

Dueling for *Da'wa*: State vs. Society on the Saudi Internet

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This article examines Saudi Arabia's introduction of the Internet, and the manner in which the Kingdom has sought to balance the communications, business, and economic advantages of the Information Revolution with the country's conservative form of Islam. The article also examines the use of the Internet by the Saudi opposition abroad and the government's efforts to filter these sites and other sites the government deems objectionable. Thus the government seeks to use the Internet for modernization and business uses, but to prevent globalization from affecting the traditional mores of the Kingdom. Despite efforts at centralization and control, the nature of the Internet has meant that control is not absolute.

Since its founding in 1902, the modern Saudi state has struggled to centralize and bring its traditional, tribal, and decentralized society under its cultural, ideological, and religious hegemony. Over the years, various social groups have challenged the state's centralizing policies. For example, The military-tribal group known as the *Ikhwan* had to be confronted and was suppressed in 1930, and a radical Islamic trend raised its head in the late 1970s and mid-1990s. Both tried to confront the Saudi Royal Family's monopoly on government and Islam. The Al Sa'ud have been largely successful in this centralizing process. Yet, in the past few years, a new challenge has arisen in the form of the Internet, and it is a decentralizing juggernaut. The Saudis, however, seem well-prepared for this latest test.

On the face of it, the Internet offers wondrous possibilities for business, education, culture, and the general increase of the flow of information across boundaries. But benefiting from the Internet seems to require the openness of society. For the *New York Times*' Tom Friedman, author of the best-selling *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*, those countries that are not open enough to allow the free flow of information will be left behind, in a process that he calls "creative destruction." Friedman is a globalization guru, and the book is not without its critics, but few argue with his contention that societies that buck the globalization trend will

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be unable to participate in the economic benefits of this mega-force. Friedman admits, however, that globalization and the Internet are also “producing a powerful backlash from those brutalized or left behind by the system.”¹

Moreover, the Internet, according to Friedman, is homogenizing, and this means, to a large degree, Americanizing. Such cultural domination is opposed by many societies, who fear that their own culture and its values will be swallowed up by the American colossus. Finally, the Internet can be challenging to the policy of governments as they try to control the free flow of information they oppose. The 1997 Nobel Prize for Peace was granted to Jody Williams, an American woman who has campaigned to ban landmines. The Big Five powers opposed the treaty to ban landmines, but she persisted in her fight. Her secret weapon, she was asked? “E-mail.”²

The Internet, therefore, is both a blessing and a curse. It is natural to want to reap the touted benefits of a globalized world, but if a society is not enamored of a system seemingly run under an American hegemony, or if a government has political, social, or religious objections to the free flow of information, then globalization and its vehicle, the Internet, pose serious problems.³

SAUDI ARABIA AND THE INTERNET: THE DEBATE

It is a truism that Saudi Arabia is a very conservative society. Unlike any other state in the region, its founding *raison d'être* is Islam. Its founders sought to project an image of selfless devotion to the establishment of a purely Islamic state in the land of Islam's birth, the land of Mecca and Medina. Saudi Arabia considers Islam to be its constitution and to be run entirely according to Islamic law, the *shari'a*, as determined by the men of religion, the '*ulama*'. At the same time, the Kingdom considers itself to be a modern country, indeed, a country that has achieved an ideal balance between the modern and the traditional.⁴

King Fahd bin 'Abd al-'Aziz has been seriously ill since late 1995, leaving his half-brother Crown Prince 'Abdallah as king in all but name. 'Abdallah has surprised many by liberalizing policies in a few noteworthy areas, notably the slow introduction of foreign, non-Muslim tourism, initiating a debate on the status of women, releasing Islamic dissidents, and introducing the Internet into Saudi Arabia.⁵

In mid-1997 the Saudi government signalled that it was considering the introduction of the Internet for public use; previously this new medium had been lim-

1. Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999), pp. 8.

2. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, pp. 7-9, 12-13.

3. It should be noted that even in the US and other Western countries, the issue of a totally free Internet is seriously debated; efforts at censorship abound, with the idea of protecting perceived American values. Still, these are private initiatives, not government ones.

4. See, for instance, “Saudi Arabia: Modern Vision and Traditional Values,” special advertising supplement to the *Washington Post*, June 20, 1994.

5. See Joshua Teitelbaum, “Saudi Arabia,” in *Middle East Contemporary Survey (MECS)*, 1998 (Boulder: Westview, 2001), pp. 523-524.

ited to those with special accounts at universities. The government wished to gauge opinion and perhaps float a trial balloon. A debate in the press followed. Saudis were understandably cautious about the introduction of the Internet. For those opposed, it was a bald-faced attempt at Westernization. "Since you have agreed to adopt this civilization's instruments, including its factories, its weapons, and its computers, then you are forced to adopt its ideas and values," opined a columnist in *Al-Yawm*.⁶ 'Abdallah bin 'Abd al-Muhsin al-Turki, then Minister of Religious Trusts and Guidance, a thinker who wrote often on what may be called the "Saudi view" of Islam, penned a paper on globalization, of which the Internet was a cardinal component. He said that globalization proponents sought to promote Western democracy, without taking into consideration the religious distinctiveness of other societies. The Islamic system of consultation (*shura*), he argued, did not rely on a numerical majority, but on the consensus of well-chosen individuals who feared God and thus would arrive at the proper decision. In Islamic consultation, pure reason prevailed over a tyranny of numbers.⁷

On the other hand, some writers valiantly defended the Internet as one of the most important advances in the history of communications. Even Israel did not lose an opportunity to exploit it, wrote Umayya al-Khamis in *al-Jazira*: "For how long are we going to remain isolated from a language the entire world is using? The nature of the age no longer accommodates custodianship of the minds of people...."⁸

In early March 1997, the Council of Ministers charged the King 'Abd al-'Aziz City for Science and Technology (KACST- *Madinat al-Malik 'Abd al-'Aziz lil-'Ulum wal-Taqniyya*) with setting up a unit for Internet affairs, the Internet Services Unit (ISU-*Wihdat Khidmat al-Internet*).⁹ All Internet traffic in Saudi Arabia would go through this one and solitary node.

The inaugural meeting of those interested in qualifying as Internet service providers (ISPs) was held in May. The KACST, said Badr al-Badr, the head of the KACST Internet team, would provide the basic service, which would then be subcontracted to ISPs; some 227 had applied to provide service. The subcontractors had to abide by the rules set by the KACST regarding the level of service to their customers. Most importantly, they were forbidden to allow pornography and gambling, and from carrying out any activities that violated the "social, cultural, political, media, economic, and religious values of Saudi Arabia."¹⁰ The Saudis were preparing to censor the Internet. According to the opposition Committee Against Corruption in Saudi Arabia (CACSA), the government had contracted with a British company, JBB Consultancy Services, to both filter out objectionable web sites and monitor access of all sites.¹¹

Salih bin 'Abd al-Rahman al-'Adl, chairman of the City, said that Saudi Arabia

6. *Al-Yawm* (Dammam), August 23, 1998.

7. *Al-Jazira* (Riyadh), July 10, 1998.

8. *Al-Jazira*, January 22, 1997.

9. *Al-Jazira*, May 6, 1997, refers to the March decision.

10. *Al-Jazira*, May 6, 1997.

11. CACSA web site (www.saudhouse.com), April 24, 1997. This site is now defunct.

would avoid the mistakes made by other countries, which moved too quickly; the Kingdom, he emphasized, would make a study of the negative aspects of the Internet before making it widely available.¹²

He also gave more details on the Kingdom's proposal to filter access:

A standing committee has been formed...to protect society from material on the Internet that violates Islam or encroaches on our traditions and culture. This committee will determine which sites are immoral, such as pornographic sites and others, and will bar subscribers from entering such sites. There are many bad things on the Internet. That is why we have created a mechanism to prevent such things from reaching our society so that a home subscriber to this service can be reassured.¹³

Al-'Adl stressed in conclusion: "We first want to make sure we eliminate all negative aspects of the Internet." But Saudi officials would soon discover that reality was stronger than their technology.

By May 1998, KACST officials were announcing that experimental operations would begin in October, with public access beginning in December. Officials also published additional conditions by which ISPs would have to abide, including refraining from connecting to the Internet by any means other than through KACST, which had a proxy filtering out "undesirable" sites. Officials also made public some guidelines for Internet usage:

Refraining from the use of the network for illegitimate purposes such as, for example, pornography and gambling. Moreover, refraining from carrying out any activities violating the social, cultural, political, media, economic, and religious values of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.... Refraining from using the network in a way that causes annoyance, threats, or spreading rumors against any person or party whatsoever. Refraining from or receiving coded information....¹⁴

Public Internet access began in the Kingdom in late January 1999.¹⁵

HEGEMONIZING THE HARAMAYN: THE BATTLE FOR BANDWIDTH

The Internet, by its very nature, is a decentralized and a decentralizing medium. For the Saudi government, the advent of this new space was a matter of concern, for it challenged Riyadh's veritable information monopoly, its role as centralizer and as arbiter of Islam. There was a new public arena that it could not control. For years,

12. MSANEWS, May 15, 1997. For one of these ISU studies — on the Internet and pornography — see Mash'al bin 'Abdallah al-Qadi, "*al-Ibahiyya wal-Internet*," ("Licentiousness and the Internet") at www.isu.net.sa/mas3al-pres.rtf.

13. *Al-'Ukaz* (Jidda), February 24, 1998.

14. *Al-Jazira*, May 6, 1998.

15. *Agence France-Presse*, February 1, 1999.

through such institutions as the *haji*, the Muslim World League, and their control of major pan-Arab print and broadcast outlets, Saudi officials sought to portray the Kingdom as possessing the purest, most unadulterated form of Islam.

By monopolizing information, the Al Sa'ud sought not only to neutralize political dissent, but also to take the wind out of the sails of those who would oppose their control of Islam's holiest places, the *Haramayn*.

THE SAUDI OPPOSITION ON THE NET

But society had the jump on the lumbering state when it came to using the Internet. The first to enter this new arena in 1994 was the Saudi opposition, in the form of the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR), which sent e-mail and ran a sophisticated website (www.cdldr.net). Following a split in the organization in 1996, the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA) was set up (www.miraserve.com, www.islah.org) by Sa'd al-Faqih, a Saudi surgeon living in exile in London.¹⁶ On his MIRA site, Faqih offers political statements, news coverage, and analysis. The tone is Islamist and anti-government, challenging the Saudi pretension to speak in the name of an authentic Islam. He offers audio commentary, a bulletin board, and subscription to his newsletter, *al-Islah*, via E-mail. Faqih also offers technical advice on how to access his site while avoiding Saudi censorship of the Internet. Surfers are invited to try different ports, by pointing their browsers at www.islah.org:104, for example, and are also pointed to the anonymizing browser, Safeweb.¹⁷ There are several other Sunni opposition websites, most connected to al-Faqih and the CDLR.¹⁸

In order to expose Saudi corruption and embarrass the regime, in mid-2000 one opposition activist began distributing an e-mail list (via egroups.com) with images of authentic-looking secret internal documents of the Saudi government. Some were from Saudi family members of the highest rank, such as Sultan bin 'Abd al-'Aziz, Minister of Defense, and the Crown Prince, 'Abdallah. The document from Sultan orders the transfer of public land in Mecca to himself at a "symbolic cost." Another document, signed by the Director of Investigations, Salih Taha Khasayfan, is an invitation to a meeting of heads of various security agencies. Also distributed were in-

16. On these groups, see Teitelbaum, *Holier Than Thou*, pp. 49-71, and Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

17. www.safeweb.com. According to Debby Koren, Director of Internet Technology at RAD Data Communications in Tel Aviv, this method, which uses a non-standard port (the standard port for web browsing is 80), is not very effective, because as soon as Saudi censors catch on they can simply allow only specific ports, while only letting their proxy connect to the worldwide Internet on port 80.

18. See, for example, the site devoted to the leaders of the Sunni opposition, Shaykhs Safar bin 'Abd al-Rahman al-Hawali and Salman bin Fahd al-'Awda at www.salman-safar.org; see also the following: www.almasrah.net, www.saudireport.com, www.boynaif.co.uk, www.arabiaview.org, www.osamah.co.uk, and the site devoted to the jailed Saudi cleric, Shaykh Sa'id bin Mubarak Al Zuayr, www.zuair.com. It should be advised that such sites are often quite ephemeral and can appear and disappear at a moment's notice.

structions for following opposition figures and their sympathizers. Ironically, the Crown Prince is signed on a document dealing with ways to upgrade the security of secret documentation.¹⁹ Although most of Saudi Arabia's Shi'i opposition reached an accommodation with the authorities in 1993, not all did, and the Shi'i opposition began to increase its presence on the Internet following the arrests of Shi'i activists believed to have been involved in the November 1996 bombing of an American installation in Dhahran.²⁰ The most comprehensive Shi'i website is the Haramayn Islamic Information Center (*Markaz al-Haramayn lil-I'lam al-Islami*). The name of the site, www.alharmain.org, is instructive. *Haramayn* is Arabic for Islam's two holiest shrines, Mecca and Medina. By appropriating this and like-sounding domain names, the Shi'i opposition sought to take advantage of the new arena of the Internet to strike out at the Saudi hegemony over the *Haramayn*, refusing to let Saudi Arabia appropriate these religious icons, and placing them instead within their own, opposition Shi'i discourse.²¹

This site is registered to an address in Beirut, a center for Iranian-sponsored Shi'i opposition organizations operating in the Gulf. It contains documents and some links to the following Shi'i opposition groups: the Islamic Movement in the Arabian Peninsula (*al-Haraka al-Islamiyya fi al-Jazira al-'Arabiyya*); The Coalition of Hijazi 'Ulama (*Tajammu' 'Ulama' al-Hijaz*); The Hijazi Party of God (*Hizb Allah al-Hijaz*); and the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in the Arabian Peninsula (*Lajnat al-Difa' 'an Huquq al-Insan fi al-Jazira al-'Arabiyya*).²²

Non-government political activity on the Net is not limited to the opposition. Prince Khalid bin Sultan, former commander of the Saudi forces during the Gulf War and owner of the prominent *al-Hayat* newspaper, has his own website at www.moqatil.com. The site is designed, it seems, to promote Khalid's ambitions.

19. Documents apparently no longer available online. This list also distributed directions for obtaining proxy-avoidance software.

20. On the bombing and the arrest of suspects, see Teitelbaum, *Holier Than Thou*, pp. 83-98; Joshua Teitelbaum, "Saudi Arabia," *MECS 1996* (Boulder: Westview, 1998), pp. 582-585; Teitelbaum, "Saudi Arabia," *MECS 1997* (Boulder: Westview, 2000), pp. 609-613; Teitelbaum, "Saudi Arabia," *MECS 1998* (Boulder: Westview, 2001), pp. 524-525.

21. The Al Sa'ud have never enjoyed automatic domestic or world support for their version of Islam nor for their control of the *Haramayn*. Both foreign and domestic Sunnis and Shi'is had often opposed Saudi control. But for the Saudis, who had occupied Mecca only since 1924, control of Islam's holiest places was not by dint of possession, but by right. In 1986 King Fahd had emphasized this by arrogating to himself the title *Khadim al-Haramayn al-Sharifayn* (Servant of the two holy shrines, i.e., Mecca and Medina). Previously, the title had been in use primarily by the Ottoman Caliphs. For more on the use of the title in Islamic history see, Bernard Lewis, "Khadim al-Haramayn," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new edition, volume 4, 1977, pp. 899-900.

22. The latter has its own website at www.cdrap.net (which in turn is linked to a Beirut-based site that attacks the Wahhabiyya movement — www.alwahabiya.org). Links are also ecumenically included to the Sunni movements, MIRA and CDLR.

THE GOVERNMENT ON THE NET

The regime had no intention of abandoning the Internet arena to its Islamist opponents, just as it had not abandoned the arena of satellite and print media. It joined the domain battle over representing the *Haramayn* by establishing an Internet presence of its own. This has included many sites, including the *Al-Haramayn* Good Deeds Foundation (*Mu'assasat al-Haramayn al-Khayriyya*).²³ Central to the government's legitimacy is the perception that it represents the true Islamic path. It therefore set up al-Qimam (www.alqimam.com) in 1997, which published government announcements, responses, and interviews with officials, and opening up a web site for the Ministry of Higher Education (www.mohe.gov.sa).²⁴

Since King Fahd was the Guardian of the Two Holy Shrines, what better way to emphasize this than to broadcast prayers from Mecca and Medina over the Internet? To this end, KACST announced in May 1998 that it was putting up the "Islamic Radio Server" on their website. Saudi Arabia's Channel 1 announced that in April it would begin broadcasting to the US and Canada. The contract was signed by Prince Faysal bin Fahd, then head of the Saudi Youth Organization, who stated that the purpose was to "enable Saudi and other Muslims in these countries to receive Saudi religious and cultural programs." In early January 1999 KACST announced that this would be carried on its website.²⁵

The Saudi government has always perceived itself as having a proprietary hold on its version of Islam, which is called Wahhabism by outsiders. Its official *'ulama* are expected to follow it, and provide legitimacy for the regime. This is also part and parcel of the regime's historical efforts at state-building centralization in a predominantly tribal and decentralized polity. To a great extent, its confrontation with opposition preachers has been over who determines what the correct form of Islam is, and who has the right to preach Islam in the country.²⁶ This preaching is known as *da'wa*. At a June 1999 seminar on *da'wa* in the reign of the founder of the Kingdom, 'Abd al-'Aziz Al Sa'ud, Interior Minister Prince Nayif bin 'Abd al-'Aziz addressed the preachers gathered. He stressed the importance of a unified message coming from preachers, and reminded them that "this is a state for *da'wa* and not a state that has been established merely for an earthly matter." He expressed his hope that the preachers would act as security men to protect Islam, and concluded with an observation that the Internet, while containing much negative matter, could be a useful tool in informing the world about Islam in Saudi Arabia.²⁷

Symbolically, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Da'wa and Guidance has arrogated to itself the most important domain name in Muslim Saudi Arabia: islam.org.sa. Among the many items to be found at the site was "A Work Plan for Qualifying Islamic Propagators," presented to the 6th Conference of Ministers of En-

23. www.alharamain.org.

24. *Al-Riyadh*, September 10, 1997.

25. MSANEWS, May 25, 1998; AFP, March 30, 1998; MSANEWS, January 5, 1999.

26. See Teitelbaum, *Holier Than Thou*, pp. 25-47.

27. Nayif, *Al-Yawm*, June 7, 1999.

dowments and Islamic Affairs, held in Jakarta in November 1997. The Islamic Studies and Research Center of the Ministry, which could be accessed from the site, proclaimed its mission as “manifesting and defending the correct Islamic beliefs, and clarifying the Islamic point of view on the different contemporary intellectual issues.” It further set for itself the goal of “keeping a vigil watch on whatever is published...regarding Islam and Muslims.” The Ministry also operates the website of the Cooperative Office of Call and Guidance (*al-Maktab al-Ta‘awuni lil-Da‘wa wal-Irshad*) with offices in Jeddah. Its declared aim is to missionize in the name of Islam.²⁸ The obvious purpose of such websites is to present the Saudi version of Islam to the world.

The former top religious official in the Kingdom, Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin ‘Abdallah Bin Baz, had been famous for his *fatawa* (religious edicts) supporting the government. When he died in 1999, the government opened a website in his name — www.binbaz.org.sa — where one could learn about his life and read his decisions on supporting the Saudi Family and its devotion to Islam. The site is run by his son, Shaykh Ahmad Bin Baz himself was not averse to using the Internet to advise people and render them religious decisions.²⁹

This was what was needed to be done, according to the Saudis, to harness the Internet in the service of Saudi Islam. But this was only one edge of the Internet’s two-edged sword.

DAMMING INFORMATION: HOW SAUDI ARABIA MONITORS AND CONTROLS INTERNET ACCESS

While realizing the importance of the Internet for modernization and the economy, the Saudi government is concerned about Saudi citizens reaching sites that include pornography or that are opposed to the regime. It wishes to protect its monopoly on information, and many citizens expect the regime to protect them from untoward influences. The Saudis have not divulged details of how they block “undesirable” sites, but we do have a general idea.

The first block is self-censorship. Saudis are unlikely to access sites, particularly political and pornographic ones, that will bring them to the attention of the authorities. The ISU admits that it keeps proxy access logs, but states that they are confidential and “may be accessed for the purpose of stopping excessive network abuse.”³⁰ The Saudi Internet regulations (see Appendix) stipulate: “Keep a manual and electronic register with comprehensive information on end-users, their addresses, telephone numbers, purpose of use, and private internet access accounts, and provide the authorities with a copy thereof, if necessary.”

The next filter is the local Internet Service Provider (ISP), which can lose its

28. www.islamicupport.net/COCG.

29. Nasir bin Musfir al-Zahrani, *Imam al-‘Asr: Samahat al-Shaykh al-Imam al-‘Alama ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Baz, 1330-1460H* (Imam of the Age: his Eminence Shaykh Imam ‘Alama ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Baz, 1330-1460 H) (Mecca: *Mu’assasat al-Juraysi lil-Tawzi‘ wal-I‘lan*, 1999), pp. 50-51.

30. www.isu.net.sa/faqs.html.

license if it allows access to forbidden sites. ISPs are not allowed to have a direct connection to the Internet, and all traffic must go through the main proxy server (proxy.isu.net.sa) at the ISU of the KACST in Riyadh.

It is at the ISU where the real work of blocking and filtering gets done. In all likelihood, the Saudis are using web-filtering technology like that of the US firm Websense (www.websense.com), which is designed primarily for companies to monitor the Internet use of their employees. It counts among its customers American Express, General Motors, and IBM. The program works by comparing user access requests to a master database of over 1.5 million sites. New sites are added daily. Aside from the expected political and pornographic sites, the database includes sites that provide proxy avoidance systems, which someone might want to use in order to avoid the ISU proxy. Websense also allows the administrator to restrict access to all sites except those explicitly specified. This is sometimes called a “yes list” or “white list” feature.³¹ If this is indeed the type of system being implemented by the Saudis, then this “would be the world’s most restrictive regime of web-site filtering” according to Human Rights Watch.³²

Users who attempt to access banned sites are greeted with a bilingual Arabic-English message: “Access to requested URL is not allowed. Please fill out form below if you believe requested page should not be blocked. Please add other sites you feel should be blocked.” Such language, to say the least, is not conducive to the kind of research and exploration to which the Internet naturally lends itself. The Saudi surfer would certainly be cautious lest he ever bring up such a message. Users are invited to suggest sites that should be blocked, and those that should be unblocked.³³ In a July-September 1999 ISU survey on site blocking, 45% reported that blocking was too extensive, 41% said it was reasonable, and 14% said it was not enough.³⁴

Despite the millions invested in filtering and blocking, the Saudis are aware that they cannot block everything. “Either you let it go altogether,” says Fahd al-Huwaymani, who heads the ISU, “or you try to limit it, and we hope to at least protect the innocents.”³⁵

KACST officials report that they receive about 500 daily requests to ban sites, and 100 applications to open them. In March 2001, there were approximately 200,000 banned sites, with an average of 250 banned daily. In late April, the ISU announced

31. See how Websense works at www.websense.com. According to one report, the government is actually using Websense, caching all approved web pages in a 500-gigabyte storage system, but this cannot be independently verified (see *The Guardian*, May 11, 2000). According to another report, filtering is carried out by Saudis and other employees from Finland (see www.bbc.co.uk, May 10, 2000).

32. *Gulf Business*, December 1998; Human Rights Watch Report on the Internet in the Middle East and North Africa, June 1999, section on Saudi Arabia, online at www.hrw.org/advocacy/Internet/mena/saudi.htm.

33. *New York Times*, March 18, 1999. See the forms for suggesting to block or unblock sites at www.isu.net.sa/webcontrol.html.

34. www.isu.net.sa/survey.html.

35. *New York Times*, March 18, 1999.

that it intended to institute a “new campaign” to ban another 200,000 sites.³⁶ Writing in the Saudi English-language daily *Arab News*, ‘Abdul Wahab Bashir stated that the campaign “has been viewed as pointless by many who point out that blocked sites can easily be accessed through other means that circumvent the ISU proxy and which leave virtually no traces. Instead, more effective educational measures should be used so that people become aware of both the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet and learn to act responsibly when using it.”³⁷ Also in April, Saudi Arabia’s General Mufti, Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin ‘Abdallah Al Shaykh, called for a boycott of Yahoo! because of the pornographic content available on that site. It was not known how many Saudis heeded his call.³⁸

Access to the Internet, for many Saudis, is also blocked by a poor infrastructure and a high pricing structure. ISPs are limited in the number of modems they are allowed to have; 130 in the first six months of operation.³⁹ The small number of Internet modem ports was also a problem. In June 1999 there were only 5,000 ports, but the Saudi Telecommunications Company (STC) was said to have promised local ISPs to double that soon and then add 5,000 ports each week.⁴⁰ Filtering itself also significantly slowed down the network. The Director General of Ofoq Information Systems and Communications, Sa‘ud Katib, complained bitterly about the effect of filtering on access. Moreover, the costs of filtering were economically unjustified; it added to the already high cost of Internet use, and KACST had exaggerated the need for it, said Katib, and therefore censorship should be up to individuals. “I believe censorship is technically wrong and of no use. It is a waste of money.” Katib’s statements were remarkable, because Ofoq runs the ISP ArabNet (www.arab.net) which is a subsidiary of the Saudi Research and Marketing Group, a publishing house owned by members of the Saudi Royal Family. The ISU denies that filtering caused a significant slowdown in the network.⁴¹

Katib’s views were countered on the same occasion (a seminar on “Internet: Today and Tomorrow in Jeddah) by the director of the ISP Arab Circle (www.arabcircle.net.sa), Rahmatullah Khukhar, who said, “If we do not have censorship, things will turn to chaos. It is moving from order to disorder.”⁴²

Whether by design or not, the high prices charged ISPs for access and the relatively high charges for uses, all mandated by the ISU, create a strong economic disincentive for both ISPs and users. This in itself limited access.⁴³

36. Reuters, April 29, 2001; AFP, April 30, 2001.

37. *Arab News*, June 18, 2001.

38. AFP, April 13, 2001. Yahoo! has come under worldwide attack for such content.

39. *Middle East Economic Digest (MEED)*, October 1, 1999.

40. Reuters, June 30, 1999.

41. *Arab News*, April 30, 2000; *Arab News*, July 17, 2000; www.isu.net.sa/faqs.html.

42. *Arab News*, July 17, 2000.

43. The Mosaic Group, *The Global Diffusion of the Internet Project*, chapter on Saudi Arabia, February 1999, online at mosaic.unomaha.edu/SaudiArabia_1999.pdf; *MEED*, October 1, 1999; Human Rights Watch Report on the Internet in the Middle East and North Africa, June 1999, section on Saudi Arabia, online at www.hrw.org/advocacy/Internet/mena/saudi.htm. For a current list of licensed ISPs, see www.isu.net.sa/licensed/index.html.

Poor service also certainly limits use, as few have the patience necessary to endure busy signals, dropped connections, or slow downloads. But Saudis are not standing by idly when it comes to poor Internet service. A columnist in the daily *Al-Riyad* complained bitterly: "Our joy with the Internet will continue to be lacking as long as the service we receive falls short of the price that we have to subscribe to it... It is impossible to gain access to the network from around 1800 until after 0200." The columnist concluded: "The [authorities] must provide us with an explanation, not only so that we can save our wasted subscription rates, but also to protect our nerves from damage."⁴⁴ In October 1999, it was reported that hundreds of users were to go on strike to protest high rates and slow access.⁴⁵ It is not known how many actually took part.

Dabbagh Information Technology (www.ditnet.co.ae), a Dubai-based IT company, monitored Saudis on its bulletin board who complained vehemently about the level of service and high prices, which in November 1999 were 500 times higher than those in the US. A Saudi ISP source, who refused to be identified, stated that "service is still much below standard, including numerous cutoffs." "The low standard of Internet services in Saudi Arabia... will deny the national economy some important opportunities for growth that e-commerce and other online services can bring," he lamented.⁴⁶

At a meeting of the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry in June 2000, a number of ISPs said that they were considering direct access to the Internet, thereby bypassing the restrictions of KACST. They said that they could filter websites themselves, while KACST should only be concerned with enforcing compliance with regulations.⁴⁷

But Saudis can be as adept as any other advanced computer users in trying to go around the Saudi filtering and proxy system. In September 2000, a reporter at an Internet cafe in the Kingdom witnessed a young Saudi successfully download about a dozen pictures of nude women from a pornographic site, after several days of trying.⁴⁸ The government realizes that it cannot block everything, but it thinks it important to control major sources of pornography and information on the political opposition. A site where this was particularly present were the Yahoo! Clubs site (www.clubs.yahoo.com). The Saudi regime banned access to the clubs in August 2000. Over 60,000 were registered in over 250 Yahoo! Clubs with Saudi content.⁴⁹ But despite the blocking, a check of the clubs demonstrates that many continue to get through. This could be through proxy avoidance systems, dialing outside the Kingdom, or the users might have access to illegal satellite hookups.⁵⁰

44. *Al-Riyad*, September 19, 1999.

45. AFP, October 7, 1999.

46. www.ditnet.co.ae/ITnews/newsnov99/newsnov15.html.

47. *Arab News*, June 14, 2000; *Arab News*, October 15, 2000.

48. Associated Press (AP), September 24, 2000.

49. United Press International (UPI), August 13, 2000.

50. On the use of these illegal links in the Kingdom, see *Financial Times*, June 29, 2000; for the ISU policy, see www.isu.net.sa/faqs.html. Because of low reliability, many foreign companies resort to illegal VSAT (Very Small Aperture Terminal) connections, which allow a user to connect to the internet via a satellite dish. The ISU explicitly states that such connections are not allowed, though it seems that this ban is largely unenforced (see *Satcoms Insider*, November 1999).

Khalil al-Jadan, head of Internet security at the ISU, said that it had been decided to close down access to all the clubs, because it was easy to set up new clubs in a matter of seconds (and he was right). The decision to block was final, he said, “for matters have exceeded acceptable limits on these sites by publishing pornographic materials and opening forums for sexual and political discussions that damage the reputation of the Saudis themselves.”⁵¹

Crusaders for online freedom are hard at work creating anonymizing software, and the Saudi proxy is one of their main targets. To this end, Craig Carey of New Zealand has created an e-mail forum, Saudi Proxies, devoted solely to defeating the proxy.⁵² Two other Internet freedom activists, Stephen Hsu and Jon Chun, founded the anonymizing browser, safeweb.com. In December 2000, www.safeweb.com was blocked by Saudi Arabia’s ISU.⁵³

SURFING SAUDIS: INTERNET USAGE PATTERNS IN THE KINGDOM

Estimates of Internet usage in the Kingdom vary widely. Ajeeb.com, which claims to survey ISPs, gives a mid-March 2001 figure of 570,000 users, with an average of three users per account.⁵⁴ The International Telecommunication Union April 2001 figures are 300,000 users.⁵⁵ Pyramid Research, the IT and telecoms arm of the Economist Intelligence Unit, has determined that the government estimate of 220,000 subscribers is inflated, and puts the number of subscribers at 135,000 in January 2001, with an average of 4.5 users per account subscription. This makes for a penetration rate of about 6.4%.⁵⁶

It is still too early to draw conclusions about the nature of public Internet usage in the Kingdom, but we can make use of some anecdotal evidence. Use by women seems to be a growing and perhaps unexpected phenomenon. In Saudi Arabia, women who are not part of the regular workforce are often forced to stay at home for long periods, since they may not drive themselves. They can only go out if they have permission from or are accompanied by a *mahram*, a male relative such as a brother or their father. This can be a severe limitation on their ability to get out, do errands, and socialize. The Internet here seems to be playing an important and perhaps even liberating role for them. It has opened up an entirely new arena for gathering infor-

51. UPI, August 13, 2000.

52. This was formerly at Yahoo!, but can now be found at www.topica.com/lists/saudiproxies.

53. Fugu.safeweb.com/webpage/press_room/saudi.html. The CIA is planning to use Safeweb technology, a program called Triangle Boy, to mask its own activities on the Internet (*Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2001). In June 2001, Safeweb introduced Triangle Boy to the public, trumpeting it as a “breakthrough technology that allows users everywhere to access the Web free of censorship” (fugu.safeweb.com/sjws/pressroom/Tboy_1.0_release.html). See also *New York Times*, April 26, 2001.

54. eit.ajeeb.com/PrintThis.asp?Article_ID=28132

55. www.itu.int/ti/industryoverview/at_glance/Internet00.pdf

56. Joseph Braude, “Saudi Arabia: Internet Infrastructure Improves but Penetration Remains Low,” Pyramid Research Advisory Service, January 19, 2001.

mation and for socializing, and one does not have to leave the house in order to do this. A reporter at Riyadh's glitzy Faysaliyya mall writes of a scene she witnessed: "A date begins when a woman's look invites a man to discreetly throw a jotted-down cell phone number and e-mail address at her feet. Next step: to stand at opposite corners of the mall, watching each other and whispering through cell phones." Young people are increasingly turning to chat rooms to discuss issues such as why women are forbidden to drive, and why sexes must remain segregated.⁵⁷ One can be anonymous in chat rooms, and this encourages frankness about issues that would be difficult under other circumstances. Many of the various online "clubs" urge their members to talk frankly about love. Indeed, cyber-dating appears to be a growing phenomenon.

Unofficial statistics suggest that two-thirds of Internet users in Saudi Arabia are women. The *Economist* profiled two businesswomen who were using the Net to successfully start new businesses, a travel agency and party planning.⁵⁸ Internet cafés present certain problems for women, who would have to be next to men if there were no separate section for them. In late 2000 the 'Abd al-Latif Group, importers of Toyota and Lexus cars in the Kingdom, announced that it would soon open a center where women could take a break from looking at new car models and surf the Net. The Group stated that 30 percent of their customers were women, and a similar center for men was already quite popular.⁵⁹ However, apparently several Internet terminals are in secret use at women's social clubs and beauty parlors. Operators are careful to avoid the searching eyes of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, a kind of religious police, which had shut down such arrangements in the past.⁶⁰

Most Saudi women, however, access the web from home. Of particular interest in this regard is AwalNet's Laki Anti site (www.lakianti.com) which is for women only. Women run the site, and women who need technical help can be assured of speaking only to female technicians. Topics covered include Islam, social issues, and the family.⁶¹

One of the most popular sites is the Yahoo! Clubs site which, as noted above, was banned by the Saudis. These clubs were overwhelmingly sexual in nature (lewd conversation, pictures, lesbian, homosexual), with the most popular club having over 7,000 members out of a total of nearly 60,000 members in Yahoo! Clubs dealing with Saudi topics. Other clubs deal with political issues, such as the Islamic opposition in the Kingdom, and gave detailed references to opposition websites. One of the most interesting of the clubs was the "Saudi Proxies" club mentioned above, which has declared its goal as "resistance to ISU clubs censoring." It gives detailed technical information on how to go around the ISU proxy and blocking mechanisms. A smaller

57. AP, January 6, 2001.

58. *Economist*, October 1, 1999.

59. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 4, 1999.

60. *Arab News*, January 28, 2001. By May 2001 there were a reported 280 Internet cafés, but many were complaining of severe difficulties due to competition and had shut down (*Saudi Gazette*, December 14, 2000; *Saudi Gazette*, May 10, 2001).

61. AP, August 13, 1999.

number of Saudis congregate at Microsoft's Web Communities.⁶²

Many in Saudi Arabia's minority (about 12%) Shi'i population seem to spend much of their Internet time at Arabic-language Shi'i sites in Iran. Rafed.net, based in Qom, and other such sites, report that 45% of their traffic comes from the Kingdom. These sites are apparently banned, but the owners switch domain names often and users have developed techniques to get around the Saudi censor.⁶³

Given the dampening effect of censorship on free-wheeling usage typical of the Internet, it is perhaps no surprise that applications such as Internet telephony, chatting, and e-mail have become more popular than web-surfing. Apparently, the ISU censors chatting only when connected to a banned website.⁶⁴

It should be noted that political opposition is not the main use of the Saudi Internet. It is entertainment and dating. While the government tries to reflect and enforce the conservative tribal values of the society and restrict this space, it cannot really do so. For years, young men and women have had to meet clandestinely or through parental mediation, but the Internet affords a new, anonymous space for meeting the opposite sex, and the temptation is great.

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS AND FUTURE ISSUES

When the Saudis finally agreed to let in the Internet, they made a cardinal decision to filter out undesirable sites. While a society may choose to defend its norms, the Saudi decision was not without a far-reaching technical price for the level of Internet service. With all traffic going through only one node at KACST, a step necessitated by filtering, traffic slows and is extremely vulnerable to malfunctions, hacking, and "denial of service" attacks. In August 2000 the Kingdom dropped off the World Wide Web for over 17 hours when KACST suffered a crippling network failure. ISPs were given only laconic information on the failure and were not prepared to handle irate customers – and KACST staff were not answering their phones.⁶⁵ In fact, Internet failures of lesser magnitude are announced quite often, and categorized as "slow browsing," "very slow browsing," and "loss of internet connectivity."⁶⁶ In February 2001 the country's Internet access was severely hampered by two days of massive denial of service attacks.⁶⁷ Such problems may discourage Internet use, particularly with the high fees in place, or it may at least limit its effective influence.

The Saudis do want to modernize, lower prices, and improve their infrastructure. Crown Prince 'Abdallah announced in May 2000 that he would be putting \$1.3

62. Communities.msn.com.

63. Joseph Braude, "Iran: A Growing Internet Market Weathers a Temporal Storm," Pyramid Research Advisory Service, May 18, 2001.

64. *MEED*, October 1, 1999.

65. www.itp.net/news/9667707146592.htm.

66. See www.isu.net.sa/newsgroup-cgi/isu.announce?425 for an example of such announcements. See also *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 7, 2000.

67. www.itp.net/news/98134788237161.htm; *Saudi Gazette*, February 5, 2001; *Saudi Gazette*, February 7, 2001; *Arab News*, February 7, 2001.

billion towards introducing computing and the Internet into Saudi schools. The ambitious project, known as “Watani” (my homeland) Schools’ Net Project, would provide basic technological services including E-mail, chat, links to educational sites, as well as the networking of Saudi schools in an intranet, later to be connected to the Internet. The ultimate goal would be a “comprehensive national and information service network that covers all towns and villages of the Kingdom.”⁶⁸ By associating himself with the modern, while maintaining a conservative and Islamic persona, ‘Abdallah was performing the balancing act that many had hoped for.

In January 2000, it was reported that KACST was considering a price cut, and the fees it charges ISPs were actually cut by about 45% in May.⁶⁹ But the real hurdle was lack of reliability. “The problem for companies is dependability,” said Rida Islam, information manager at the Yanbu’ Cement Company. “You don’t know when there will be congestion, you don’t know when there will be a scheduled shut down.”⁷⁰ The May price cut was seen as inadequate by many, particularly since service still had to improve. “It reflects good intentions,” stated ‘Abd al-Qadir Fantukh, general manager of a Saudi ISP, but “connection problems are still there, since all connections have to be made through the City despite the repeated complaints in this matter.”⁷¹

New rate structures were announced on January 1, 2001. However, these targeted only the ISPs with the highest capacity, which were inexplicably prevented from passing on the savings to the consumers.⁷² The motive for this was unclear, but it may have been that the government was interested in filtering out the smaller ISPs, forcing a consolidation of the industry and therefore making it easier to manage access to content.

Was Saudi Arabia still afraid of the Internet challenge, and was it therefore putting up obstacles to its becoming a serious medium in Saudi society? Was it trying to have its cake and eat it too? Its micromanagement, high prices, and poor service were certainly economic disincentives. ISPs found it difficult to make a profit, and individual users were frustrated. Or perhaps the regime was making a financial decision, aimed at forcing ISPs to go beyond being simply e-mail and web providers and become bigger businesses expanding into other areas of information technology? (On the other hand, how could they be expected to expand if their initial revenues were being limited by government policy?) It was difficult to tell, and perhaps the two strategies were not contradictory. In any case, such a policy reflected a definite ambivalence about the social and political cost-to-benefit ratio of wider Internet ac-

68. *Arab News*, February 6, 2000, *Arab News*, April 5, 2000; *Arab News*, July 9, 2000; *MEED*, June 8, 2000; www.watani.org.sa/project/net_servicesE.htm.

69. Reuters, January 16, 2000.

70. www.itp.net/news/96556133834905.htm.

71. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 26, 2000.

72. *Saudi Economic Survey*, January 3, 2001; Joseph Braude, “Saudi Arabia: ISP Crunch Time,” Pyramid Research Advisory Service, January 12, 2001; Joseph Braude, “Saudi Arabia: Internet Infrastructure Improves but Penetration Remains Low,” Pyramid Research Advisory Service, January 19, 2001.

cess in the Kingdom.

Internal ISU documents promise expanded infrastructural development, and there are concrete plans to open another KACST gateway in Jeddah (known as ISU-2), which should improve matters; planned ISDN and ADSL services, scheduled for a soft launch in July 2001, should allow subscribers to have faster connections.⁷³ Users blame filtering as a main culprit in poor service. ArabNet director Katib said that the ISPs could do the filtering “as effectively as KACST.” That would get rid of the bottlenecks and eventually KACST would be eliminated from the system, bringing down costs and improving service. But Fahd Huwaymani, ISU director, said that this would be more expensive and inefficient, since there would be different standards for identifying sensitive material. He also denied that filtering significantly contributed to the slowing down of the system.⁷⁴ According to an ISU report, “Internet Future,” filtering was too complex to be left to ISPs: it was “not possible that every ISP would do it correctly; it involved “many tasks, many technical fixes, [and a] specific software/hardware requirement;” and, the ISU asked, “who is accountable for filtering failures?”⁷⁵

It was apparent from this explanation that when it came to determining what information would enter the Kingdom via the Internet, the state monopoly would remain sacrosanct. This monopoly was codified in regulations issued by the Council of Ministers in February 2001 (see Appendix). In this way the state could – to a great extent – limit society’s access to information, thus holding the centralization fort against a decentralization attack. Here, in essence we have a state that continues to be interested in the centralization of Islam and information, arrayed against a medium – the Internet – which by its very nature is decentralized. This will continue to challenge the regime, which will remain on the horns of this dilemma for the foreseeable future.

Saudi Arabia is struggling with the implications of globalization’s main vehicle, the Internet. It wants to be part of the “new economy,” but it also wants to keep its unique heritage insulated from what it sees will be the untoward effects of the Internet. The Internet is thus both an opportunity and a challenge. Even without the Internet, Saudis are exposed daily to that other vehicle of globalization, satellite television. There too, the Saudis have tried to buy and run the most important stations, but they cannot do this forever. Many Saudis see the Qatari satellite station, al-Jazira, with its controversial and dynamic programming, as a welcome alternative. Each country may wish to set its own Internet policy, but it must also be prepared to pay the price of limiting and monitoring Internet access. Saudi Arabia needs to find a way to balance these competing concerns. Many younger Saudis look to Crown Prince ‘Abdallah with much hope that he will find such a way.

While the Internet offers tools for continuing to centralize and monopolize Islam in the Kingdom, it also creates a more level playing field for the opposition.

73. www.isu.net.sa/future_presentation_final.pdf; www.itp.net./features/99416804315408.htm.

74. *MEED*, April 20, 2001; www.isu.net.sa/faqs.html.

75. www.isu.net.sa/internet_future.pdf.

Filtering and blocking sites can put a damper on some of this, but not all of it. The challenge of using the Internet for Islam and modernization, while trying to limit its cultural impact will continue for many years to come.

Appendix: Saudi Council of Ministers Resolution on the Internet (February 12, 2001)

All Internet users in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia shall refrain from publishing or accessing data containing some of the following:

1. Anything contravening a fundamental principle or legislation, or infringing the sanctity of Islam and its benevolent Shari'ah, or breaching public decency.
2. Anything contrary to the state or its system.
3. Reports or news damaging to the Saudi Arabian armed forces, without the approval of the competent authorities.
4. Publication of official state laws, agreements or statements before they are officially made public, unless approved by the competent authorities.
5. Anything damaging to the dignity of heads of states or heads of credited diplomatic missions in the Kingdom, or harms relations with those countries.
6. Any false information ascribed to state officials or those of private or public domestic institutions and bodies, liable to cause them or their offices harm, or damage their integrity.
7. The propagation of subversive ideas or the disruption of public order or disputes among citizens.
8. Anything liable to promote or incite crime, or advocate violence against others in any shape or form.
9. Any slanderous or libellous material against individuals.

Furthermore, certain trade directives stipulate that all companies, organizations and individuals benefiting from the service shall observe the following:

1. Not to carry out any activity through the internet, such as selling, advertising, or recruitment, except in accordance with the commercial licenses and registers in force.
2. Not to carry out any financial investment activity or offer shares for subscription, except when in possession of the necessary licenses to do so.
3. Not to promote or sell medicines or foodstuff carrying any medicinal claims, or cosmetics, except those registered and approved by the Ministry of Health.
4. Not to advertise or promote or sell substances covered by other international agreements to which the Kingdom is a party, except for those with the necessary licenses.
5. Not to advertise trade fairs or organise trade delegations visits or tourist tours or trade directories except with the necessary licences.

All private and government departments, and individuals, setting up websites or publishing files or pages, shall observe and ensure the following:

1. Respect commercial and information convention.
2. Approval of government authorities for setting up websites or publishing files or pages for or about themselves.
3. Approval of the Ministry of Information for setting up of media-type websites which publish news on regular basis, such as newspapers, magazines and books.
4. Good taste in the design of websites and pages.

5. Effective protection of data on websites and pages.
6. All government and private bodies, and individuals shall take full responsibility for their websites and pages, and the information contained therein.

The Resolution refers to a set of regulatory and technical procedures aimed at ensuring the safety of the constituents of the national network (the internet inside the Kingdom) through effective programming and mechanical means. These include the following:

1. Service providers shall determine internet access eligibility through access accounts, user identification and effective passwords for the use of the access point or subsequent points and linking that through tracing and investigation programmes that record the time spent, addresses accessed or to which or through which access was attempted, and the size and type of files copied, whenever possible or necessary.
2. The use of anti-virus programmes and protection against concealing addresses or printing passwords and files.
3. Endeavour to avoid errors in applications that may provide loopholes that may be exploited for subversive activities or to obtain data not permitted for use for whatever reason.
4. Restriction of the provision of internet services to the end-user through the internet service unit at King Abdulaziz city for sciences and technology.
5. Keep a manual and electronic register with comprehensive information on end-users, their addresses, telephone numbers, purpose of use, and private internet access accounts, and provide the authorities with a copy thereof, if necessary.
6. Not to publish any printed directories containing subscribers' and end-users' names and addresses, without their agreement.

Source: English translation from www.al-bab.com/media/docs/saudi.htm; available in Arabic at www.netsec.org.sa/ar/dwabit.htm.

