

NO, SAUDI TO LIFT BAN ON WOMEN DRIVING IS NOT A PR CAMPAIGN

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Ink still is fresh on the many analysis papers that blossomed as soon as the Kingdom's royal decree was issued on Tuesday the 26th of September. Saudis, and the world alike, learnt that the last societal rule still applying constraint - to say the very least - onto women driving was finally vanishing from the surface of the Earth. Though, observers were not taken by surprised by the move that was everything but unexpected or sudden. But was on the contrary inherited from decades long processes and the ultimate step of long designed reform. Needless to state that the Saudi power is capitalizing on it in order to curb a terrible global reputation, yet it would be a mistake to consider the lift of the ban solely as something it is not: a PR campaign.

An old quest

Among the many rebukes carried against the Kingdom, the prohibition of driving for Saudi women has long held pole position. Mediatically appealing and socially unbearable, this blatant humiliating treatment targeting women has always been considered the foremost personification of the rampant misogyny spreading and poisoning the country, preventing it from fully embracing the modern time evolution. Many are the skeptics, or even enemies, of the Saudi kingdom, both internationally and regionally, who have hourly used the driving prohibition as a “proof” of the country's backwardness and “barbaric” rules, in order to demonize what would be considered foolish States' relations, cooperation or agreements prolicies to maintain with the kingdom. If Western societies' paternalism and orientalism actually take pride into believing that it played a role in the lift of the ban, therefore explaining that the only goal of this lift is for the Saudi leaders to please the international community, the real architects of this decree are the many Saudi female and male activists who for long stood the ground and - whether one likes it or not - the Saudi regime itself.

Only fools would give a full round of applause to the regime just because of a ban to be lifted, yet one must still render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's. In reality, many observers have been stating that authorization for women to drive in the whole country, has long been in some members of the ruling family's minds, and that the debate among Saudi royal family has been running for years. Even if a famous motto regarding the Saudi royal family's matters, states that "those who know don't speak and those who speak don't know", it is undeniable that various opinions are challenging one another within the family. One of the most internationally renowned member of the family, even if with marginal or very few decision-making authority inside the kingdom but what his wealth and fame could eventually bring, Prince Waleed bin Talal, has for years been a prominent voice for Saudi women emancipation on the global stage.

It is also quite well known that some branches of the family tree are more powerful, wealthy and even conservative than others. The main example to illustrate the unbalanced power and wealth among the members of the Saudi royal family often revolves around the Sudairis. This branch of the family whose members are children of first ruler of modern time Saudi Arabia, Ibn Saud, and Hussa bint Ahmed Al Sudairi who is believed to have been his favorite wife. The progeny of this couple consists of four daughters and seven sons referred to as the Sudairi Seven.

Among these seven sons, two were kings including the current one, two served as crown princes and all occupied powerful positions, mainly in the Ministry of Defense as Ministers or deputy Ministers. For the Ministry of Defense has traditionally been held by a Sudairi member since 1963 with Sultan bin Abdulaziz who served the longest time ever as Saudi Minister of Defense during 48 years. Previous him, and since the foundation of modern day Saudi Arabia, only five persons held the position and for a time period never exceeding 9 years and more commonly being 2 to 3 years. After him, his brother Salman held the position until he was crowned king and directly followed by the latter's son, Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) also current crown prince.

In parallel the first occurrence of the Sudairi Seven at the head of the powerful Ministry of Interior happened in 1962 when Fahd was appointed Minister for more than a decade before becoming king. Followed by his brother Nayef, who headed the ministry for 37 years. Then followed by the youngest Sudairi Seven brother, Ahmed, minister for less than 6 months and replaced by Nayef's son, Mohammad bin Nayef (MbN). The latter has been dubbed "[the prince of counter-terrorism](#)" for his role in crushing al-Qaeda cells and engineering the government's counter-insurgency program when his father was Minister of the Interior. Since 2017 he has been replaced by his own nephew, the son of his older brother Saud, Abdulaziz bin Saud bin Nayef during what is believed to be a power struggle between MbS and him.

Another person of interest is Bandar bin Sultan, son of now deceased Sudairi Seven Sultan, and who served as Saudi ambassador to the US and Saudi intelligence chief later on replaced by MbN himself. Bandar is the son of Sultan and Khiziran, an Ethiopian maid. If he first grew without seeing his father he later on was welcomed to live with Hussa Sudairi, his grandmother and mother of the Sudairi Seven.

These examples alone illustrate the humongous powers held by the Sudairi branch within the upper strata of the Saudi power, as even if there is infighting among the second Sudairi generation, namely between MbS and MbN, still holds the two main ministries, Interior and Defense.

This is not the case with all the prominent members of the royal family as illustrated by late king Abdullah whose accession to the throne has been a clear personification of the struggle between some princes and the Sudairi Seven drowned with privileges. If the Sudairis come from a prestigious tribe from the Najd, Abdullah, through his mother, is the inheritor of one of the most prestigious Arab tribe: the Shammar. The tribe is composed of several millions people scattered across Syria, Jordan Iraq or Saudi Arabia. Today's Shammar capital city is located in Mosul. The House of Rasheed - from the Shammar - has long been the greatest enemy of the Saud dynasty and their most ferocious competitor even overthrowing them from Riyadh at the end of the 19th century. Saud's final victory is what led some of the members to exile in Iraq. The marriage between Ibn Saoud and Fahda bint Asi bin Shuraim Al Shammari, the daughter of the Shammar tribe chief, was said to be political in order to regain peace. Yet, the competition among these various heritages within the Saudi royal family didn't fade away with time. Also in a family into which prestigious ancestry still matters, jealousy and rivalry both fuel distrust. In order to even go further, it is interesting to note that the Sudairis are part of the al-Dawasir tribe, who are inheritors of Adnanites (Arabized Arabs) and the Shammar are Qahtanites, that could also lead to "precedence" tensions, even if that is another matter.

During his reign, king Abdullah did it all to sideline the Sudairis, and as Jean Aziz [wrote](#) in 2014: "The transition to the second generation of sons is being accelerated in two ways: removing the sons of former kings and crown princes, especially the Sudairis, and concentrating the positions of power and influence in the hands of the sons of the current King Abdullah and his closest associates. This is happening [gradually and with great care](#)."

These backgrounds, even if they could seem marginal, are pieces of the puzzle composing the core center of one's personality. Some are born with a natural disdain and assured legitimacy that prevent them to even question their place within a society, others have to constantly prove everything for they believe they have to win their legitimacies. That could be an angle to understand the struggle between late king Abdullah, a free mind resulting of the alliance between the two most powerful houses of Saudi Arabia, and the Sudairi Seven, constantly climbing the layers of the Saudi power and conscientiously eliminating all the competitors on the way. And that could be one of the reasons why the Sudairis have always been labelled as more conservative and protecting one another by shaping a bound brotherhood. King Abdullah only had two full younger sisters and no full brothers to rest upon.

The process that led to 26th of September 2017's royal decree allowing women to drive starting in June 2018 and after the recommendations of a Commission, has in reality began under the reign of Abdullah. This free thinking personality's achievements in order to shape a modern society are countless even if a sharp veil of conservative policies also shadows the overall balance sheet.

In 2009, King Abdullah appointed [Nora bint Abdullah al-Fayez](#) as deputy education minister in charge of a new department for female students. She is Saudi's first woman to hold a cabinet position.

On the 25th of September 2011, King Abdullah [announced](#) that women would be granted the right to vote and run for the following municipal elections that occurred in 2015. In December 2015, 978 [women ran](#) for the approximately 2,100 municipal council seats being contested. Officials state that 130,000 registered to vote. [As a result](#) "18 women have won seats in Saudi Arabia's municipal polls".

During the same announcement, king Abdullah decided "to involve women in the Shura Council as members, starting from the next term". The next term occurred in February 2013 when [thirty](#) women entered the 150-members advisory council (members of the Shura Council are appointed, not elected).

In 2012, two Saudi women competed in the London Olympics for the first time in the kingdom's history. The same year, [Mody al-Khalaf](#) was appointed to a senior diplomatic position as attaché for cultural and social affairs at the Saudi Embassy in the US. She is now member of the Shura Council.

In 2013, four [female lawyers](#) were authorized to appear before court.

Though, the grant of female right to drive in Saudi was not among king Abdullah's reforms. Even if it is [said](#) that he, "and other senior figures have said they would support rescinding the ban on women driving" since 2005, never was it implemented under his reign. Journalist Brian Palmer [wrote](#) in 2011: "The king, in addition to opening municipal elections to women, announced on Sunday that he would soon appoint women to the [Shura council](#), which, in 2005, discussed the issue of female drivers. They debated whether it was consistent with Islamic law, and even batted around some practical issues. They considered allowing only women over 35 to drive, limiting female drivers to daylight hours, and banning the practice outside of city limits. (In fact, many women already drive in rural areas of the country, where police intervention is rare.) The council even suggested raising a force of female traffic cops, so woman drivers wouldn't have to interact with male officers. Even though the 150-member council is merely advisory, the discussion upset conservatives. When the Shura council considered women's transportation issues in 2011, [no one suggested licensing women](#) to drive. The king's move may be an attempt to revive those discussions inside the council."

Indeed, outside of the Saudi cities, many [Bedouin women](#) were actually defying the unwritten rule by taking the road, imposed by the harsh Bedouin lifestyle. Doing so with the knowledge, if not the consent, of the authorities. Though the topic of women right to drive has always been severely opposed by many members of the royal family and as NEIL MacFARQUHAR [wrote](#) in the NYT in 2011: "King Abdullah, the 87-year-old monarch who has a reputation for pushing reforms opposed by some of his half-brothers among the senior princes", demonstrating the delicate arbitration the king had to make. Not only some prominent princes opposed the right to drive, but also many conservative clerics. In September 2013, leading Saudi cleric Sheikh Saleh Al-Loheidan, seriously [claimed](#): ""If a woman drives a car, it could

have a negative physiological impact ... Medical studies show that it would automatically affect a woman's ovaries and that it pushes the pelvis upward." The comment was received by [60 women protesting](#) and taking the wheels. But as a [result](#) "150 clerics and religious scholars have held a protest outside the Saudi king's palace against renewed efforts by women seeking the right to drive" in October 2013.

The patient crackdown on the Muttaween

These resistances, among the temporal and spiritual layers of the Saudi society demonstrated then that a tiny improvement in women's daily lives such as the right to drive, remains highly complicated to push forward. Strangely enough, the right to run for municipal elections, the right to vote for the same elections and the Shura Council appointments provoked lower resistance than the right to drive, which greatly impact the middle class Saudis' budget: "The prohibition forces families to hire live-in drivers, and those who cannot afford the \$300 to \$400 (£190 to £255) a month for a driver must rely on male relatives to drive them to work, school, shopping or the doctor" wrote Mark Tran.

These resistances proved the power, it had to act gradually, in order to avoid direct confrontation. The reforms were therefore taking much time. But it also made King Abdullah realize that before hoping making the changes, the influence of the clerics should be limited. In Saudi the main personifications of the clerics' grip onto the daily lives of the citizens are embodied in the ash-Sheikh family, descendant of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and the Hai'a. The Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Elimination of Sin (known as Hai'a) has been created by King Fahd and works more or less like a religious police employing Muttaween in order to enforce its decision. For the past decades, the Muttaween constantly grew unpopular and the list of their alleged abuses seems to never end. The most famous case is also the most deadly and happened in 2002, when a fire broke in a Mecca school. As the [BBC wrote](#) back then: "Saudi Arabia's religious police stopped schoolgirls from leaving a blazing building because they were not wearing correct Islamic dress, according to Saudi newspapers" resulting in the death of 15 girls. Obviously, the terrible event caused a public outcry, and since then the feared Muttaween have little by little seen their powers melt like snow under the sun.

It is widely believed that the main blow against the Muttaween has been carried by current regime, in April 2016 with a [decree](#) revoking the "religious police" the right to arrest and engage in pursuit. If the decree legally enacted it once and for all, it was in fact in October 2012 that the decision was made. Few months before, in January 2012, King Abdullah dismissed Abdul Aziz al-Humain as head of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice and [replaced](#) him by Abdul Latif Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh. No reasons were actually given but it is widely accepted to have been provoked by growing popular discontent toward the aggressive behavior of the Muttaween. Abdul Latif Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh [announced](#) in October 2012 that "arrests, interrogations, house raids and searches will now be carried out by other police or judicial bodies".

As a result it would be exaggerated to say that the Muttaween are still "feared" in Saudi Arabia as their authority was greatly reduced. This is particularly true in what is considered to

be the most liberal city of Saudi: Jeddah. Paradoxically, if the city laying on the shores of the Red Sea, is the summer retreat of the entire Government and the royal Court, therefore a periodical yearly center of power, and located few dozens of kilometers away from Holy cities of Medina and Mecca, it also is the most “open minded” place of the country in which Muttaween barely frighten any citizen anymore. And as for the rest of the country, their authority is kept in capital city of Riyadh only by tradition and only in a representative way. The other big cities might still be in their reach but it has been for a long time now that provincial and rural areas are escaping from it. This proves the slow but real decrease of their rule over Saudis. Today’s definition of the Muttawa as a religious police is somehow exaggerated and does not represent the real state of affairs.

The economic challenges

That religious grasp onto the daily lives of Saudi citizens having been limited with time, the power also undertook another great defy that prevented any change of the law regarding the women right to drive: the economy.

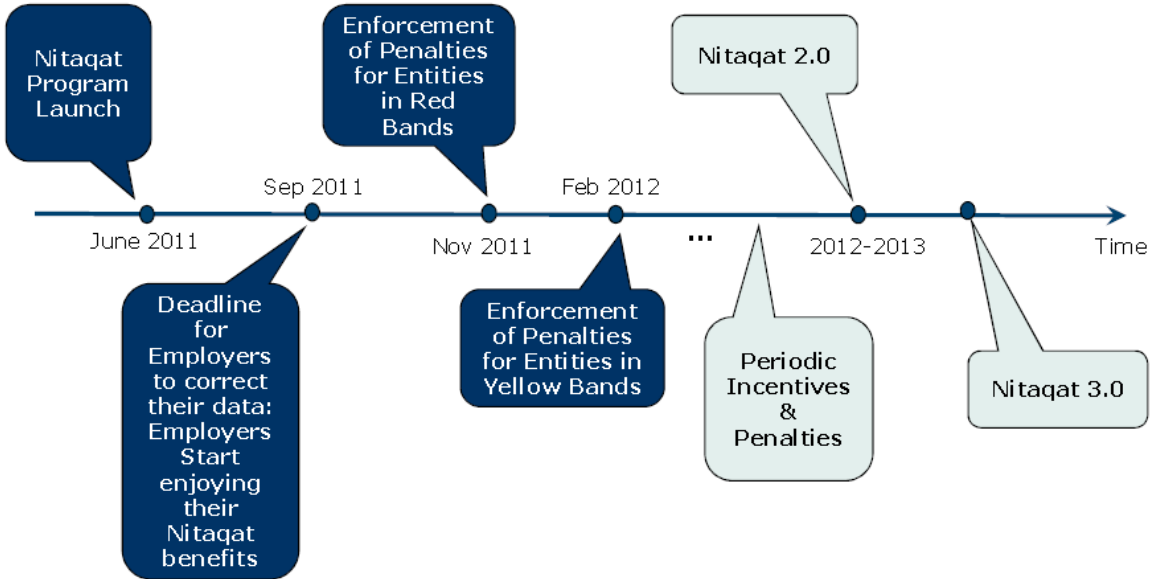
Rumors in Saudi are often wrong but they still are indications of the streams shaking the country up. And there is a persistent rumor that every observer has at least once heard about regarding king Abdullah’s willingness to lift the ban. It is said that king Abdullah asked a management consulting firm to estimate the economic impact of such a lift. Versions vary but rumors say that the company itself was world renown McKinsey, the same company that would later shape Vision 2030 so dear to MbS. McKinsey team is reported to have given its result and some figures speak of more than one million job losses instantly in the country and a potential addition of several other thousands of ban related jobs. That would have directly cooled down king Abdullah’s inclination. And in order to compare, a quick look at our own employment and social issues in the West could be of interest. During the French Presidential campaign, two of the main candidates, right wing François Fillon, and center Emmanuel Macron, both promised public servant cuts. The first one promised a cut of 500,000 public sector jobs, and the second, 120,000. Even if popular among a part of the population, the mediatic and public outcry did not wait long to be heard. These campaigns promises both became the core center of the attacks the two candidates faced and were labelled as “trouble spots” by the media. That is in a society of 70 million citizens and proud of what it calls “social model”. Now, in Saudi, 30 million citizens, with huge wealth inequality, important unemployment and high traditional practices, the perspective of a loss of more than 1 million jobs is not recomforting.

A gradual solution would therefore need to be applied in order to tackle the eventual loss of jobs, [unemployment](#) but also to prepare Saudis to take jobs that were, up to then, done by foreign workers. The solution shaped by the regime was (and still is) the [Nitaqat](#) system that forces private companies to set aside some jobs for Saudi nationals.

The Nitaqat (“Saudization”) finds its roots several decades ago, but at that time the oil industry was booming, the prices of the barrel was growing and the budget of the State was therefore full. Which allowed the previous Governments and kings to finance a social peace whenever needed. For example, Saudi Arabia has an astonishing number of nationals being

employed in the public sectors and many are still trying to figure out what all these people have been doing for years. As Simeon Kerr out it in the [FT](#) in December 2016: “For decades, young Saudis have grown accustomed to walking into easy public sector jobs, cushioned by decent salaries and benefits paid for by the kingdom’s petrodollars.” Even more worrying, [figures](#) are stating that “two thirds of the working Saudis are public servants”. In 2005 the oil prices rose drastically until reaching a then all-time record price in 2008 (94\$/barrel). By 2009 however, the oil price crashed. Before rebounding from 2011 to 2014, performing way better than the 2008 record (reaching close to 110\$/barrel in 2012). Then, again, collapsed in 2015 reaching bellow 50\$/barrel.

The least can be said is that the market is volatile. And the 10 million barrels/day producer, understood very quickly that it had to cease relying entirely on it. In order to avoid public roar, it had to tackle the unemployment issues fast. In June 2011, the Ministry of Labor introduced the Nitaqat Program that the private companies had to implement by March 2013. The program then headed by Dr. Amre Massoud, was dividing Saudi private companies in terms of numbers of employees, percentage of Saudi nationals working in the company and according to which the companies had to employ a certain minimum amount of Saudi nationals (a classification based on colors to identify the private companies has been applied, from biggest percentage of Saudization to lowest: Premium, Green, Yellow and Red).



Number Goals and timeframe of Nitaqat implementation (Source: Saudi Ministry of Labor)

The Nitaqat Program [raised concerned](#) among foreign workers’ countries of origin that were afraid a lot of their nationals would lose their jobs. Which they eventually did, and would therefore come back to these countries even if some of them were sometimes born and raised in the kingdom but would never have obtained the citizenship. For example Indian Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs, Vayalar Ravi [said](#) in 2013 as the deadline for implementation of Nitaqat was reached: “It’s a serious issue that will affect not only India but also other countries. I spoke to the Indian ambassador and have asked him to keep me informed on

developments”. The Indian workers back then in Saudi was accounting for more than 2 million people. [In few months](#) in 2013, “200,000 foreigners have been deported from the country” due to Nitaqat.

The Nitaqat also [aimed at tackling](#) women unemployment but the latter “remains five times higher than for men.”

As for the driving industry, the rumor according to which the lift of the ban for women would result in the loss of 1 million jobs seems to actually be verified as of today. In September 2017, [Al Arabiya](#) revealed that in 2016 alone, foreign drivers in Saudi accounted for 800,000 up to 1 million people that could be forced to leave the country once the decree would be fully applied.

What is thus noticeable in retrospect, is that far from being a sudden turn of events, king Abdullah paved the way for reforms, sometimes at the expenses of foreign workers that would find themselves in very critical situations, but that would try to get Saudi economy back onto modern tracks. If the lift could not be applied under his reign, one could argue that it is because back then the working landscape wasn't mature enough in Saudi and the society has not been sufficiently prepared to fill in the gap that would have been created by a sudden authorization, nor the prospect of having a million more unemployed people that the kingdom's economy would have not been able to cope with. Of course, many arguments could also come in mind as the slowness and the lack of courage that could be upheld against Saudi decision makers who failed to promote the right for women to drive, but taking such decisions requires to go step by step, and therefore the need to establish the Nitaqat before the right to drive itself.

A pragmatic regime

The current regime, that for many is more conservative than the previous one, yet highly pragmatic according to several observers, has proved wise enough to pursue the social reforms and more precisely the reforms targeting women, of king Abdullah. Far from destroying this heritage, king Salman and his son, carried on the work done previously and engraved it into the law. There is no intent here to turn a blind eye onto the severe crackdown the current regime is enforcing against various activists while applying a hugely mediatically attractive decree. But one must acknowledge the efforts made by the regime and the great impacts the several laws will have on Saudi women daily lives. Surely not sufficient, but having the virtue to exist nonetheless.

“On May 4, 2017, Saudi King Salman bin Abd Al-'Aziz issued a royal decree easing guardianship (*wilaya*) requirements for women in the country. The decree instructs all government institutions in the kingdom to provide services to women without requiring the consent of their male guardians, unless such a requirement is stipulated by state law based on the Islamic shari'a” [recounted](#) MEMRI.

The decree easing aspects included women being given independent access to government services, jobs, education and health care.

MbS's Vision 2030 economic program, that still fails to win the confidence of the international market, however strongly emphasizes on the role of women in the Saudi society and they are referred as a "great asset" for the country's development.

In February 2017, Sarah Al Suhaimi [has been appointed](#) as the first women to chair Saudi stock exchange, "the largest bourse in the Middle East". In July a popular Snapchat user, named Khulood provoked a controversy by posting a video of her walking in Saudi heritage site of Ushayqir wearing a miniskirt. If it portrays the fact that conservatism still holds the upper hand in the kingdom, many [observers reminded](#) that Khulood after being arrested would not be facing much troubles. And indeed, the authorities released her [without any charges](#).

Useless to actually remind that much more is needed in order to tackle the hard misogyny targeting Saudi women. Useless also to highlight the fact that the newly authorization (to be effective in June) is being used by the regime in order to make its mediatic case and win some international support. It allows the regime to prevent its "enemies" of ever using the old argument of the women driving prohibition again. But stating that the lift itself, and the women rights improvements in general, are just a PR campaign targeting the international community and the Western world in particular is a severe misunderstanding of the real core changes Saudi Arabia is undergoing.

It also is a highly Orientalist view to consider that the lift is only designed to please the media and the international community for the kingdom to confront its terrible worldwide reputation, and particularly in the midst of its influential "fight" against Qatar and Iran.

These progresses have been in the loop for years now (at least intellectually), and the current regime is enjoying the many mentality changes made possible by the struggles engaged by late king Abdullah.