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The Saudi Women2Drive Campaign: Just Another Protest in the Arab Spring?

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The Facebook-based Women2Drive campaign, which encourages Saudi women with foreign driver's licenses to post photos and videos of themselves driving, is wrongly – and patronizingly – categorized as just another protest movement in a string of Arab Spring uprisings. To be sure, Saudi women were inspired by the scenes of other Arab Muslim women rallying alongside men for democracy and civil rights. And seeing Middle Easterners publicly speaking out for their rights empowered more mainstream, less politically active women to engage in civil disobedience. Still, launching Women2Drive during the Arab Spring may have been more about pragmatic timing than political awakening: there has been an activist current among Saudi women, focusing on gender inequality, for decades.

The Women2Drive campaign is not the first organized act of civil disobedience in which Saudi women have driven cars. In November 1990, 47 women drove in a parking lot in Riyadh to protest the driving ban. The traffic police took the women into custody, and would not release them until their male guardians signed statements that they would never drive again. The women were suspended from their jobs, some of them for three years; their passports were confiscated; and they were forbidden to speak with the press. Afterwards, the religious establishment issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) that officially banned women from driving. On International Women's Day in 2008, Wajiha Al-Huwaydir, a founder of the Association for the Protection and Defense of Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia, posted a video of herself driving a car. She was forced to apologize and to promise never to drive again.

These two earlier protests, as well as other petition and civil disobedience campaigns, did not attract as much media attention as the Women2Drive

campaign, in which 51 women — only four more than the 1990 protest — participated. Women2Drive was launched at the right time in the right place: towards the end of the Arab Spring, and in a country where there was no significant public protest to overshadow the women’s rights protests. Women2Drive was also well managed on the Internet, making it easy for protesters and the media to follow the movement. Finally, Manal al-Sharif, whose driving video (filmed by al-Huwaydir) hit YouTube in May, was imprisoned for over a week — thus earning her and the movement international media attention.

The Women2Drive campaign elicited a variety of reactions ranging from praise to denigration. Many international commentators applauded the movement and its participants.¹ Saudi men are increasingly voicing their support in opinion columns, petitions and letters to the King.² Still, the movement has detractors in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East region. Many of them are “religious puritans who object to the very idea of women being exposed to strangers outside their homes by driving.”³ Some conservative clerics have started Twitter accounts to warn the religious police to be more vigilant against women drivers. However, more liberal clerics argue that women should be allowed to drive because the Qur’an mentions women driving camels. Many supporters of the ban — including King Abdullah — say that Saudi society is simply not ready for women to gain the right to drive.⁴ And some supporters of the ban are women, like the activist Rawda al-Yousif,⁵ and a cross-section of students, professionals and housewives for whom “driving is a hassle and not appropriate for Saudi Arabia.”⁶

In Saudi Arabia there is no law stating that it is illegal for women to drive; rather, a convoluted pair of laws makes it *de facto* illegal. The Saudi government does not issue driver’s licenses to women — this is why Women2Drive specified that only women with foreign licenses should participate in the protest. This law, on its own, makes it difficult, if not impossible, for Saudi women to drive, but does not make it illegal. A second law stipulates that Saudi citizens are not allowed to drive without a Saudi license. So it is legal for foreign women working in Saudi Arabia to drive, but Saudi women with the same license would be breaking the law. The issue of women driving is ambiguous on paper, and even more so in practice: some Saudi women actually drive regularly. It is universally understood that women can drive in rural areas and within corporate and housing complexes.

Still, the ban remains in force in most places. There seem to be two reasons why some Saudis, religious scholars in particular, staunchly defend it. First, in

¹For example: Maureen Dowd, “Camel’s Nose Under the Wheel,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2011, A27; Mai Yamani, “Are Saudi Women Next?” *Project Syndicate*, June 13, 2011; Isobel Coleman, “Grabbing the Car Keys in the House of Saud,” *Today’s Zaman*, June 28, 2011.

²“Saudi Arabia Debates Right of Women to Drive,” *Middle East Policy Council*, June 2, 2011.

³Neil MacFarquhar, “Saudis Arrest Woman Leading Right-to-Drive Campaign,” *New York Times*, May 23, 2011, A4.

⁴<http://www.susris.com/articles/2008/loi/o8o8o6-walters-interview.html>; Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed, “Women Will Not Drive Cars in Saudi Arabia!” *Asharq Alawsat*, May 28, 2011.

⁵“Grabbing the Car Keys”

⁶Rima Al-Mukhtar, “Not All Saudi Women Seeking to Drive Cars,” *Gulf News*, April 13, 2011.

traditional Arab cultures the locus of virtue for women is modesty, and for men it is honor, which is strongly tied to the modesty of female relatives. Second, lifting the driving ban would erode the Saudi system of male guardianship over women.

The code of feminine modesty is rooted in a social matrix of gender segregation and kinship structure. Both in public and in private, women are required to be modest around men who are not their husbands or *mahram* — the men a woman is forbidden to marry because it would be incest, including the father, brothers and sons. Modesty is, of course, subjective and relative. Modesty implies a mode of both dress and behavior: it may include not only hair and face covering, but also avoiding eye contact and inappropriate topics of discussion — in other words, self-censorship. The prescribed level of modesty also depends on the social and cultural context. What is considered modest varies among different communities. And a woman is required to show more or less modesty depending on whom she is with and where she is. In Saudi Arabia, for example, the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (the religious police, *al-hisba*) detains women whom they find associating with non-*mahram* men in public. Family honor — and therefore male honor — is closely related to feminine virtue, which is called into question if a woman is viewed as immodest.

Promoting self-restraint among Saudi women is not the only tool employed to maintain what is clearly a deeply rooted set of tribal-patriarchal norms. Saudi women are required to get written permission from their male guardian in order to board a plane, have elective surgery, get married, get an education, and work. Every Saudi woman under the age of 45 is required to have an official male guardian, who can be either her father, husband, brother, and in some cases, her adult son. In effect, Saudi women have the status of minors until they are 45 years old. Every decision, big or small, can be made only with the approval of one's guardian. Not only does guardianship bar women from having agency; it results in major human rights abuses, such as denying women the right to education, healthcare, employment, equality before the law, and freedom of movement.⁷

Like the driving ban, Saudi guardianship laws are ambiguous and based on the most restrictive interpretation of a Qur'anic verse.⁸ According to Human Rights Watch, “Even where permission from a male guardian is not mandatory or even stipulated under the government's own guidelines, some officials will ask for it, since the overarching system in place in the kingdom transfers virtually all decision-making power to a woman's guardian.”⁹ Allowing women to drive, even if they were required to have permission from their guardians, would be a first step in undermining guardianship laws. If a woman can drive, she can more easily flout guardianship laws — and she can help other women do the same. Giving women wheels means giving them agency and recognizing their right to be in the public sphere.

⁷ “Perpetual Minors: Human Rights Abuses Stemming from Male Guardianship and Sex Segregation in Saudi Arabia,” Human Rights Watch Report, 2008.

⁸ Sura 4 verse 34 of the Quran states, “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more [strength] than the other, and because they support them from their means.”

⁹ “Perpetual Minors”

In her driving video, Manal al-Sharif enumerates the reasons that it is simply impractical to keep women from driving. For example, one-third of the average working woman's salary goes to her chauffeur, and a woman is not allowed to drive someone to the hospital in case of an emergency. She also describes the embarrassment of begging a colleague or family member for a ride, and of being subjected to the unwanted attentions of male chauffeurs. But the most poignant moment in Manal al-Sharif's video comes when she says, "And they tell you, 'You are a queen. You are a jewel. You are protected.'...[But] when I stand by the roadside, everyone, good and bad, will look at me. The good and the bad humiliate me...I am respectable and I have my dignity." A woman's right to drive is about more than convenience and practicality. It is about human dignity and agency, which Saudi women began fighting for long before the Arab Spring.

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