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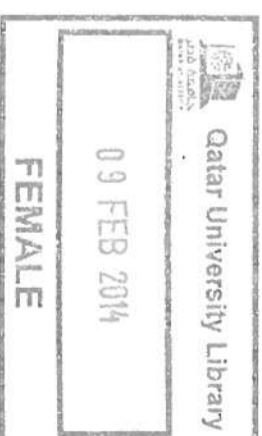
ISLAM AND WOMEN

Natana J. DeLong-Bas

EDITOR IN CHIEF

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SHURUQ MAGUIB

SAUDI ARABIA. Women in Saudi Arabia

have long made headlines in the international media. Any reading of Saudi women's status will end up going back to as early as the beginning of Islam, looking for explanations and sometimes justifications. Thus, it is important from the outset to investigate the context that created, affected, and shaped the case of the 'Saudi woman' and how she interacted with and responded to it, both internally and externally. The "Saudi woman's" case needs to be contextualized within the debates about modernity, Islamic conservatism/revivalism, and the response to narrow interpretations of Islam in the Muslim world and in Saudi Arabia. Saudi women's issues are not ancient ones, nor are they inherent to Islam: most of them are a reflection of the inability to deal with modernity when it hits this sacred part of society, that is, women.

Historical Factors. Saudi Arabia's history has been shaped by three major factors in recent decades: geographic location, Islam, and oil. Perhaps this is a simplification, but it gives, at least, a structure to how one can understand the major players in Saudi Arabia's current history. What formed the history of the state shaped also the past and present of Saudi women.

Saudi Arabia is situated on the Arabian Peninsula, which is flanked on the east by the Arabo-Persian Gulf and by the Red Sea on the west, guaranteeing its economic access to Asia from one side and Africa from the other. This was reflected in Arabia's rich historical relationships with India, Persia, Mesopotamia, the Levant, Egypt, Abyssinia, and Europe. Arabia was in the middle of the major ancient world civilizations

and routes. It participated, transferred, and contributed to it prior to and after the advent of Islam in Makkah in 610 CE.

Alliance. Saudi Arabia is a modern nation state that emerged in 1932 but claims a longer history that dates back to 1744, when Muḥammad ibn Saud, one of central Arabia's leaders, from Diriyah (north of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's capital today), decided to ally with a religious activist who critiqued the practices of his fellow men and women in Najd (central Arabia) in particular and who advocated for a puritanical reformation in Islam based on the early sources of religion, the Qurʾān and *sunna*. This background is important for understanding the modern history of Saudi Arabia, which became indebted to this alliance throughout its political, economic, educational, and social decisions. Women were always an important component in the power equation of state and society in Saudi Arabia.

Oil. In 1933, Saudi Arabia signed a concession treaty with Standard Oil of California. In 1938, it began producing oil and, in 1939, the first shipment of oil left the Gulf to the United States. In 1973, Saudi Arabia led the famous oil embargo on the states that were supporting the Israelis in the 1973 Arab–Israeli War. In 1974, oil prices boomed. Since then, oil has become a major factor in the relationship between power and modernity.

Women and Modernity. Women's status in Saudi Arabia was formed in part by its sacred spatial location as the cradle of Islam. The government, therefore, carries a sacred responsibility for protecting the holy sites, leading some to claim that Saudi Arabia is the only true representative of Islam, following a strict adherence to the Qurʾān, *sunna*, and Hanbali school of Islamic law.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia was faced with accepting the challenge of modernity that was not limited to modern technology, but also included ideas, concepts, philosophies, and ideologies that touched on society, education,

health, the economy, women, and even religion. Modernity meant also the adoption of the modern nation-state's components of institutions, administrative and bureaucratic systems, legal bodies, organized defense, etc. Where women fit within this modernity has long represented a challenge.

Muslims, in general, tend to think of "modernity" in two ways: (1) as modernization, which is associated with science, technology, and material progress, and (2) as Westernization, which is associated with promiscuity and all kinds of social problems. Although "modernization" is considered highly desirable, "Westernization" is considered equally undesirable. Because an emancipated Muslim woman is seen by many Muslims as a symbol not of "modernization" but of "Westernization," some conservative Muslims have also gone to the extreme of considering such "Westernization" as disguised "modernization."

Saudi Arabia therefore faced the additional challenge of conforming every modern innovation with religious guidance, often resulting in conflict between the religious establishment and the state on one side, and society on the other. As the state succeeded from early stages in gaining the grounds against fanatical tribes through the famous battle of Sbeila in 1929, the battle to win over society continued unresolved. In 1961, the state managed to pass a law introducing public schools for girls. However, this was done under the condition of keeping girls' education under the control of a committee of religious scholars chaired by the Grand Mufti, separate from the ministry that runs boys' education. This was done to follow the objective of keeping the schools' curriculum in the private sphere to train girls to be good mothers and obedient wives. This situation continued until 2003, when, following a fire at a girls' school in which many students died because they were prevented from leaving the building unweilded, the education ministry was merged with the High Presidency for the Education of Girls.

Saudi women's twenty-first century story has been much affected by the religious discourse that dominated forty years of governing girls' education, curriculum, self-image, role, and position in society, indoctrinating women's inferiority to men and their only purpose of existence as a man's appendix, as N. Barazangi (2004, p. 54–58) puts it. Also impacting women's status were strict interpretations of various Qur'ān verses limiting women's movement, interaction, work, and education, justified as protecting women and society from gender mixing and social decay.

State Regulation of Women's Lives. To achieve this, Saudi Arabia adopted strict regulations that affected education, economic and political participation, public appearance, and legal status. Women were limited to traditional disciplines in education and were averted from some others, such as engineering and archaeology. Other regulations limited their work opportunities within strict boundaries in compliance with the state's guidelines that prevent gender mixing in the workplace. Publicly, women were barred from any political post and were prevented from being in control of their own movement by prohibiting them from driving cars or traveling without the consent of their guardians, even if these were their own sons. Also although the Basic Law gives women a legal capacity equal to that of men, it has mostly exceptional clauses that lead to undermining women's equity or freedom (for details see Al-Jarbou' and al-Muhaysin, 2010, pp. 51–59). Despite all of the aforementioned, women's response was unexpected. They overwhelmed the education system and shortly came to outnumber male students in schools and universities, even though some disciplines remain denied to them. Some progress in opening new disciplines, such as law, engineering, (interior architecture, not pure engineering), and computer and information technology, has occurred in recent years.

The paradox is that, prior to modernization in the 1950s, women in Saudi Arabia were active in all turns of daily life inside and outside the home, more so in the rural areas than the urbanized cities, bearing in mind that class and racial relations determine some classes for certain professions and exclude some from others. Some jobs were known to be traditional and date back to time unknown. Women worked as farmers, weavers, nurses, wet nurses, midwives, sellers, healers, herders, painters, business women, and more. They were also teachers, poets, and, in some instances, even warriors. Although this is not an exhaustive account, the list gradually decreased as we move into modern times and urbanization. In other words, women lost much of their initiative and economic participation in these traditional jobs to modern jobs of teaching in schools and healing in hospitals. After the seizure of the Grand Mosque by armed militants in 1979, the hand of the religious establishment was strengthened in the public arena. Constraints were subsequently imposed on women, pulling them away from the public sphere. The resulting limitations on education, work, and movement were reflected in women's economic participation confining them to jobs that conform to rules of segregation. This has resulted in turning Saudi women into the least economically productive persons in the world, with only 10.5 percent economic participation, not by their own choice, but by state and religious establishment unconscious design.

The Advent of Reform. Under internal and international pressure after the second Gulf War (1990–1991), some reforms started to take shape in the form of the promulgation of the Basic Law, the formation of the Shūrā Council, the declaration of a Succession Law, and the Provinces Law. However, none of this was meant to ameliorate women's status. It was not until the new millennium and the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack on the United States involving fifteen Saudi men, followed on

13 May 2003 by the shocking attack inside Riyadh, the Saudi capital, that the issue of women's status was raised to the "A" list of debate and reform.

Although none of the relevant organizations were civil society institutions, the debate front that was established through many platforms, such as the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, resulted in identifying female activism in the country that could belong to roughly three categories:

1. The traditional position that considers "feminism" and "emancipation" to be bad words and actions. This trend follows the official line that denies anything wrong with women's status. The belief that any change in women's status should be led by the state only or the traditional educational institutions.
2. The "enlightened" position that began in the 1930s with pioneering male activists who called for women's right to education, such as Muhammad Hassan Awwad in 1926, Muhammad Said Khoja in 1932, Ahmad al-Sibai in 1935, all from Makkah; 'Abdullah al-Qassemi in Qassem in 1946; Abdel-Kareem al-Juhaiman in 1955 in Dhahran; and 'Abdallah Abdeljabbar in Makkah/Jeddah (al-Qash'ani). Following this voice were women who were educated early in the twentieth century and studied abroad or in private girls schools or private home schooling. Many of them came back with a new vision of women's rights and individually held positions outside the country in international organizations or universities, such as Dr. Thoraya Obaid, UN Under Secretary and Executive Director for the United Nations Population Fund (UNPDF) between 2000 and 2011, or Dr. Thoraya al Turki, anthropology professor at the American University of Cairo. Other women made a collective move that reached its peak on November 6, 1990, when forty-seven women took to their cars and drove in Riyadh, challenging the ban on driving. The movement marked the beginning of Saudi women's public activism and signaled the embarkment of Saudi feminism. The debate that took place in society after this incident was as remarkable as it was vicious. Those women were sacked from their jobs, banned from traveling, detained on the podiums of mosques, and, nationally, a *fatwa* was issued to prohibit women from driving cars. In spite of that, the demonstration succeeded in attracting attention to the status of Saudi women, both nationally and internationally. Since then, many active nonofficial women's groups have emerged to form pressure groups for reform, such as the Sunday Women's Group (1994–) in Riyadh. More groups were set up after 9/11, such as the Family Safety Program, a civil society initiative that was adopted by King 'Abdullah and became a national program in 2005 to counter domestic violence against women and children. These campaigns and groups also include the national Saudi Women Writers Group (2006–), the Society for Defending Saudi Women's Rights (2007–) in Dammam, The Divorce Initiative (2008) in Khobar, the national Business Women Demand the Abolition of a Legal Guardian to Start a Business *Wakil* (2009) campaign, the national No to Minor Marriage campaign, the Women 2 Drive (2011) campaign, and so on.
3. The third voice is the revival Islamism that follows, on the one hand, a radical line that believes in women's rights through *Shari'ah*, and, on the other, believes in women's right to reinterpret their position in Islam, challenging the religious establishment, which could be coined as Islamic feminism.

Despite the absence of unions and civil society platforms, which makes it hard on women to organize fully and be of real effect, they were able to break the silence, voice their demands, and sometimes even mobilize beyond the restricted lines to a relatively large extent. In addition to the preceding examples, women used writing, forming pressure groups, campaigning through journalism, new social media, cyber media, writing petitions, and networking.

This activism came to fruition on September 25, 2011, when King 'Abdullah granted women

their full political rights in the only two quasi-democratic institutions, the Shūrā Council and the Municipal Councils. They are to be part of these bodies similar to men, as appointees for the Shūrā Council and as appointees, voters, and candidates for the Municipal Councils in the 2013 and 2015 elections. This development was owed in part to the vital transformation in the Arab world wrought by the Arab Spring that began in December 2010. On January 13, 2013, thirty women were appointed to the Shūrā Council, increasing their number to twenty percent of the Council's membership, the minimum percentage required from now on, which is the result of women's demands. To the surprise of many, there was limited segregation and women shared the hall with men without barriers.

In the face of the limited opportunities given to Saudi women in private and public life, there are very significant examples of women who made it to the top in many areas of specializations. Pioneering women were able to lead their fields after continuing their education abroad, while others were able to break through by challenging the system internally through a constant struggle, or merely with social and economic class support that enabled them to excel as well. Another sort of support that is essential in the Saudi context is familial support, mainly by the male members of a woman's family.

Today, there are many reference books dedicated to collecting biographies of Saudi women, including *Asbar, Mujān al-nisaa' al-ayat* (Dictionary of Saudi Women, 1997), *m asbar li al-'atibba' wa al-tubbāt al-aseren* (Asbar Dictionary of Saudi male and female medical doctors), and *Mujān nisaa' min al-mamlakah al-'arabiyah al-Saudiyyah* (Dictionary of Women from Saudi Arabia, 2006). Some of these books are inspired by pride in Saudi women's achievements and some by public relations program. Regardless, the achievement of any Saudi

woman should be counted as double or triple in size or weight compared to that of her male counterpart to account for the immense gender gap.

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HATOON AL-FASSI

SCHOLARLY APPROACHES AND THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS (THEORETICAL OVERVIEW).

It would be difficult to imagine constructing a volume of this type without giving consideration to the core scholarly issues and approaches used in analyzing questions and conducting research related to women and gender in Islam. The goal of addressing *Scholarly Approaches and Theoretical Constructs* as its own theme was to bring attention to the ways in which "women," "gender," and "women's rights," particularly as related to "Islam," are conceived and defined, as well as to analyze the broader meaning of the conceptualization process, particularly its impact on contemporary events. The articles within this theme give attention to how gender roles have been defined in different Islamic contexts and time periods and according to what criteria, how and why women's status has changed over time and space, and definitions of what feminism and women's rights are, and whether and how they are applied and reinterpreted in different Islamic contexts. It has also been important to resist oversimplification of these topics by asserting a monolithic identity to "women," "gender," "women's rights," and even "Muslim women" by recalling the variety of historical, geographical, and cultural experiences contained within each category.

Feminism has been split into three separate articles, so as to focus on the major components of and developments in each. The article on Sources examines the awakening of awareness of "women's issues," looking at the relationship between modernization and development of the nation and women's status and roles, with particular focus on the rise of women's organizations and writings about the status of women in Egypt and Turkey in the late nineteenth century, as well as the impetus for a more "Islamic" version of feminism that emerged in the 1970s. The article addressing Concepts and Debates addresses questions related to "women's rights"—who has defined them since the nineteenth century, in particular, what this phrase means and to whom, and how to move the quest for achieving these rights forward. Finally, given the developments of the past few decades, the nature of Islamic feminism deserved an article of its own, as Islamists and Muslim women have struggled to decide not only how best to define these rights, but also how to structure the quest for these rights within the context of their faith, including questions related to who has the right to define what rights are and how to remain authentic to faith and scripture while seeking fulfillment of these rights. These debates are particularly critical today as new governments and state structures are being formed in response to the Arab Spring and questions about authenticity and legitimacy, often defined by the status and role of women as the culture bearers, are resurfacing.

Similarly, gender construction was broken out into three different time periods—early Islam, historical, and contemporary—as a means of looking for both continuity and change. Understanding how gender is considered and constructed allows for recognition of the human role at play, even where divine texts are under consideration. Gender studies as specific scholarly endeavors were given their own articles, examining