

## **“New Women for a New Saudi Arabia?” Gendered Analysis of Saudi Vision 2030 and Women’s Reform Policies**

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### Abstract

Saudi society has undergone tremendous changes since the Crown Prince’s declaration of Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016. In the process of realizing Saudi Vision 2030, “moderate Islam” and “Saudi First” nationalism have appeared as a new state ideology, replacing ultra conservative Wahhabism-based religious nationalism. Within this paradigm shift, Saudi women, previously restricted to the private realm and therefore “invisible,” have emerged as “visible” participants in the public arena. However, the limitations of women’s reform policy are revealed by, *inter alia*, by the government’s crackdown of several women’s rights activists in early 2018 and the ensuing Saudi–Canada diplomatic dispute. This paper examines the characteristics and limitations of Saudi Vision 2030 and related reform policies from a gender perspective by elucidating state and women’s relations within the context of existing literature. This article highlights that the new policies are not intended to expand women’s rights per se, but contribute to the expansion of the Saudi economy and reinforce the Crown Prince’s leadership. Saudi Arabia thus follows the suit with other patriarchal Arab countries’ modernization and reform processes in which women’s role and images are constructed by state policy and ideology.

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### Key words

Saudi Vision 2030, Saudi women, Wahhabism, religious nationalism, Saudi First nationalism

## **Introduction**

In April 2016, Saudi Arabia introduced a new national reform policy named “Saudi Vision 2030.” Led by the Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, the policy aims to lessen the country’s dependence on oil, diversify its economy by concentrating on tourism and entertainment sectors. Given that Saudi national reform

policies of prior decades had similarly focused on economic diversification and the nationalization of the labor force, Saudi Vision 2030 is hardly innovative. However, since assuming office in June 2017, the Crown Prince has pushed the project forward in unprecedented ways and with unprecedented speed under the auspice of his father, King Salman (2015–present). The Salman government, under which the Crown Prince is known as a *de facto* ruler, has weakened the powers of the Wahhabi conservative clergy, religious elites, and religious police; announced the development of a free tourism zone in the Red Sea region; and broken Saudi socio-cultural taboos by allowing cinemas, concerts, and women’s driving, all of which had been banned for decades under Wahhabism’s strict Islamic tradition. In October 2017, the Crown Prince even announced a national shift to “moderate Islam,” mentioning that the “ultra-conservative state has been ‘not normal’ for the past 30 years” (Chulov, 2017).

Gender reform is remarkable aspect of Saudi Vision 2030, which describes women as “a great asset” (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p. 37). The policy has invited Saudi women, who have long been segregated and excluded, to become main partners in building a new Saudi society. Saudi women have indeed experienced a new environment since 2016 due to various new women-friendly reform policies, within which women are differently situated. From a Wahhabi religious perspective, women are seen as “guardians of the moral integrity of the nation, producers of the future pious generation, keepers of tribal and Arab purity, and markers of the nation’s commitment to Islam” (Al-Rasheed, 2017). In contrast, a driving force behind Saudi Vision 2030’s reforms is that women are considered an integral part of nation-building processes that aim to bring Saudi Arabia into a post-oil era. Their newly proclaimed role is centered around increased economic contribution that has been made possible by allowing women to drive, easing guardianship laws in the business sector, and expanding women’s employment rates.

The potential impact of these reform policies is ultimately limited, however, as they are not the product of genuine social evolution, but instead stem from economic and political motivations of the state. This article argues that these ulterior motives are revealed by the government’s detention of several women’s rights activists just before the historical lifting of the driving ban for women in June 2018, as well as the diplomatic dispute with Canada that subsequently ensued in August 2018.

In light of the recent women’s rights reform policies promoted by Saudi Vision 2030, this study examines why Saudi Arabia shifted from religious to “Saudi First”

nationalism and how it is pursued within Saudi Vision 2030. From a gender perspective, this study discusses how Saudi Vision 2030 and its implementing policies can be understood and what the position of women is within this project. The gendered analysis of Saudi Vision 2030 presented here is crucial to furthering existing discussions of reform in Saudi Arabia, demonstrating how recent reform policies are not intended to expand women's rights per se, but rather boost the Saudi economy and reinforce the Crown Prince's leadership. This paper argues that the reform policies still aim to control women, ensuring women's rights are permitted only within boundaries demarcated as top-down privileges granted by the government rather than gained through the bottom-up activism of women. Drawing on existing literature on the intersection of nationalism, gender, and state policy, this study considers Saudi women's status and relationship to the state within the context of a national paradigm shift from religious to Saudi First nationalism. This study thus provides a foundation from which future research on Saudi Vision 2030 can take place, research that integrates the voices and narratives of Saudi women themselves into the purportedly women-friendly reform policies of Saudi Vision 2030.

### **Nationalism, Gender, and the Role of the State**

#### **Discussions of Religious and Saudi First Nationalism within the Historical Context**

Religious nationalism implies the intersection of nationalism with religious beliefs, dogma, or affiliation. Saudi Arabia's variant of religious nationalism was developed within the historical context of state formation and the state's relationship with Wahhabism, a puritanical form of Sunni Islam that advocates a return to the 7th century of Islamic practice. Unlike other majority Arab countries, which have, at times, adopted a form of secular nationalism to unite peoples of disparate religions, classes, ethnicities, and tribes during the post-colonial era, Saudi Arabia sought to create unity across the region through Wahhabism to gain political leadership and independence since 1932. Al-Saud Family relied on Wahhabism's religious ideology as the main mechanism by which cultural, regional, sectarian, and tribal diversity could be subdued. Hitman notes that Wahhabism was a prominent component of Saudi people's national belonging. Saudi people constructed a new collective identity upon this religious tradition (2018, pp. 86–87). Hitman's argument reflects Al-Rasheed's (2013) concept of "religious nationalism". She argues that Saudi Arabia's religious nationalism served "as an umbrella to construct a ho-

mogeneous nation out of a fragmented, diverse, and plural Arabian society,” resulting in a “pious nation” (p. 16). With regards to gender issues within Saudi Arabia, Al-Rasheed asserts that it is not Islam itself but rather a tacit partnership between the ruling Al-Saud family and Wahhabi religious leaders that have manipulated the image of women to maintain a pious national image. Consequently, women have become the most visible symbols of Saudi Arabia’s religious-national identity.

Despite Saudi’s turn toward “moderate Islam” within Saudi Vision 2030, its symbolic religious status as the “cradle of Islam” by virtue of its territory containing Mecca and Medina, Islam’s holiest sites, suggests it will remain the “model state of Islam” for other Islamic countries. Therefore, Saudi’s shift to the more secular tone of “Saudi Fist” nationalism in this study does not suggest the state is non-religious, but rather refers to the government’s strategy of supporting the mobilization and unification of a divided people. Within Saudi First nationalism, Saudi national territory has been emphasized, such as over the course of engaging in Yemeni civil war in 2015 and government depictions of Iran as an outside enemy. In addition, from the economic perspective, under Saudi Vision 2030’s motto of economic prosperity, the government emphasizes the nationalization labor market, which is seen as taken by foreign workers.

Scholarly works on Saudi Arabia’s new nationalistic discourse and women’s roles are limited. Al-Rasheed (2017 & 2018a), one of the few scholars who has discussed Saudi women’s issues from a secular nationalist perspective, argues that new nationalistic paradigms around gender began to emerge in the context of the Saudi Crown Prince’s reforms in 2016. Within this nationalistic approach to gender, Saudi women have been framed as a new source of workforce for the Saudi labor market. In the national development discourse of post-oil era preparation, Saudi women are considered both economic contributors and the “saviors” of the country under the discourse of “hazm” nationalism. “Hazm” (Arabic word for “decisive”) is frequently used in reference to the state’s “decisive” military operations in Yemen as well as the Crown Prince’s “decisive” or “strong” period of rule. Doajji (2018) argues that hazm nationalism reinforces nationalism’s militaristic and masculine aspects, thus supporting women’s new image as guardians of the nation. Again, existing literature on Saudi nationalism and gender suggests that Saudi women, within the new discourse of Saudi First nationalism, are constructed both as contributors to the economic prosperity and protectors of the country rather than reflecting genuine progress on gender issues in the country.

## Saudi Women's Relationship with the Neopatriarchal State

Saudi Arabia's shift from religious to Saudi First nationalism follows in the footsteps of other patriarchal Arab countries that have encouraged women's participation in nation-building and modernization processes during the post-colonial era, yet transformed into a "neopatriarchal state" in the process. Borrowing Sharabi's concept of neopatriarchy or modernized patriarchy, which results from an encounter between modernity and tradition in the context of dependent capitalism, to explain gender dynamics in the Middle East, Moghadam (1993) argues that

whatever the outward forms (modernized family, society, or state) are, their internal structures remain rooted in the patriarchal values and social relations. The states in Middle East share essential features of neopatriarchy whether the regimes be monarchies or republics, radical or conservative, socialist or populist, within which a central feature of this system is the dominance of father within in the household and at the level of the state (p. 112).

Saudi Arabia's government is indeed neopatriarchal in nature, with its strong message of female obedience reflected in the government's crackdown on women activists despite the introduction of women's rights reforms, as will be discussed further in the following section.

Other studies have also stressed the significance of state policy in shaping national gender consciousness. Pinto (2010) notes that in the United Arab Emirates, a neighboring country with similar political, economic, religious, and cultural structures as Saudi Arabia, the state is a strategic actor that defines, coordinates, and produces gender relations and the "gender framing" of the nation. Similarly, Hatem (1999) argues that "the impact of the state was undermined by the resilience of traditional force, whether these took the form of Wahhabi, Sunni, or Shia Islam, or traditionalism; or of patriarchal Arab ideology" and shed light on the state's role as the "agent of social change" by emphasizing their instigator role "from the above" (p. 81). According to Al-Rasheed (2018b), the main barrier to social change in Saudi Arabia is not conflict between traditionalist (e.g., religious clerics and tribes) and modernist (e.g., the royal family and Western educated technocrats) sectors in society with regards to women's issues. Rather, the lack of social progress should be attributed to the state, as those clerics who object to change are products of state-sponsored religious institutions that maintain the ruling family's state leadership and the state's ban on the development of civil society

reinforced tribalism. Then, what role has the Saudi state and its nationalist frameworks played in defining women's roles and shaping women's image in Saudi society? To explore this question, this article examines Saudi women's status respectively under religious and Saudi First nationalism before examining Saudi Vision 2030, its political and economic implications, and its construction of women through related gender reforms.

## **The Status of Saudi Women under Religious Nationalism**

### **Wahhabism and “Controlled” Saudi Women, Intensification of Religious Nationalism from 1979 toward 2001**

Saudi women have been treated as invisible in public spaces and marginalized in the political, economic, and legal arenas. Women were banned from voting or running for office until 2015 and religious police prevented women from mingling in public with men not related to them until the introduction of mixed-gender concerts and cinemas in 2017. Furthermore, their mobility was severely restricted until female driving was allowed in June 2018. As this section argues, Wahhabism is one of the foremost political and legal factors fostering gender inequality in Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism's view of women and their role in society reflects a strict, puritan interpretation of Islam. Al-Rasheed (2013) argues that the idea of “godly women” was constructed through Wahhabi religious nationalism, under which women became a symbol of national identity and authenticity and a visible boundary marker of chastity and morality through gender segregation and the veiling tradition. Saudi women became subjects of state patriarchy, controlled by strict government surveillance. Within this state patriarchy, men's direct control over women was expanded and institutionalized through government policies.

At the surface level, Saudi women's status appears static, influenced only by religious traditions through which women are marginalized, segregated, and excluded from the public sector. But their status was and still is a subject to change according to state policy and its regional and global context. For example, religious nationalism intensified in 1979 when extremist insurgents led by Juhayman al-Otaybi seized control of Mecca's Grand Mosque for two weeks in a bid to overthrow Al-Saud Family. They called for a return to the original Islam of the 7th century, the repudiation of Western influence, the abolition of television, and the expulsion of non-Muslims from the country as destructive influences on Saudi culture. In addition, the Saudi government also faced changing regional dynamics after the Shia Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran. The newly born Islamic Republic of Iran chal-

lenged Saudi Arabia's monarchy system, agitating Shia Muslims in the eastern part of the country to rebel against the Sunni government. To secure itself against domestic and regional challenges, Saudi Arabia proclaimed itself "the last bastion of (Sunni) Islam" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 131). King Khaled (1975–1982) responded to both upheavals by reverting to religious conservatism and giving religious elites more power.

The 1979 Grand Mosque Seizure drastically changed the everyday lives of Saudis. The social milieu quickly became staunchly conservative and closed, as artistic performances were restricted, and women were forbidden to appear on stage (Al Arabiya, 2017). Al-Rasheed (2013) argues that restrictions on women were used to assert the Islamic credentials of Saudi Arabia, and that *fatwas* (authoritative Islamic legal opinions or interpretations) related to women, marriage, polygamy, and mobility in the 1980s represented a desperate attempt to return to an "imagined past and re-fix [the] boundaries of [a] pious nation" (pp. 130–131). In this way, Saudi Arabia in the 1980s increased the exclusion and control of women through religious nationalism.

The 1990 Gulf War and *Sabwa* ("awakening") revivalist movement further strengthened the conservative social milieu under King Fahd (1982–2005). The *Sabwa* movement condemned Al-Saud Family for its alliance with the "decadent" West during the Gulf War, especially the United States, against Iraq. To appease *Sabwa* supporters, the Saudi government reinforced conservative policies, and women became hostages of religious nationalism. Veiling requirements became stricter in public spaces, and an exhaustive gender segregation policy was implemented (Van Geel, 2012, p. 62). In addition, the women's driving ban, which was initially customarily prohibited, became formalized in law after 47 women's public protest of the ban in 1991. Furthermore, the male guardianship law was strengthened: women were no longer able to travel, receive education, or take a job without a male family member's permission.

### **International Pressure for Saudi Government's Gender Reform**

It was in the 2000s when issues of Saudi women's reform began to emerge, with the turning point the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in 2001. When 15 Saudi citizens were discovered to have been involved in the 9/11 attacks, the international community, led by the US, pressured the Saudi government to initiate reforms and open Saudi society to reduce religious extremism. Women's education was deemed as having "filtering effects" on religious extremism, with the

expectation that educated mothers would raise more moderate children (Meijer, 2010). King Abdullah (2005–2015) implemented various reforms on women’s issues, such as forbidding forced marriage, appointing the first female deputy Minister of Education, and opening mixed-gender King Abdullah University of Technology in 2009. However, the Saudi government continued to respect many conservative rules and uphold religious nationalism. Women were allowed to work, but only in segregated spaces such as women-only hotels that had opened in Riyadh in 2008 and the women-only industrial city that had begun operating in Hofuf in 2012.

The 2011 Arab Spring that stirred the entire Middle East ushered in increasingly significant reform policies, with Saudi women often described as beneficiaries of the Arab Spring movements (Merium, 2013). Afraid that Arab Spring’s spirit of freedom and democracy might lead to the overthrow of the monarchy, the government tried to appease its citizens with major spending on housing and social welfare, higher salaries in the public sector, and job creation (Wharton School, 2011). In 2013, 30 women were appointed to the Shura Council, a 150-member formal advisory body, and in 2015, Saudi women were given the right to vote and run for election. In the December 2015 elections, 20 women were elected. Today, unprecedented reforms for women are being pursued under King Salman, especially within the context of Saudi Vision 2030. The image of Saudi women has shifted from the “cultural repository” of traditional values under religious nationalism to “partners” in nation-building mainly through their economic contribution.

## **Saudi Vision 2030 and its Political, Economic, and Gender Implications**

### **Saudi Vision 2030 and its Economic and Political Background**

Saudi Vision 2030 is a national plan that aims to diversify the Kingdom’s economic structure and reduce dependence on oil revenue through the following three themes: “A Vibrant Society,” “A Thriving Economy,” and “An Ambitious Nation.” The drastic decrease in oil revenues between 2014 and 2016 became a powerful driving force in the Saudi government’s bid for economic diversification. The rise in the state’s budget deficit and the fall in foreign reserves led the government to implement austerity measures such as cutting public-sector wages and energy and water subsidies and implementing a 5% value-added tax in January 2018 (Kinninmont, 2017, p. 9). Thus, economic pressure led to welfare cuts and induced the ruling family to afford the people with more freedoms to maintain its leadership. To realize a more moderate Islam, the Crown Prince restricted the

powers of the religious police, who opposed new reform policies, and removed many hard-liners from government, thereby distancing the royal family from Wahhabism.

Saudi Vision 2030 explicitly targets youth and women, populations who were once largely excluded from political participation. Saudi Arabia is a young country, with more than 50% of its population under the age of 30, and securing the support of the younger generation for the regime is thus one likely goal of the state opening-up; the same logic may also apply to women. Reed (2016) views youth and women as the “winners” of Saudi Vision 2030. Saudi Vision 2030 aims, *inter alia*, to harness the economic power of women. Consequently, Saudi Vision 2030 looks to play a significant role in bolstering political support for the Crown Prince amid decreasing oil revenues and the demise of the welfare rentier state.

### **Saudi Vision 2030 and Emergence of Saudi First Nationalism**

Saudi Vision 2030 strengthens Saudi First nationalism in pursuit of national prosperity and security. Rejecting the previous paradigm of religious nationalism based on Wahhabism, the policy has produced a “Saudi First” nationalist ideology (Al-Rasheed, 2017, 2018a; Duran, 2017; Ghattas, 2018; Jabbour, 2017; Karasik, 2015; Lall, 2018; Murphy, 2014). Saudi First nationalist ideology has political, religious, and economic implications, as it demarcates stronger boundaries between insiders and outsiders and creates real and fictional enemies both inside the country (e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood, foreign workers, and the Islamic State) and outside (e.g., Iran and Yemen’s Houthi rebels). Murphy (2014) argues that the time when the state can use religion to enforce uniform social behavior and impede political action has passed.

Lall (2018) asserts that current Saudi nationalism has both softer and harder sides from a political perspective. On the softer side, the government has reinforced national arts and culture, whereas on the harder side, the government has aimed for regional dominance, especially through Saudi-led engagement in the Yemeni Civil War, to prevent the expansion of Iran’s Shia Islam. Under Saudi First nationalism, the traditional distinction of enemy and ally countries has become ambiguous. For example, in 2017, the Saudi First policy led to a diplomatic rift with Qatar, as Saudi Arabia criticized Qatar for its alleged support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran. Such critiques are notable considering that Qatar was considered a brethren country with which Saudi Arabia shares cultural, religious, and political commonalities. In 2017, Saudi Arabia also implied the estab-

lishment of cooperative diplomatic relations with Israel, a country which has long been considered an enemy of the Arab world, with the intention of isolating Iran. By portraying Iran as an enemy who supports Houthi Shia rebels in Yemen, the Saudi government was able to legitimize its engagement in the Yemeni Civil War while strengthening internal unity. This reflects an emphasis on Saudi national identity before Arab or Muslim identity. By promoting the younger generation's Saudi-first national identity through Saudi Vision 2030, the Crown Prince aims to construct the youth as a homogenous identity that traverses internal tribal and regional divides. This approach appears to be effective: according to a recent Saudi Social Cohesion survey, which measures individual and collective feelings toward political, economic, socio-cultural and security issues, the Saudi national cohesion rate is over 84% (Al-Dahass, 2018). From a religious perspective, Saudi Vision 2030's declared shift towards moderate Islam—regardless of its real accomplishments or motivations—enables Saudi Arabia to differentiate itself from Iran, identifying Iran as a dangerous country that propagates a violent and extreme version of Islam (Duran, 2017).

Economically, the Saudi government has promoted the “Saudiization” of the labor force to decrease the unemployment rate among Saudi youth, with a focus on increasing female labor force participation, after observing how youth unemployment in other countries undermined political stability during the Arab Spring. Furthermore, from Saudi First nationalist perspective, foreign workers, who currently compose 38% of the total population, are seen as not only hampering national integration but also taking employment opportunities from local people (Hvidt, 2018). Therefore, the Saudi government has designated 12 private-sector industries as Saudi-only sectors beginning in January 2018 (*Arab News*, 2018). To regulate the entry of expats and their families into Saudi Arabia, the government introduced family tax in 2017, which caused many expats to leave Saudi Arabia (*Khaleej Times*, 2017). Expanding women's workforce participation is meant to increase the country's economic prosperity and reduce the unemployment rate among native Saudis as they move into positions vacated by expat workers. Various women-friendly policies have been put forward under Saudi Vision 2030's “A Thriving Economy” theme, which includes lifting the ban on women's driving and creating new jobs in new sectors for women. However, Saudi Vision 2030's reform policy has its limitations from a gender perspective, as it was derived not from the need for social evolution but from fiscal challenges.

## “New Women” under Saudi Vision 2030 and the Limits of Reform

### Saudi Vision 2030 and Creation of “New Women”

The Saudi reform project seems especially favorable for women, shifting the role of women from inactive, private, and invisible to active, public, and visible. Among the many reform policies implemented since the declaration of Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016, lifting the ban on women’s driving is one of the most remarkable changes. The ban on women’s driving blocked women’s freedom of movement and therefore, limited their access to employment, as they often could not find suitable transportation to work. Women typically had to hire a foreign driver that cost around 1,105 USD per month. By lifting the ban on women’s driving, households are spared driver expenses, and the realm of women’s activities has been expanded. Women are now not only able to drive their children to school, but can also go shopping or visit the hospital by themselves. Male family members are also relieved from the burden of driving their female relatives around, which can interrupt their own working hours. Consequently, women’s driving thus has both social and economic benefits.

In addition to lifting the driving ban, the Crown Prince also declared that the *abaya*, the hallmark of conservative Islamic dress, was no longer necessary as long as female attire is “decent and respectful,” a declaration which secured support from a Saudi cleric in March 2018 (*Gulf News*, 2018). Furthermore, in May 2018, Saudi Arabia’s Council of Ministers passed for the first anti-harassment law for women, providing a maximum penalty of up to five years in prison and a fine of up to SAR 300,000 (approximately 80,000 USD). The law is intended to protect employed women who are now visible in public places. In addition, Shura Council members have proposed that compensation be paid to divorcees, as many Saudi women suffer from financial difficulties after divorce (Al-Qahtani, 2018).

It is undeniable that the rights of Saudi women have increased under the shift from religious to secular nationalism embedded within Saudi Vision 2030. However, a gender perspective requires consideration of what image of women the Saudi government intends to construct. It appears the Saudi government promotes an image of “new women” who are assertive in terms of their economic contribution to and protection of their country. To meet Saudi Vision 2030’s goal of increasing the female labor force to 30%, the government urges women to work in private-sector jobs traditionally occupied by expatriates. To bolster the private sector, the Labor Ministry has, as a pilot project, offered 400 women vouchers for the ride-hailing apps Uber and Careem, with the goal of serving up to 150,000

women by 2020. The government also no longer requires strict segregation in the workplace; companies can hire women to work side by side with men if they provide separate toilets, a security system, and a private room where women can pray (Al-Omran, 2017). Al-Rasheed (2018a) refers to the government's shift from emphasizing religious morality to economic prosperity as the emergence of "Saudi Homo Economicus," wherein women constitute an essential part of a nationalist project to build a prosperous country.

Concurrently, Saudi Arabia's new nationalistic discourse seems still to carry with it a masculine image. The new image of Saudi women has been constructed to represent them as strong protectors of the nation, including as soldiers. Doajji (2018) argues that Saudi Arabia has promoted "hazm" (decisive) nationalism alongside the country's "decisive" entry into the Yemeni Civil War in 2015. In the hazm nationalism, traditional womanhood, which was portrayed as "pious," has shifted to emphasize its nationalist and masculinist character. For example, female Saudi journalist Haifa al-Zahrani gained recognition when photographed at the frontlines of the Yemeni conflict wearing a military-style helmet and vest. This photograph helped to construct a militarized image of the nation and a strong "masculine" image of women. Doajji argues that Saudi women are portrayed as "fulfilling a duty to the nation" within hazm nationalism (2018, pp. 130–131), a portrayal that coincides with Saudi Arabia's new policy allowing female soldiers into the army. Saudi women symbolize the Crown Prince's new Saudi First nationalism and in this way, the once "invisible" Saudi women have thus emerged as "saviors" of the economy and "protectors" of nation.

### **The Limits of Women's Rights Reforms**

Despite the emergence of a new image of Saudi women under Saudi Vision 2030 reforms, these new reforms have limitations, as evidenced by the government's detention of women activists and the subsequent of Canadian-Saudi diplomatic dispute. Since early 2018, Saudi authorities have arrested more than a dozen leading women's rights activists, whom they accused of having had suspicious contact with foreign entities and receiving financial support to "destabilize the kingdom and breach its social structure and mar the national consistency" (El Sirgany & Clarke, 2018). Saudi authorities have accused several of those detained of serious crimes, branding them "traitors" rather than using the term "*kaafir*" ("apostate" or "heretic"), which was predominantly used during the rise of religious nationalism in the 1980s and 1990s for people who strayed from religious norms, secula-

rists, and intellectuals (Ghattas, 2018). Among those detained include internationally recognized women's rights activist Samar Badawi, a recipient of the United States' 2012 International Women of Courage Award, best known for challenging Saudi Arabia's discriminatory male guardianship system. She was one of the first women to petition Saudi authorities to allow women the right to drive as well as the right to vote and run in municipal elections (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

The arrest of Badawi caused a diplomatic crisis between Saudi Arabia and Canada. Badawi is the sister of Raif Badawi, a Saudi dissident blogger who has been imprisoned by the Saudi government since 2012 on charges of "insulting Islam through electronic channels" (Williams, 2018). Raif Badawi's wife, Ensaf Haidar, and their three children have been living in Quebec, Canada, since 2015 to escape further persecution, and they were given Canadian citizenship on July 1, 2018. When Samar Badawi was arrested, Canada's foreign minister, Chrystia Freeland, tweeted a request for her immediate release, adding that "Canada stands together with the Badawi family in this difficult time (Baker, 2018)." The Saudi Foreign Ministry responded that the tweet was "an overt and blatant interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," and demanded that the Canadian ambassador leave the country within 24 hours. Saudi Arabia also declared the suspension of "all new trade and investment transactions" between Saudi Arabia and Canada as well as the withdrawal of all Saudi students studying in Canada (Williams, 2018).

These sanctions were efforts by the Crown Prince to control internal and external challenges to his leadership. By cracking down on social movements within Saudi Arabia, he sends the message to Saudis that there are limits to the new rights emerging under Saudi Vision 2030. The sanctions simultaneously allowed the Crown Prince to convey a message of non-interference to the international community, especially Western countries. Canada was thus a good target, as, in contrast to the US, it is not one of Saudi Arabia's most important allies (Drezner, 2017).

The detention of women activists and its aftermath shows that although the situation of Saudi women is ostensibly improving under Saudi Vision 2030, the reforms have inherent limitations. It seems that the reforms empower women economically but continue to deny them voices and agency, as most women who were arrested were those who actively fought for women's rights rather than taking a "wait and see" position. Tucker and Lowi (2018) state that Saudi Arabia's detention of women activists reveals the narrow vision of gender reform, criticizing it as

...a state project designed and run with the interests of the rulers in mind. What apparently it does not want, or feel it needs, is an independent woman's voice of any kind. The state will decide on the character and pace of reform, the state will be the sole spokesperson for reform.

This interpretation is consistent with Liou and Musgave's (2016) argument, which stresses that reforms were derived not from the need for social evolution but from fiscal challenges. Ghattas (2018) similarly argues that the detention of female activists exposed "the crown prince's much-touted reforms as nothing more than a sham."

It is also noticeable that women not only have to obey the patriarchal government but also are controlled by the traditional code of honor and dignity of Saudi society. Saudi women can now attend sporting events, concerts, and movies alongside unrelated men, but if they violate the traditional honor code, they are still subject to severe punishment. A Saudi woman was arrested and sentenced to two years in jail after running on stage and hugging the popular male Iraqi-Saudi performer Majid al-Mohandis in Taif in July 2018 (McKernan, 2018). The limits to women's rights make it clear that Saudi Arabia's reform policies still aim to control and tame women. Women's rights seem to be permitted only within the boundaries demarcated by the government, with the message that these rights are not something women have gained through their own efforts, but privileges granted by the state's top down policy. Despite the limitations of the Saudi's reform on women's issues, it is undeniable that most Saudi women, especially the younger generation, welcome and enjoy their new rights and roles as it opens and expands their realm of activity. Thus, even though it is too early to evaluate, further research is needed regarding the impact of Saudi Vision 2030's reform policy on Saudi women's lived experience in the near future.

## Conclusion

Saudi society has been undergoing great change since the Crown Prince's declaration of Saudi Vision 2030 its focus on women's rights reform. To realize Saudi Vision 2030 as well as to break from its image as an ultra-conservative religious country, the Saudi government has shifted its nationalist ideology from a religious nationalism based in Wahhabism to Saudi First nationalism characterized by moderate Islam. Women, who were restricted to the private realm of the home and

therefore invisible, have emerged as visible participants in the public arena, with the new mission of contributing to the national prosperity and security of Saudi Arabia. However, as the detention of women activists and the diplomatic dispute with Canada in 2018 demonstrate, women's rights reforms under Saudi Vision 2030 are not intended to grant women the range of rights and freedoms held by men, but rather contribute to the expansion of the Saudi economy and reinforce the Crown Prince's leadership. These examples show that it is the government which defines women's roles and constructs their image in society. Thus, Saudi's reform policy for women within the context of Saudi Vision 2030 and Saudi First nationalism will likely be continued as the government will need women's support to maintain the young Crown Prince's leadership as well as women's contribution in building a new nation.

Today, a growing number of Saudi women have become visible due to Saudi Vision 2030 and its gender reform policies. Saudi women's participation in the workforce, in addition to other newly granted rights, may slowly empower Saudi women in the future. However, if women do not maneuver between their traditional role and the new roles constructed under Saudi Vision 2030, the reforms may ultimately lead to a worsening of the position of Saudi women, as they will have the added burden of serving as an income earner in addition to their conventional roles of home manager, caregiver, and honor keeper. In other words, if the new perception of emancipated women is not accompanied by further social changes, Saudi women will be forced to obey the demands of both the formal public and informal private patriarchies, rather than experiencing a legitimate expansion of their rights and freedoms as equal partners in a new Saudi Arabia.

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