ulema*'s will develop new interpretative ways of reading the Qur'an, and provide a contemporary link between Saudi practices – especially in human rights – and Islam.

It is still not clear what the government's line has been on the reforming sheikhs, for whom an important issue has been tackling corruption. Meanwhile, one female activist commented that, of the conservative sheikhs, those in the *jama'at* (a term meaning community, but used to characterize conservative clerics) are the most retrogressive; but apparently now the *jama'at* sheikhs do just what the government says.³³

A further problem of Islam and tradition in Saudi Arabia, according to a number of interviewees, is the *hadith* saying that whatever the ruler prescribes must be obeyed because he is the *wali al-amr* (legal guardian, person in charge) of the country. The *tanwiriyyin* have published a number of tapes stating that the *hadith* about the *wali al-amr* is not in the Qur'an or in the collections of good *hadith*. It is sheikhs like Sheikh Ahmad al-Ghamdi and Sheikh Salman al-Awdah who have taken this line. According to one interviewee, Saudi television misrepresents Sheikh Salman al-Awdah saying he is Ikhwan when actually he is part of the *tanwiriyyin*. Another area of contention for liberal Saudis is the mid-18th century Diraiyah agreement between the Islamic scholar Muhammad Abdul Wahhab and the first Saudi king Abdulaziz.

³² Interview, EP, February 2014.

³³ Interview, EP, February 2014.

Associational Life: Civil Society, Politics and Debates

Civil society and volunteerism

There exists considerable awareness of civil society, and the need for it, and many groups are active in this sphere. However, the government gives only limited support, retains restrictions on their operations, and, moreover, sets up parallel official institutions that can overpower the private groupings – an example being the establishment of two human rights organizations.

The charitable sector has expanded considerably in recent years. In about 2008 there were some 200 NPOs and 10 *madrassahs*; now there are about 950 NPOs – including around 600 charities with expanding activities and 70 *madrassahs*.

Women in the Majlis al-Shura see civil society being created in the universities. The country's tertiary institutions have been fostering active civil society among young people for the last two decades through running programmes – such as those on training and employment – and building up an infrastructure of clubs. For example, King Saud University has been promoting clubs for the last 10 years.

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Many government bodies now have committees through which people are able to volunteer. The *amanah* (municipality) or the *muhafazah* (governorate) of Makkah has a council of advisers for development and volunteering, formed of half government personnel and half individuals from different sectors. Government bodies such as that responsible for civil defence, or the Saudi Red Crescent Authority, have registered volunteer groups. Some Saudi businesswomen have suggested there should be female coastguards in Jeddah, and Hejazis have also approached the civil defence in Riyadh about engaging women volunteers.³⁴

Many Saudis disregard volunteer groups, but these are integral to the practice of Islam and have always been active in Saudi Arabia. It is said that there are more than 500 volunteer groups in Jeddah alone.

Hindrances to association

The Saudi government has made meetings illegal unless they are meetings of associations registered and permitted by the government, some cultural meetings or meetings that the government would like to go 'under the radar' for all sorts of different but specific reasons. The effect of these restrictions is to prevent people meeting for most social, cultural, socio-political, human rights purposes, or any other forms of contact. However, the government is capricious about association: some associations are allowed, and others not.

³⁴ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

The missing civil society law and MOSA

A law to regulate the establishment and operation of the large charitable sector was proposed by MOSA about 10 years ago, but this has never been approved by the council of ministers or been put into practice. It was intended to regulate the operation not just of charities but also of all associations, such as the country's cultural or professional associations. It is now being called the 'civil society' law and is said to be with the council of ministers (in effect, it is more likely to be with one of the committees reporting to the council of ministers). What has been unclear about this legislation is the question of who will supervise its operation, and how far the measure may allow a more unrestricted development of civil society than the government would wish.

Some people interviewed for this paper were concerned about the stalemate in this regard. Another study on civil society by a group of women has been sent to the Shura, which has failed to respond despite frequent reminders. The absence of legislation governing civil society means that new associations cannot be set up, and people are turning to virtual associations – which of course are convenient and low-cost, and are in effect more open than physical meetings.

One journalist commented:

We need civil society. People need to understand what the concepts of civil society are. The Twittersphere has shown that we're poor in understanding it, not least because Saudi Arabia is not homogenous; it's full of tribalism out there in full gear – racism, *hadari* (urban) or *qabali* (bedu) discrimination, sexism, regionalism.³⁵

In the words of a pro-reform lawyer:

It is time to enact the law for civil society. It's overdue. We can't even call for advocacy; if we criticize the government we will be arrested, so we have to be very cautious and work with it, not against. We are trying to include all of them in our work, such as the human rights groups and the Shura members. The government should allow public meetings and physical groups. We do meet like-minded people but on the net, and we have small physical meetings.³⁶

One woman activist noted, 'We are hoping to expand civil society by demanding the right to have societies and associations.'³⁷ Some unregistered groups just hold meetings anyway. Given the paperwork and scrutiny required of registered organizations, she stated that many groups exist informally, as it is easier to be unregistered.

Interviewees were concerned about MOSA's poor performance. The ministry has long been a preserve of conservative civil servants and ministers, and it is also inefficient. An executive of one of the Al-Saud foundations commented: 'MOSA is so inefficient. It's the biggest obstacle to social change in Saudi Arabia. It's not deliberate; it's just very unskilled and conservative. It is very difficult to deal with MOSA even with registered organizations and [making] arrangements to establish new NPOs is very hard.'³⁸

However, not all agree. A senior Hejazi businesswoman contended that civil society is alive and functioning in Saudi Arabia, and is being developed through the labour ministry. The government, she stated, is looking to civil society groups or individuals for feedback advice and recommendations, and will then pass the stalled law; further, the recent delay in implementing the labour ministry's

³⁵ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

³⁶ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

³⁷ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

³⁸ Interview, Riyadh, February 2014.

new labour regulations has arisen from adverse feedback from the business sector. The ministry has introduced *Ma'an*, an online platform where people can comment on laws and regulations proposed by the ministry before they are submitted for implementation. This at least seems to be an example of feedback being used and possibly exerting influence on the eventual decision-making process.³⁹

Association in the virtual space

The main locus of association is now in the virtual space – i.e. on social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube; some 60 percent of Saudis are online.⁴⁰ Given the government's restrictions on physical meetings, it is easier – and less dangerous – for Saudis to meet in the virtual world. Saudi Arabia has 2.8 million active Twitter users, the highest number of any Arab country, accounting for more than 40 per cent of all active Twitter users in the Arab world.⁴¹ Usage is growing rapidly: more than half-a-million new users joined in 2013 alone.⁴² More than one-quarter of the population has a Facebook account.⁴³ Reportedly some 30 per cent of account-holders are Riyadh-based – possibly suggesting that Jeddah and the Eastern Province allow more room for physical interaction while Riyadh is more closed. 'Social media is where people meet, minds meet, people have found they've got voices', one newspaper editor commented.⁴⁴

Although the Saudi government has tried to control use of the internet and social media, opposition, reform, discussion and activism are proliferating in the virtual space. What is censored in the physical world can thrive in the virtual world. Virtual meetings and discussions are expanding, with topics, selected by participants, changing daily. For instance, some 45 Saudis belong to the *Atyaf* Whatsapp group,⁴⁵ intended as a virtual forum for discussion for local and regional issues, as well as themes such as religion, women's rights, coexistence or political change. Its members can select an important 'op-ed' article every morning and discuss it for two hours; additionally, they are able to set a subject for discussion and debate it for up to five hours. The group sometimes also arranges a physical regional discussion group.

There are an increasing number of groups organized privately. Like *Atyaf*, these sometimes link Saudis studying in the US with those in the kingdom, and focus on topics such as education, human rights, business, culture or art.

Use of Twitter also facilitates the sharing of material on human rights issues, including abuses. For example, there is a group of women tweeting about the rights of Saudi women married to foreign men (who do not yet have the right to pass on their citizenship, and concomitant economic benefits, to their husband or children).

³⁹ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

⁴⁰ See also Masry, Sara, 'Social Saudis', in Jane Kinninmont, ed., *Future Trends in the Gulf*, Chatham House, February 2015, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/future-trends-gulf>.

⁴¹ Arab Social Media Report (2014), *Citizen Engagement and Public Services in the Arab World: The Potential of Social Media*, 6th edn, Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government; <http://www.mbrsg.ae/getattachment/e9ea2ac8-13dd-4cd7-9104-b8f1f405cab3/Citizen-Engagement-and-Public-Services-in-the-Arab.aspx>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

⁴⁵ *Atyaf* in this context signifies a rainbow, or diversified group.

As described by one interviewee:

The virtual meetings and chats cover the spectrum of issues and grievances ... Some are small groups, all Saudis, some studying in the US. There's a group of members of the Qatif municipal council which might discuss their business matters; groups in cultural forums exchanging ideas, some may be human rights activists, some not. They are creating platforms and groupings all the time. Whatever is censored in the physical world goes into the virtual world and is discussed.⁴⁶

A journalist commented:

The government also monitors the virtual world and uses it as a tool of government policy. The government has its people in the Twittersphere; government officials, posing as ordinary people, often oppose ideas on Twitter. However, if the government were to try to shut it down it would be disastrous because people have got used to talking on it and having their own voices and exchanging ideas with no restraints.⁴⁷

This is an important development for the state. The government uses social media as a source of information and as a sounding board for the mood of the people – as do Saudi Arabia's journalists. The officials most frequently on Twitter are from the ministries of commerce, health, media and labour; the minister of commerce is particularly responsive, tweeting back and acknowledging problems in cases such as faulty or expired goods, poor regulations or price fraud. The Twittersphere is thus one way – in the absence of other channels – for citizens to try to regulate the government.

It is still unclear what the long-term impact of social media will be on the kingdom. While the reformers are certainly meeting virtually, it seems probable that the largest number of Saudis follow sheikhs like Muhammad al-Arifi (6 million followers on Twitter) and Salman al-Awdah (8 million).

There are ways for government to engage more positively, by recognizing social media as a democratic institution in the virtual world, interpreting the mood of the people from Twitter, for example, and being sympathetic to allowing a broader based civil society. In 2013 the interior ministry launched a video conferencing facility whereby people could schedule a direct audience with the minister. Notably, publicity slogans for the launch were 'your time is precious; we value it' and 'easier access and faster results', suggesting there was a desire at least to appear to be more outward looking and interactive.

It is still unclear what the long-term impact of social media will be on the kingdom. While the reformers are certainly meeting virtually, it seems probable that the largest number of Saudis follow sheikhs like Muhammad al-Arifi (6 million followers on Twitter) and Salman al-Awdah (8 million). On Twitter, conservative sheikhs are, for example, urging the restoration of *shari'ah*. The cleric Salman al-Awdah is against terrorism but is calling for implementation of *shari'ah*. Conservative activists are asking for justice, transparency, accountability and 'true Islam'.

⁴⁶ Interview, EP, February 2014.

⁴⁷ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

Types of association

Formation and registration

Many associations are tolerated but not legal, and their existence depends on the subject matter. Registered associations such as the Saudi Arabian Society for Culture and Arts, formed in 1972, and specialist trade or special interest associations lead a government-controlled existence. The registered associations received a substantial financial boost from the government handout in 2011, and have just been given further funds on the accession of King Salman in early 2015.

Establishing new associations in Saudi Arabia has always been difficult. Even charitable associations must wait years to receive government approval and registration. For instance, according to one of its founders, it took three years to establish the Saudi Cancer Foundation, which was finally licensed in 2004 with backing from a senior Eastern Province businessman, Abdulaziz al-Turki, and his Rawabi Group. In 2001 there were just two cancer charities. The government's slow progress in licensing such associations possibly stems from the clampdown in charities after 9/11. It apparently took 17 years to get the Saudi Diabetes Association approved, again with backing from Abdulaziz al-Turki. Neither does informal encouragement from the royal family necessarily speed its registration: for example, the licence for Princess Adilah's children's cancer charity, Sanad, was slow to come through. While formal, government-sponsored health support groups are (eventually) accepted, voluntary groups established in the same field are deemed illegal and closed.

Saudis say that even if Saudi professionals get together, like doctors and accountants, the government gets nervous. One female academic, for example, wanted to form an alumni society of law schools, but this was not allowed.⁴⁸ Long-standing civil society groups now have to be registered and come under government control. Even cultural groups like Hatun al-Fassi's well-known Sunday Club have to be registered and submit a schedule of their discussions. It is said to be increasingly difficult to have any groupings that are unregistered, but it is often impossible to register. When Jafar al-Shayeb, member of the Qatif municipal council, tried to register his *Thulathah* (Tuesday club), one of the most famous groups, with the municipality there was no regulatory path.

Other groups in Jeddah and Riyadh (see below) continue to provide meeting places for civil discussion, civil society, and constructive reform and opposition.

Socio-political, reformist and activist associations

Within Saudi Arabia, groups break down into those traditionally operating along regional, tribal, community, patrimonial, family, sectarian and jurisprudential lines, which tend to be vertical; and the more modern ones – including professional groupings, social media, women's groups and lobbyists, which are more horizontal.

The Hejaz, always more open and cosmopolitan than Nejd, and less politically suspect (from the point of view of the authorities) than the Eastern Province, probably has more informal *majalis* and groupings than the other main areas. Young people in Jeddah used to go to a bookshop/café called *Jusur* (bridges) until this was closed down for allowing discussion deemed too open; now they go to a very comfortable café and book club called *Andalusiyah*, set up by a Saudi TV personality, Ahmad Shaqairi, in the north of the city.

⁴⁸ Interview, Riyadh, February 2014.

In the Hejaz, too, the role of student organizations was highlighted at the 2011 Jeddah Economic Forum (JEF), which offered room for students and student socio-political groups to present their views. Among the student groups were the Young Initiative Group (YIG), *Izzati Islami* (My Glory is My Islam) and Madiha Khayyat's *Ihsan* group on children's creativity.

YIG, started in 2010 by Maha Taher and Muhammad al-Bakri, is a group of young people (mostly aged 20–25), of both sexes, open to any nationality or background, originally set up to provide small-scale, 'hands on' assistance to poor households in south Jeddah.

YIG, like other groups, was galvanized by the Jeddah floods of 2009 and 2011 delivering goods well ahead of the civil defence corps or other government bodies. More recently, YIG joined the powerful state-sponsored Saudi Environmental Society on a cleaning project for 50 families in south Jeddah. Volunteers were expected to set to and personally clean the areas allotted, in contrast to the usual stereotypes of Saudi youth. YIG's work on environmental hygiene and awareness has the approval of the health ministry, the Makkah Governorate and MOSA, and help from the charity the *Jam'iyah al-Khairiyyah*.

Another socio-political organization in Jeddah is *Naam* ('Towards a Responsible Community'), an informal gathering of mainly media people and Al Sauds with the stated aims of 'creating a healthier social environment', combating the 'negative aspects of Saudi society', and, after 9/11, 'countering extremism and protecting human rights and civil liberties'.⁴⁹

According to one *Naam* member, 'We need to support reforms; we want to safeguard security and stability. We need to define our position so the government can't label us as dissidents or marginalize us, so they include us in the reform movement.'⁵⁰ Thus, the group identifies itself as accelerating and assisting reforms instituted by the late King Abdullah, not as opposing or criticizing the government. In the view of this interviewee, the government 'has a phobia of losing control after the Arab Spring,' but the authorities need to allow civil society to help it in addressing public needs, acting as a liaison between the people and the government, spreading awareness and changing conservative mindsets. The involvement of women is important, according to the speaker: 'We have women in the key areas – law, women's rights, psychology and family violence, media, business, professional, tribal. We women group together.'

Associations also exist in Riyadh, although these are less obvious. For example, a reformist group of both men and women meets monthly in a private house in Riyadh. According to one member, 'They talk about ACPRA, women driving, raising awareness, sectarian discrimination, Arabism, with a bunch of lecturers.'⁵¹ The member noted that some of the group's lectures have been put on YouTube and the government has not responded. 'But the most dangerous thing is calling for political rights and calling for a constitutional monarchy. You talk about it and you go to prison.'⁵²

However, the same interviewee considered that past levels of repression were too difficult to repeat in the social media age. The international opprobrium at the blogger Raif Badawi's sentencing, in 2014, to 1,000 lashes and 10 years in prison would not have proliferated to such an extent before the social media age. In the 1980s, the interviewee noted, the Saudi government stopped scholarships and people in the kingdom disappeared in prison for years on end in response to critical groups and

⁴⁹ NAAM booklet.

⁵⁰ Interviews, Jeddah, February 2014 and May 2011.

⁵¹ Interview, Riyadh, February 2014.

⁵² Interview, Riyadh, February 2014.

publications such as *Al-Bohra* (Tomorrow) a US-based newsletter on human and political rights. ‘Now with the Twittersphere and the cyber sphere the reform movement is too big with too many people for that sort of government behaviour. The core activists are willing physically to meet the government, but you need the ordinary people to stand on the line and then the core will do the work.’

These meetings tend to overlap on topics covered, with people coming from different groups of which some are male only. One woman activist in Riyadh said she knew of the male groups, but not any detail about them. Men who espouse women’s issues do so in the face of considerable opposition. Many Saudis think such matters are trivial. More seriously, one Hejazi who has sponsored women driving and other women’s issues has left Saudi Arabia after he received death threats.⁵³

One of the best-known reformist groups is the weekly *Thulathah* group (referred to above), run by Jafar al-Shayeb, which brings together intellectuals, writers, researchers and thinkers to discuss topics with guest speakers. Subjects for debate have included rights women’s issues, recent measures such as the 2014 counterterrorism legislation, and the translation of the Qur’an into English. Some 70–100 people – more Shias than Sunnis – generally attend the group’s sessions, which take place in a basement venue, although more than 200 came to an event with a Shia speaker on the need for self-criticism in religious groups. Items on the group’s website are reported on by Saudi newspapers, and it has a mixed Shia/Sunni advisory board.

In 2010, in an apparent acknowledgment of the need for cultural discussion and exchange of ideas, the then minister of information dedicated the cultural programmes of that year’s Riyadh International Book Fair to six of the country’s cultural forums: the *Thulathah* forum in Qatif; the Abdelmaqsoud Khoja forum in Jeddah; Dr Rashid Al-Mubarak’s forum in Riyadh; Adnan Al-Afaliq’s forum in Al-Ahsa; Sara Al-Kathlan’s forum in Dammam; and Sultana Al-Sudairy’s forum in Riyadh.

Human rights forums

To some extent, the government is less restrictive of the activities of the country’s mainstream human rights forums than it is with political groupings, because the human rights forums are more public and the government can monitor them.

The National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) was set up in 2004/05 with its 41 founder members – men and women from all over the country. The NSHR monitored the 2005 municipal elections, but refused to do so for the 2011 elections because again women could neither vote nor stand. The NSHR has a large number of associate members and, in theory, has a branch in each of the kingdom’s 13 regions.

The NSHR attempts to work with political prisoners, investigating their judicial and human rights, and does express a political opinion. In its first case, it secured defence and family rights for three arrested men. However, the NSHR cannot be as effective as it should be as the government does not implement its own rules and does not submit actual charges through the public prosecution service. In one case, the NSHR was ejected from a trial that it was attending by the presiding judge. It has also criticized the government for conducting secret tribunals.

The government-established watchdog, the Human Rights Commission, established in 2005, was apparently more active under the former head Turki al-Sudairi (who held the rank of government

⁵³ Interview, Bahrain, February 2014.

minister). It now does very little, with a purely institutional role; indeed it defends the government. The commission cannot criticize the government, although it can give assistance about legal rights. Neither the Human Rights Commission nor the NSHR can intervene effectively on behalf of those imprisoned for political reasons. If it were to bring a case, which the commission can in theory do, it is likely that it would have no success because the Board of Grievances, although it has jurisdiction, is not independent of the interior ministry.

To give an example of the difficulties encountered in attempting to register, a few years ago the Adalah Center for Human Rights, a Saudi NGO that documents human rights violations and supports victims, published reports about rights violations. Adalah applied to MOSA for registration, but the ministry responded that it was the Royal Court, not MOSA, that was the ‘correct’ agency to which to apply; however, the Royal Court did not respond to Adalah’s request for registration. So Adalah was helpless between two government agencies.

Other human rights groups are active, but outside Saudi Arabia (for example, one in Belgium and one in New Zealand), gathering, updating information and issuing statements on matters of human rights.

Traditional gatherings

The *majlis*, or meeting, is the traditional regular open house held by senior members of the community, princes, businessmen, tribal and religious leaders, and some professionals. Within Saudi Arabia, these *majalis* are essential loci for discussion, rumour, chat and gossip, and also for the informal presentation of petitions. The equivalent in the Eastern Province and Kuwait is the *diwaniyyah*.

The meetings have served as the social ‘glue’ of the kingdom, supporting the clientelism and vertical structure of Saudi society while serving as channels for people to make their views known and to raise suggestions, grievances or other topics. They have functioned less well in terms of the horizontal integration of people from different backgrounds and areas of expertise. Furthermore, as the country’s population has grown, such meetings cannot function as effectively as the Al Saud’s eyes and ears, and are no longer adequate conduits for citizens to send their views to government – nor indeed for government to brief society.

Similarly, along with the weekly cultural forums discussed above, regular *salunat* (salons) and other forums in Jeddah and Riyadh facilitate cultural discussion. One forum is held monthly in Riyadh with a guest speaker and talks on intellectual and social issues, bringing together 15–25 people generally aged between 20 and 35 years. This is more popular with women, who do not have the same opportunities to attend talks in public places.

Cultural groups

There is considerable cultural association in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, cultural life is one area in which the government encourages associations of a non-political kind; and this sphere was a beneficiary of the 2011 financial allocations previously mentioned. Groups exist for photography and art, literature and poetry, textiles, and fashion, *inter alia*, and now film. Cultural clubs exist all over the country – in Jizan, Buraidah, and Al-Ha’il, for example, as well as in the major cities. Saudi Arabia recently held the second Saudi Film Festival in Damman in February 2015.

Contemporary art has developed rapidly in the past few years, with good exhibition spaces in the major cities. Even in Riyadh an exhibition of young painters will hold a private view at which young men and women both mix. The art and culture trend is driven by the country's youth, to whom it gives some sense of identity, but is still almost exclusively for the elite. One Nejd woman is travelling the country photographing Saudis at leisure – sitting by the sea, in the mountains, in coffee shops, by the road; her images show a diversity of Saudi culture and characteristics that usually goes unrecorded.

It has become recognized by the Saudi authorities that art and literature provide an outlet and a leisure activity for people. Music is a different matter, with a clampdown on live music in recent years (see Box 1). However, the King Abdullah Scholarships scheme, established in 2005, is hardly ever extended to arts and humanities students.

In the Eastern Province people in groups of between 10 and 20 may meet together to discuss poetry, short stories, novels, etc. They sometimes meet in coffee shops, of which one example is *Maqa Thaqafat* (literally translated as cultural coffee shop) where the Qatif Cultural Committee, led by a woman, meets every two weeks.

One young Saudi businesswoman in Jeddah has taken up the cause of encouraging young people to become design entrepreneurs. She has set up a company for social innovation, with women at its core, and is looking to transform it into an NPO with funding from private sector companies through their corporate social responsibility programmes. However, echoing a common Saudi complaint, she stated that she had decided not to register with the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA) as this was too expensive; registering the company had already required four commercial licences from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry; and she found the volume of red tape was an obstacle to productivity: 'They are almost encouraging us to migrate.'⁵⁴

In Jeddah a female journalist tried to start a group, *Al-Kalimah* (The Word), to promote culture, but could not secure registration in two years of contact with the Ministry of Information.

None the less, the same interviewee considered that in terms of social innovation for women, Jeddah is the right place, although the company's work is mainly limited to workshops and exhibitions. Asked about the future for creative industries, she stated that at present art is fashionable but elitist. She commented that the extent of Saudi society's suppression of individuality resulted in a great need for creativity, which helps Saudis express themselves and unites people.

Permission for cinemas to operate was granted in principle in mid-2014. Hitherto, cinema clubs are only used by expatriates and children. Even in the absence of public cinemas in Saudi Arabia, the international success of Haifaa al-Mansour's *Wadjda* may suggest that there is an appetite for Saudi film-making.

In terms of the performance arts, one interviewee commented: 'There's a lot of underground stuff, for instance Saudis did a production of 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest', changed the American Indian [the character Chief Bromden] to Palestinian, with an audience by invitation only.' Such activities, she argued, are fighting the system, but 'the hill is less steep to climb' than it was.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

⁵⁵ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

In Jeddah a female journalist tried to start a group, *Al-Kalimah* (The Word), to promote culture, but could not secure registration in two years of contact with the Ministry of Information.⁵⁶ The rival group is of course the government's cultural institution, *Al-Nadi Al-Adabi*. The official argument against new registration is that the long-delayed civil society law (see The missing civil society law and MOSA, above) will soon be implemented, and until such time it is too early for independent associations.

In Jeddah, meanwhile, even conservationist groups have been shut down, apparently in response to criticism by senior conservation architects that the government has allowed the wholesale destruction of the old quarters of Makkah and Medinah. This dispute has been rumbling on for decades, during which the delays have facilitated the loss of the old quarters.

Charitable organizations

The charitable sector is probably the largest area of activity for groups and associations throughout Saudi Arabia. Its origins can be traced back to the Five Pillars of Islam, of which the third is *zakat* (charitable giving). Charities range from small local mutuals in the towns to large national organizations such as *Al-Birr*, which is almost an arm of government and which receives both private and public funding. Between these extremes are the specialist charities, including health and medical charities; and regional charities that look after their local communities and cover widows and orphans, the mentally and physically disabled, education, victims of family abuse, the destitute, and issues such as employment, training and sustainable development.

Other institutions operating in the charitable sector are the foundations of the merchant families, such as the highly distinguished Abdul Latif Jameel (ALJ) or the Olayyan foundations. Also notable are the princely foundations, such as what is now the King Salman Center for Disability Research, the Sultan Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud Foundation or the King Khalid Foundation (KKF). Like the 'traditional' charities, both these types of institution provide forums where men and women are able to meet.

Charitable associations have long been part of life for the Shia in the Eastern Province: some of the earliest charitable societies in Saudi Arabia were groups established in Seihat, Qatif and Tarut. The Shia position in Saudi society requires such groups to look after their interests and to protect them from too heavy a hand in Riyadh: in their view, Riyadh obstructs their activities, and they mistrust the Nejd central government. Now, however, even these traditional Shia organizations are less effective; they have become semi-official, receive state funding and are overly bureaucratic.

Since the need for charitable activity remains essential in areas such as youth, sport, vocational training, marriage, health care and housing, the Shias of the Eastern Province have set up parallel – or shadow – systems, *Al-lijan al-ahliyyah* (social groups). There are some 80 or 90 such parallel organizations, focusing on particular issues and operating through a *sunduq* (fund) at community level. Under this system, every sheikh or elder in a community can potentially have his own charity: funds go into, and are then distributed from, his personal account.

The *lijan* are unlicensed, but cannot be closed down because they have no formal existence, no office, and no bank account (since the funding is distributed through personal bank accounts); they may, however, produce a leaflet, and certainly yearly accounts for the community's benefit. Other groups work through the mosques; as noted above, the Shia aim to keep their religious activities and needs independent of Riyadh's ministry of social affairs.

⁵⁶ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

Youth and student groups

Youth groups generally originate in the universities; often there is a personal initiative from the dean, with outreach volunteers and organizations such as Adheeb and CellA+ (see Professional groupings, below). King Saud University has a new Students Partnership initiative, participants in which are responsible for projects with an outside community – such as working with the poor in south Riyadh.

The *Muntadah al-Redd* is a Hejazi youth forum where young people sit together, devise well-structured projects for the common good and get them sent to the relevant local government agencies. Other youth groups include the many sports associations.

Groups and meetings have flourished at Effat University, one of the two private women's universities in Jeddah. One academic there commented: 'At first degree level, students think they are going to influence government, for instance through student government. The senior staff teach them about participation. The student elections to students' council are very active but they have to be practical.'⁵⁷ Such activity could be said to represent a shift: changing laws and regulations, as with elections, are not Saudi traditions, but have now become part of the students' experience.

After a decade in operation, the some 150,000 Saudi students, both male and female, who study abroad through the King Abdullah Scholarships programme each year are likely to return to Saudi Arabia with different perspectives – for example about elections, representative life and political decision-making. Within Saudi Arabia, academics hope these students will also see that things have changed in their own country, for example that there is more mixing between men and women in the workplace. The Effat academic quoted above stated: 'People ask me what will happen when the students come home. I hope I have understood what the government wants: change. If the government was not willing to change, they wouldn't have sent the students abroad.' In the view of one journalist, however: 'The West has worked for its emancipation. Saudi youth must get off their backside and work. Kids are demoralized by the older generation, and crippled by the culture.'⁵⁸

Professional groupings

Many of Saudi Arabia's professional groups and associations are registered with the government and are licensed to hold meetings. Such associations cover the standard range of professions, and are trade associations but not unions (which are banned). In 2011, in the context of the Arab Spring, King Abdullah made sizeable financial allocations to institutions within the country. These included a subvention of SR10 million per year to registered professional associations, which were accorded fresh status.

These professional associations are different from other cultural, charitable, human rights and socio-political groupings, already discussed, that go to make up Saudi civil society – i.e. the space between the authorities and individuals in which people can express their views and needs, and hope to influence government. Rather, the professional associations are strictly monitored, paid for by the government and unlikely to step out of line. Examples are the Saudi Association for Civil Engineering, the Saudi Organization for Certified Public Accountants or the Saudi Pharmaceutical Society.

In the Eastern Province, local self-funded committees provide assistance for employment, training for employment, job-seeking and entrepreneurship. Funding is available from the chamber of commerce

⁵⁷ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

⁵⁸ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

or the government, but the Shia community – wary of the heavy hand of Riyadh – has been reluctant to take this up. Other groups provide social services such as education, student support, support for the elderly, hospitals and marriages.

The most prestigious and democratic professional groupings are the nationwide chambers of commerce and the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry. These bodies hold elections – often hotly contested – for their members. For example, elections to the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI – which includes women on its board) are well canvassed, with an electioneering programme and candidate manifestos.

The Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry is the country's most powerful association, and is a statutory consultee to the government. It operates nationally, with specialized committees at its headquarters in Riyadh and local committees in all towns that have industrial estates. 'We are a well-organized country, but in a different way,' commented a senior executive of the Riyadh Council.⁵⁹

Registration of professional groups, which is mandatory, falls under different 'umbrellas' – i.e. auspices. To give some specific examples, the social service charities are registered with MOSA, health charities come under the Ministry of Health, the Saudi Environment Society is registered under the Presidency of Meteorology and Environment, and associations like the Saudi Council of Engineering (SCE) Council under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Many are under the umbrella of universities.

The professional associations are expanding in coverage and activity, and have latterly come to be seen as an active part of society. For instance, the SCE is the accreditation agency for foreign engineers coming to Saudi Arabia to work on government contracts. In the Hejaz, in 2011 the governor of the Makkah region established a new association, the Society of Volunteering and Charity; the society was to be managed by young people, with some 70 per cent of its board members under 35 years of age. Other recently established professional societies include a retirement society, a society supporting people with HIV/AIDS, an artists' society (distinct from the long-standing Saudi Arabian Society for Culture and Arts) and various specialist medical societies.

A number of networks have emerged in the context of the government's drive to train and employ more young people. One such is CellA+, the Saudi Professional Women's Network, an NPO 'virtual' grouping for young professional women, with support from the long-established *Al-Nahda* philanthropic society. Another is *Adheeb*, linked to CellA+. King Saud University has its own career groups: female graduates set up daily professional booths, create exhibitions, engage in marketing and fundraising, and encourage new graduates to join.

An initiative in the Eastern Province is attempting to integrate people from different communities, find common goals and educate women on their rights. Three professional women there have created an association (which includes Shia from Qatif) to promote the interests and rights of Saudi women. However, their experience serves as an illustration of how difficult the government makes it to hold meetings. Using the window of King Abdullah's reforms, the society started a 20-strong, mixed Sunni and Shia steering committee, and entertained some 50–60 guests at a dinner in a private house to introduce the concepts. When informed of the event, however, the municipality judged it to be a gathering, not a private dinner. The organizers believed the issue of contention to have stemmed from the 50:50 mix of Sunni and Shia.

⁵⁹ Interview, Riyadh, May 2011.

As early as 1999, 40 businesswomen in the Eastern Province met and identified how much they were in need of training. Ignored by the chamber of commerce and in the absence of any other assistance, they undertook their self-education with no legal umbrella or external financial resources. After five years they agreed to join together in a *mntadah* (forum), and the women have now registered a company, *Sharikat al-Muntadah al-Sharqiyyah* (see Box 3).

Box 3: A businesswoman's perspective

A businesswoman working in the Eastern Province but originally from the Hejaz was interviewed as part of the research for this paper.^a

The *Sharikat al-Muntadah al-Sharqiyyah* as a legal entity has provided the umbrella for the Women's Group through its CSR [corporate social responsibility] division. The Women's Group is now in its third five-year plan; each year it focuses on a particular issue and holds one symposium with the media invited. When it has focused on the issue of *wakil* [male power of attorney, business manager], it was this Women's Group that successfully lobbied Jeddah and Riyadh to get rid of the obligatory *wakil*, and succeeded.

The second five-year plan tackled two years ago the issue of *al-wilayah*, the concept of the *wali al-amr*, the *mahram* [chaperone or guardian – a male family member who supervises a woman]. We tackled it low profile because of the religious implications. Our aim was to demonstrate that women cannot be advocates for their rights unless they understand the Qur'an. So we asked a woman *Shari'ah* professor, Dr Farida Bennani, who lives in Marrakesh, to teach a select group, 20 in Riyadh, 20 in Jeddah and 20 in EP, with a one-week workshop in each area – and she taught well. Only 75 verses in the whole Qur'an focus on women. She focused on the *wilaya'a* only. A former judge and sheikh in Riyadh helped her get a visa: Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Qasim – who is an incredible human being. He supported the group because we did it in our own homes, and he stood by us. Dr Bennani tackled each *ayah* [verse]: she divided the 75 verses between the three cities and then we turned over the results to Sheikh Abdulaziz to check, so we could use it as a basis for family law and codification. The report is finished but waiting; we have showed it to a few *ulema'* but they have not responded yet.

We aim to clarify the misinterpretation of the *Shari'ah*, the misconceptions and mixing up between verses and culture, and the Basic Law of Saudi Arabia. We were the first group to address the Basic Law. We told Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Qasim that it was not being used even though it had been approved by the *ulema'* and came from the *Shari'ah* and was in the spirit of the *Shari'ah*.

We raised the following points: one, *mahram* and *wakil*; two, right to work; three, right to go to school; and four, medical treatment; five, right to drive. In the workshops and Dr Bennani explained that Islam is right for all ages, all places but it must be interpreted for the communities of today; we cannot take 1,000 year old interpretations. Nor should there ever be should be a *fatwa* [ruling] that has no backing in the Qur'an. We divided into groups and worked at the *ayat*, then we got Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Qasim commissioned to bring us all the regulations of all the ministries and state institutions that pertain to women – and most of them are regulations not laws. Every law in Saudi Arabia has to have Quranic backing and be from *Shari'ah* and derived from Quranic exegesis.

Therefore, looking at all the regulations and *ayat* with all the interpretations, we deduced first that guardianship has to stop at a certain age, around 17 or 18. We then pulled together the Basic Law, the Quranic verses and the regulations. And the Basic Law said all citizens are the same; there is no gender discrimination and there should be no *wilayah* except for minors and the mentally disabled. There is no Quranic reference to *wilayah* – women had jobs then and travelled. Now the right to work, to education and marriage comes under the *wilayah*.

^a Interview, EP, February 2014.

In the Qur'an women can't be forced to marry. So the current practices in the kingdom are not backed up by the Basic Law and the Qur'an. This is where we've got to, and we ask on what basis do we Saudi women put up with all this? We are now told the ultimate decision-maker, the king, is the *wali al-amr* for all. So now we go to the king. We sent our five demands – work, education, citizenship, travel/mobility, medical – to all the women in the Shura, and the secretaries and the head of the Shura council, and the head of the women's section of the Shura. But nothing in our traditions suggests that the king has *wilayah* for the whole country.

In 2013 our target was women's inheritance. The Saudi courts give a document saying who the inheritors are and what the inheritance per person is. They ask one person, usually the brother, to act as executor. In our new workshops on inheritance we find no reason for this. After a death it is obligatory to have a deed naming the inheritors, but not the volume of the inheritance itself. And importantly, there is no time scale for distributing the inheritance, nor is there a committee to check a fair distribution. It often takes 20 or 30 years for an inheritance to be announced, and we know of one that took 46 years. The division is according to *Shari'ah* but it is not supervised. Then culture comes in. People don't want to transfer land; they want to give financial assets. There are traditions mixed with religion in this and many inheritance problems when the patriarchs die.

The purpose of this symposium is to draw the courts' attention to all this, to recommend a six months' assets freeze and a time scale, and to educate women to learn about their rights. We need to teach women to be aware of their rights in inheritance and not to relinquish them because the executor is a family member. Many women are now educated and have learned their rights. Now there are endless court cases both big and small, with women arguing that her brother should no longer be the executor of her inheritance.

Women, empowerment and association

That this paper includes a considerable amount on women reflects the fact that women's groups are one of the strongest examples of association in Saudi Arabia, and are influential and expanding. None the less, it is beyond the scope of the analysis to cover all the issues currently affecting Saudi women and their ability to associate. Here, the issues for women break down into the *wakil* (male power of attorney or business manager) and *mahram* (chaperone); voting and the municipal elections; driving; the judiciary and the courts; family violence; and entrepreneurship and employment. In all these areas women are joining together – in both women-only and mixed groups – to push the agenda forward.

There is no shortage of liberals who are supportive of women's rights and who want to help women run at the municipal elections due in 2015, as well as vote. However, it must be borne in mind that in a predominantly conservative country, conservative women – often as well educated as their liberal sisters – will outnumber the latter.

Wakil and mahram

Both as crown prince and king, Abdullah's made some progress on women's rights despite opposition from religious and other conservative interests. An important step was taken in 2011, when the government abolished the need for a woman to have a *wakil*. However, as is often the case in Saudi Arabia, practice lags behind principle, and women still find they need a *wakil* (although see below). In the words of Somaya Jabarti, editor-in-chief of the English-language *Saudi Gazette*, 'We don't have implementation',⁶⁰ and this is perhaps the greatest problem for women's empowerment.⁶¹ Other

⁶⁰ Interview, Jeddah, May 2011.

⁶¹ Jabarti's appointment as editor-in-chief of the Jeddah-based newspaper in early 2014 itself sent out a powerful message in terms of placing a woman in a position of leadership in public life.

interviewees similarly commented that there are good laws on the statute books but these are not adhered to. One pointed out that Article 8⁶² of the country's Basic Law makes no distinction between men and women, and that the king signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) – although he did not fully ratify it. (Saudi Arabia ratified CEDAW but with reservations, whereby it holds the convention to be non-binding in the event of any conflict with Islamic law.)

In the last four to five years, however, women's access has improved: they work as cashiers in supermarkets and shops, and in banks, as secretaries, while the women's universities are adding faculties leading to wider career paths. However, although legally women do not need a *mahram* for travel within the GCC, in practice they do.

Attitudes are changing, albeit slowly. In 2011, for instance the Ministry of Commerce issued a circular across the kingdom stating that women's businesses no longer need a *wakil*, as previously required by royal decree. According to this announcement, a woman now only needs a man represent her at government offices that are closed to her. One member of the Eastern Province *muntadah* commented: 'You won't get anywhere unless you push even within the law. But for a *wakil* I chose a virtually illiterate old man, who makes the tea in my lawyers' office and occasionally signs papers.'⁶³

Box 4: Interview with Hejazi female lawyer and activist

In the view of one Hejazi female lawyer and activist interviewed for this paper,^a the five key issues for women in Saudi Arabia are:

- The ***mahram***, guardianship system, is the paramount problem, as it limits women's rights to control their own lives.
- **Family law** currently puts controls over women, her children and her money. Women are routinely defrauded of their inheritance and to get it back is time-consuming and expensive; often women do not know their rights and need training that even if they do not inherit as much as a man they have rights. The issue of custody needs addressing as currently if a woman marries again she automatically loses custody of her children. Thus women do not remarry – and the decision to marry has to have the *mahram*'s permission.
- **Gender segregation.** Because of gender segregation a woman cannot be in a position of responsibility. Many *ulema*' support women against this, such as Dr Issa al-Ghaith, a Shura member and judge, and Sheikh Ahmed al-Ghamdi, ex-head of the Makkah *haya'a*'. However, the chairman of the Shura, Dr Abdullah bin Muhammad Al al-Sheikh, is conservative.
- **Violence.** Family violence is a major problem in the Kingdom. The recent family violence law does not provide solutions for victims. It provides counselling and the return of a woman to another member of her family, but it does not given her freedom in another location or protection.
- **Civil Society.** It is time to enact the law for civil society [see above]. At present it is impossible to call for advocacy; criticism of the government leads to arrest. It is important to be very cautious and work with the government, not against. The government should allow public meetings and physical groups.

^a interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

⁶² Article 8 states that governance is based on justice, *shura* and equality.

⁶³ Interview, EP, May 2011.

Women in politics

In the political sphere, *Baladi* is an organization started by a Hejazi activist, Fatin Bundaqji, to prepare women to participate in municipal elections. Before the elections that were held in 2011, 25 women activists received coaching from *Baladi* in how to conduct a national political campaign and how to demand that women be allowed to vote and stand as candidates. Now kingdom-wide, the group aims to ensure that women are active in standing and voting in all 13 regions in the municipal elections due in 2015. Meanwhile, some women are attending the monthly *majlis* of the Jeddah *baladiyyah* (municipality); all citizens can nominally attend such meetings, but reports suggest that only in Jeddah are women doing so.

If the municipal elections do proceed in 2015, women are likely to be faced with significant challenges in securing election; if the past examples of Bahrain or Kuwait are anything to go by, they may not win any seats at all (although three women were in fact elected to Bahrain's council of representatives in November 2014). However, now that women have been appointed to the Majlis al-Shura in Saudi Arabia,⁶⁴ the government has a precedent whereby it may appoint women to the municipal councils. Appointment, rather than election, could thus be a strategic way forward.

Legal and judicial issues for women

Female civil society activists consider that wholesale reform of the judiciary to ensure women's rights is essential. At present, women are discriminated against in the courts; for instance, they are not allowed to be present, are mostly not represented, and are often defrauded of their inheritance.

A Hejazi lawyer with an international background said that she had examined the country's public policies and had put together human rights workshops, and that she tried to help women through her blog. She also attempts to advise women remotely, via Skype or by telephone, because in conservative households women are unable to leave their home, and because direct contact may not otherwise be possible in such a large country. The lawyer noted that written codes are absent from the judicial process, with most decisions made on the judge's interpretation of *Shari'ah* and jurisprudence.⁶⁵

The existing unwritten, 'non-formal laws' need to be examined. Such formulations do not, for instance, even give a legal definition of an unlawful act; instead, they set out the procedure to file a lawsuit. In practice, therefore, a woman wanting to file a suit against a family member can learn the procedure but has no precise definition of what constitutes an unlawful act. This may leave her vulnerable to her *mahram*, who can under Saudi religious practice justify keeping her confined at home.

Saudi judges are patriarchal, are not exposed to modern life or the family, and may be said to be prejudiced against women from the outset. The government has issued a directive for a specialized court system for family law, and for the establishment of other specialized courts for business, but these are not yet effective. As of March 2014 the first woman lawyer was not yet in court, although she had already obtained her permit to be able to go to court and to open her law practice.

Women and driving

Women who drive, or who want to drive, constitute one of the most powerful pressure groups. They are organized, educated and determined. Some are members of a group that took part in an earlier

⁶⁴ By two royal decrees issued in 2013, at least 20 per cent of seats in the Shura must be allocated to women, and 30 women were duly appointed to the assembly.

⁶⁵ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

‘driving protest’ in 1990; and many others are younger – among them Manal al-Sharif, in the Eastern Province, who was briefly imprisoned in 2011 but released following intervention by King Abdullah; and a number of others who took part in pro-driving action under the auspices of the Women2Drive group in October 2013. Women involved in the driving campaign have formed a nationwide pressure group including women from Nejd, the Eastern Province, Qassim, Buraidah and Jizan. Most recently, it was reported at the end of 2014 that two women involved in the pro-driving campaign had been detained and were to be referred to a specialist court in Riyadh. (They were subsequently released).

The government’s position on the issue of women driving seems ambiguous. The late King Abdullah apparently said that this is society’s choice, and some members of the government have supported the issue, but the authorities have also clamped down on female drivers. Notably, when women drivers are picked up by the police, they are asked for their *wali al-amr* (male guardian). In rural areas women need to drive and they do, and it is understood that some women in suburban areas are still driving disguised as men. Furthermore, economic circumstances, such as the cost of a driver, increasingly mean that women take to driving. One woman commented: ‘Now it’s much more difficult to finance a driver and get to work. It used to cost SR1,000 a month; now it’s SR4,000 a month.’⁶⁶

One woman driver interviewed said:

We collected 14,000 signatures in two days from all over the country, but the website kept being blocked, probably by the Ministry of the Interior. Before 26 October [2013] everyone was driving – in Jeddah, Makkah, the north, the east. Then on 25 October the interior minister, Muhammad bin Naif, published a letter in the newspapers saying women could not drive. Apparently the interior ministry thought we were demonstrating, which is illegal, but we were not, though a number of prisoners’ wives who were demonstrating wanted to hook up with us.⁶⁷

The *Saudi Gazette* ran a four-page feature on women driving⁶⁸ and received no criticism from the government, though it had previously been warned not to write about the topic. In the feature, the head of the *hayya*’ was reported to have told the *mutawwiyin* (religious police) that they were not allowed to pursue women drivers; and even a senior police officer said there was nothing in the *Shari’ah* to stop women driving.

Women and business

The development of Saudi women in business has been another area in which groups and associations have been formed. The need for such groups is highlighted by the reality that, despite the best efforts of women’s lobby groups, it is still difficult for women to work in public spaces.

That women at all levels are learning about entrepreneurship is also a function of closed Saudi society. In the absence of other opportunities to work and engage in the wider community, women have to create their own: for instance, they may start with a home-based business, then buy a shop, and then become more broadly associated with their sector. Thus, they begin working in their comfort zone and develop from there.

Although working at home means less harassment for women and less regulation, it can be difficult to scale up. Saudi women see themselves as being held back, so there is a gradual brain drain to, for instance, Dubai, where they go to set up businesses ranging from salons and food outlets to franchising, training and accreditation, and schools.

⁶⁶ Interview, Riyadh, February 2014.

⁶⁷ Interview, Jeddah, March 2014.

⁶⁸ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

At least the Khadijah Bint Khuwailid Centre, the women's section of the JCCI, is a very effective lobby group for businesswomen with close ties to the Ministry of Labour. No such bodies, coordination or grouping activities existed two decades ago. In the Qur'an women have entitlement and rights, but particular interpretations of religion, often based on tribal tradition, are used for control, creating a culture of dependence and victimization. 'If we had what God gave us, we wouldn't be in the situation we are now in today. People need to be assertive; individuals have to do more', commented one female journalist.⁶⁹

The government cannot provide enough jobs for Saudi graduates, whether they are men or women, and the absence of career opportunities is one of the factors influencing a new generation of younger women entrepreneurs across the kingdom.

University education has had a significant role in helping women into training and business. In the Eastern Province female students attend the private Prince Muhammad bin Fahd University (PMU), which has a women's section, as well as the women's campuses at the University of Dammam and at the university campuses in Al-Ahsa. The prestigious King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) is understood to be considering opening a women's section. The huge women's public university in Riyadh, Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, is supposed to be graduating 8,000 women students a year.

However, the government cannot provide enough jobs for Saudi graduates, whether they are men or women, and the absence of career opportunities is one of the factors influencing a new generation of younger women entrepreneurs across the kingdom. Notably, the mixed-gender King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), in the Hejaz, has a major entrepreneurial division, providing seed funding and coaching for start-up businesses.

In addition, many programmes exist specifically to enable women to work at home, including schemes for women who have perhaps received secondary education but no further training. Other major programmes aim to create productivity in families on low incomes, involving contracts for sewing, knitting and other crafts. In the Makkah region the government and the JCCI have been creating projects and exhibitions, with online sales through the state postal service Saudi Post. Companies like Sulaisna, a brand from the Faisaliyyah, fulfil an important role by helping upgrade craft designs from the traditional charities to products that can be sold across the kingdom. Furthermore, women are coming together and supporting one another even at the microfinance level.

Thus, although there certainly is poverty in the Saudi Arabia, this is sometimes perpetuated in a misuse of funds, and women often do not know how to access their rights and their money.

Islamist influences

The conservative preachers and their followers are undoubtedly the largest and the best-organized groupings in Saudi Arabia. Given that some 60–70 per cent of the country's 20 million nationals are conservatives, such groups represent a formidable constituency. These are people who do not want to

⁶⁹ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

see liberal reform, women driving, the quashing of the *mahram* and the *wakil*, changes in *Shari'ah* law, and many other forms of behaviour that are considered in Saudi Arabia to be Islamic but which are actually a part of tradition. It is fear of this conservative majority and its influence that has been at the root of the postponement of the municipal elections, and wariness of this same group that slows the government in its actions and hinders substantive and much-needed reform.

Interviewees agreed that the conservative groups are highly organized and powerful. For instance, on Twitter Salman al-Awdah has angered the government because he talks about reform, the people's voice and the treatment of prisoners, and signed one of the 2011 reform petitions. He fed out a critique of Saudi policy in 2013 packaged in the form of tweets and released to an audience of millions on a scale vastly exceeding that available to the previous generation of petitioners in the 1990s. When the Saudi government declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization in March 2014, Salman al-Awdah and Muhammad al-Arifi, both considered to be sympathetic to, if not members of, the Muslim Brotherhood, had to remove from Twitter any signs of their allegiance. The Shia community, too, has well-organized groups, including the religious lecturers in the *husainiyyahs* and the meetings before Ashura or Ramadan.

Civic gatherings

The response to the catastrophic floods in 2009 and 2011 in Jeddah could be said to represent Saudi Arabia's first major encounter with 'people power'. In both instances, social media were effective in mobilizing people, food and other necessities; and in 2011 in particular the response was highly organized through social media. Interviewees considered that the experience had increased awareness of social responsibility.

The best-known civic gathering is the annual *Janadriyyah*, the national festival for heritage, held outside Riyadh; men, women and their families gather to watch camel racing, eat Saudi food and listen to Saudi music. Established in 1985 and organized by the National Guard, the *Janadriyyah* is a tool to reinforce a sense of Saudi nationhood, culture and historical continuity.

Another big civic gathering was the festival held in the Jeddah *balad* (old city) over 10 days in January 2014. One interviewee commented that this 'showed people can coexist and enjoy themselves. There were ordinary people mixing together, men and women, a sort of local *Janadriyyah*.⁷⁰ This heritage festival was important because it harked back to a period when women had a far more prominent public role in Jeddah. On one night some women even dressed as men, evoking a tradition of a century ago: then, on Khullaif, the first three days of Hajj, men would leave the *balad* and women would stay out dressed like men and do the men's jobs as well as their own.

Fatin Bundaqji, the founder of the *Baladi* electoral group discussed in the section on women and politics, also started the *Muwatana* (Citizenship)⁷¹ network in Jeddah in 2008 to restore and clean up the city's corniche area. *Muwatana* aims to turn Jeddah into a world-class city, mobilizing volunteers to help work on its environment and cleanliness.⁷²

⁷⁰ Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

⁷¹ *Muwatana* is an acronym derived from the words in Arabic partnership, allegiance, honesty, motivation, growth, reform.

⁷² Interview, Jeddah, February 2014.

Conclusions

In January 2015 Saudi Arabia handled the political succession from King Abdullah to King Salman smoothly and seamlessly. For the first time, the new king appointed a member of the younger generation as the third in line to the throne. This is all beneficial to the kingdom's likely political stability, but the wider issues of political inclusion, especially of young people, remain largely unaddressed.

The Al Saud are keeping the country relatively stable, with a variety of development and modernization in place. Underlying this, however, is a level of discontent, especially from young people, women and minorities. Some discontent is inevitable in a country that has developed as fast in such a short time as has Saudi Arabia, but some of it could be mitigated.

Saudi Arabia appears to have considerable pent-up and frustrated social energy, both among young people and in their parents' generation. The desire of Saudi Arabia's youth to participate more actively in civil society, as well as in the workforce, could be harnessed with a view to building a more open, generous and inclusive society.

Civil society can be an asset for the nation: a mediating instrument between government and society, a way of building inclusive communities, producing ideas, and helping to integrate, use and respect the country's minorities. It is a general principle that countries with a vibrant civil society integrate better with international human rights organizations and get better results.

Developing civil society requires progress on the civil society law, which the government has been delaying for a decade. The law could draw on international best practice to become a tool that facilitates, rather than represses, an active civil society. State ambivalence towards associational life suggests that traditional interests within the authorities are uneasy at its possibilities and fear the potential for challenges to the status quo. Such conservative forces have not, however, adapted to see the contemporary shifts in the way society and individuals relate to each other, the need to provide an outlet for the energy and aspirations of the younger generation, and the utility of civic activism in helping build a stronger sense of national identity in a young, diverse and rapidly developing country.

About the Author

Caroline Montagu is a writer and journalist who has been travelling to Saudi Arabia for more than 30 years. Having initially focused on the oil and business sectors, she has more recently turned her interest to women's issues and the evolution of associations and civil society. Her understanding of the country's politics, history, society and cultural traditions has been enriched by the many professional contacts and personal friendships that she has forged during her long association with the country.

Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to the interviewees and many personal contacts in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere who have engaged with this paper and supported her in its preparation. Thanks are also due to Chatham House, and to Jane Kinninmont and Jamil De Dominicis in particular, for all their efforts in facilitating its publication.

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- **Citizenship and political development:** Looks at citizens' shifting attitudes and political aspirations particularly those of the under-30s who make up the majority of the GCC's population, exploring the dynamics of reform.
- **Citizenship and the economy:** Explores changing economic realities within the GCC, analyzing the potential of GCC countries to reform and diversify their economies and the links between citizens' political and economic expectations.
- **Islamism and post-Islamism in the Gulf:** Considers the diverse aspirations of Islamically inspired movements and their respective trajectories amid regional changes.
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The project seeks to deepen understanding of these various themes while analyzing the prospects for GCC countries to adapt to ongoing changes in the region and develop their systems accordingly. These themes are explored in the context of relevant changes in the wider Middle East region. Engaging with younger-generation scholars, researchers and analysts from the GCC countries is a core element of the project.

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Cover image © Fayeze Nureldine/AFP/Getty Images

ISBN: 978 1 78413 042 8

All Chatham House publications are printed on recycled paper.

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