

WAHHABISM: IT'S IMPOSITION AND PERFORMANCE IN THE CURRENT STATUS OF WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA*

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SUMMARY

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ABSTRACT

The gender discrimination in Saudi Arabia has been the most controversial issue not only among Islamic countries but also worldwide. The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2001 recommended Saudi Arabia to take concrete action to end discrimination against women; however the government has accomplished little to abolish these discriminatory practices and actually played an important part enforcing them. The reasons for the dereliction of the government's duty about ensuring the full development and advancement for women's right in Saudi Arabia would be surmised into several related topics.

Previous to the advent of Islam in Arabian Peninsula, numerous tribes and kingdoms had been inhabited. Among those tribes, the Bedouins represent a major tribe, therefore the cultural and traditionally view of Bedouins have contributed to Saudi Women's position in their society. In addition to this, women's status in Saudi Arabia is closely related to the teaching of the religion Islam without a doubt. Gender inequality is intrinsically associated with the country's supported interpretation of Islam, which is from a literal reading of the Qur'an and Hadith. Lastly, since the rise of modern day Saudi Arabia is firmly connected with Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab whose ideas form the foundation of Wahhabi movement it is more than necessary to observe what Wahhabism contributed to gender inequality in the country.

The Wahhabism is a puritanical movement of Sunni Islam seeks to purify Islam of any innovations or practice that is in discord with the teaching of Muhammad. This ultra conservative doctrine influenced state-funded ulama, or religious scholars, who are generally conservative in consideration of judicial precedent, meaning their official stance refuses to change, particularly when it comes to women's behavior in issuing religious opinions. However, the Wahhabism did not play an important role

to discriminate women's status in the society until three major historical events occurred during 1970s, which were the siege of Mecca and Juhayman al-Utaybi's Riot, establishment of Islamic republic of Iran and Islamism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. After these occurrences, Saudi Arabia has been exceedingly negative on women's issues so that the status of women has suffered a backlash in the Kingdom which is the only country where women even cannot drive.

Even though Wahhabi Islam has been the absolute and decisive ideology from the beginning, when Abd al-Aziz was using it to control his newly conquered land, there is not only a growing appetite of Saudi women who desire to improve their status as the same in society with their male partners for two and half centuries but also a compelling global stream from the rest of the world which constantly asks to eliminate the discrimination against women.

● Key Words : Wahhabism, women, discrimination,
Saudi Arabia, inequality,

INTRODUCTION

The persistence of gender inequality in every aspect of the society has been the most fervent debate issue not only among Islamic countries but also worldwide. The issues of women's right and responsibilities have been evenly controversial among both conservatives and liberalists in Saudi Arabia. However, a majority of Saudi nationals would not consider the inequalities between men and women as discrimination but as balanced. Even though no written legal provisions or official decrees clearly authorize male guardianship and sex segregation, the practices are manifested in every part of the society. The government has accomplished little to abolish these discriminatory practices and actually played an important part enforcing them. However, before the government establish and reforms any laws and policies in this area, the government should help the whole society realize the present situation of gender inequality which is essentially universal throughout the nation.

The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2001 recommended Saudi Arabia to take concrete action to end discrimination against women. According to article 2 from CEDAW, "States Parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women." Saudi government agreed to the provisions of the Convention and vowed to prevent any discriminatory actions against women, whether by an individual or organization. Yet, the government has not taken any solid action to abrogate these practices while only taking an indifferent stance ever since. By doing so, the government decided to ignore international law as well as the Islamic legal tradition that asserts equality between men and women in some way.

The reasons for the dereliction of the government's duty about ensuring

the full development and advancement for women's right in Saudi Arabia would be surmised into several related topics. Previous to the advent of Islam in Arabian Peninsula, numerous tribes and kingdoms had been inhabited. Among those tribes, the Bedouins¹ represent a major tribe, spreading from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf and becoming the forefather of al-Saud clan who had formed the modern day of Saudi Arabia. Since the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established by al-Saud, it is important to review some of the cultural and traditional view of Bedouins that have contributed to Saudi Women's position in their society. Pre-Islamic worldview, especially that of the Bedouins, would be helpful to understand the present day women's right issues in Saudi Arabia.

In addition to this, women's status in Saudi Arabia is closely related to the teaching of the religion Islam without a doubt. Gender inequality is intrinsically associated with the country's supported interpretation of Islam, which is from a literal reading of the Qur'an and Hadith. State-funded *ulama*, or religious scholars, are generally conservative in consideration of judicial precedent, meaning their official stance refuses to change, particularly when it comes to women's behavior in issuing religious opinions. What the Qur'an and Hadith, especially the teaching of Muhammad himself originally, talks about woman's matters has to be studied for thorough understanding of recent practices in the country. In terms of interpretations of the Qur'an, there are some controversial views on women; therefore it is paramount to contemplate the Qur'anic texts verse by verse.

Lastly, since the rise of modern day Saudi Arabia is firmly connected with Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab whose ideas form the foundation of Wahhabi

1. Bedouins traditionally live a nomadic lifestyle and the word 'bedouin' comes from the Arab word 'Bedou' that means "desert dweller." Estimates say nomadic Bedouins constitute about one-tenth of the population of the Middle East.

movement, it is more than necessary to observe what Wahhabism contributed to gender inequality in the country. Basically Wahhabism is a puritanical movement of Sunni Islam which does not support both Shiite and local practices of visiting shrines and revering the *imams* after their death. They seek to purify Islam of any innovations or practice that is in discord with the teaching of Muhammad. This ultra conservative theory has influenced women's status which is still significantly lower than that of men in almost every aspect of the society. Therefore, in this thesis, how this ultra conservative doctrine has been rooted and fortified the major role in sexual discrimination in the history of Saudi Arabia will be discussed, together with its inevitable influences in women's everyday activities in present time.

THE IMPOSITION OF WAHHABISM

However, in Saudi Arabia, rigid application of Sharia, particularly to women's issue, only began in 1979 when the Grand Mosque in Mecca was attacked by religiously oriented critics of the monarchy. Furthermore, the Islamic Republic of Iran was established shortly after, causing the ruling class of Saudi Arabia to panic. Eventually, in attempt to further their grip on power, the ruling class followed an ultraconservative movement called Islamism in the kingdom. In other words, the ruling class started enforcing strict laws of oppression in the name of religion, including women's rights issues. These events, the revolt of Juhaymal, the founding of Iran, and the Islamism movement, were the most crucial occurrences in the modern history of Saudi Arabia and became the pivot chord for degradation of women's status in the Kingdom.

The Siege of Mecca and Juhayman al-Utaybi's Riot

Since the foundation of the third Saudi State in 1902, there had been quite few revolts to the al-Saud ruling party. The first riot was “Ikhwan² revolt” of the late 1920s. The Ikhwan, who had been critical of Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud, because of his openness towards modern technology and interaction with Western culture, was infuriated by the abandonment of jihad for reasons of realpolitik³. However, after several clashes, the Bedouin fighting forces, the Ikhwan, were defeated at the battle of Sbilain in 1929.

After the discovery of immense oil field in the 1930s, Saudi Arabia became inconceivably rich and was thrust into the global limelight. During the 1960s and the 1970s, Saudi Arabia faced the explosive development due to petro dollars and started to enjoy liberal milieu and exposure to the world. The Kingdom strove to strike a balance between conservative traditions and the process of modernization.

Juhayman al-Utaybi was born in the early of mid-1930s in a small village in the western part of the Nejd. He joined the National Guard in 1955 and served for nearly twenty years, and then moved to Medina where he joined Islamism. In 1964, the pan-Islamist King Faisal succeeded to throne and increased the influence of the religious establishment and Islamic organizations in Saudi Arabia. At this time, two different divisions of Islamism were established in the Kingdom. One was political and high-class, known as the “Islamic Awakening” which represented the major group of the Saudi Islamist movement the other was rather pietistic and low-class, known as “rejectionist” or “neo-salafi.” From this time to the 1990s, these two groups of Islamists coexisted in the Kingdom. Juhayman participated in the latter one, the

2. The Ikhwan were Bedouins from major Najdi Tribes such as 'Utayba and Mutayr who had been religiously indoctrinated and trained as military force for use in the territorial expansion of the Saudi state.

3. Thomas Hegghammer and Stephane Lacroix, “Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman Al-'Utaybi Revisited,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 01 (Spring 2007).

rejectionist sect, and emerged in the 1970s as the leader ready to criticize the ulama, the educated class of Muslim legal scholars, which drew the reverence of young members of the sect.

In December 1977, the authorities received reports of Juhayman sect's radical critique towards Saudi regime⁴ and decided to arrest him along with his colleagues. Juhayman fled to the desert and stayed there for almost two years until the seizure of the Great Mosque in Mecca. This uprising was well illustrated in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* under the title of "Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al 'Utaybi Revisited" which reads

On 20 November 1979, the first day of the fifteenth century of the Islamic calendar, a group of approximately 300 rebels led by Juhayman al-'Utaybi stormed and seized control of the great mosque in Mecca, the holiest place in Islam. Their aim was to have al-Qahtani consecrated as the mahdi (Islamic equivalent of the Messiah) between the black stone corner of the Ka'aba (al-rukhn al-aswad) and Ibrahim's station of prayer (al-maqam), as tradition requires. The militants barricaded themselves in the compound, taking thousands of worshippers hostage, while awaiting the approach of a hostile army from the north, as promised by the eschatological tradition. The situation developed into a two-week siege which left a hitherto unknown number of people dead and exposed serious gaps in the Saudi crisis response capability. The timing of the attack was most likely determined by Juhayman's belief in the Sunni tradition of the "renewer of the century" (mujaddid al-qarn), according to which a great

4. In the most political of his letters, entitled "The State, Allegiance and Obedience" (al-imara wa-l-bay'a wa-l-ta'a), Juhayman accused the Saudi regime of "making religion a means to guarantee their worldly interests, putting an end to jihad, paying allegiance to the Christians (America) and bringing over Muslims evil and corruption". He added that in any case, the Al Saud's non-Qurayshi origin (i.e. not descendants from the Prophet Muhammad's tribe) excluded them from the right to Islamic leadership.

scholar will appear at the beginning of each Hijri century. Juhayman may have attempted to blend the “renewer” tradition with the Sunni mahdist tradition and thus concluded that the dawn of the new century was a propitious moment to consecrate al-Qahtani as the mahdi...On 4 December 1979, Saudi authorities regained control of the sanctuary with the assistance of three French special forces officers led by Captain Paul Barril. The rebels were tried and sentenced with lightning speed. At dawn on 9 January 1980, 63 people were executed in eight different cities around the Kingdom. The list of convicts, which had been published two days earlier in the Saudi press, included 41 Saudis, 10 Egyptians, 6 South Yemenis, 3 Kuwaitis, as well as a North Yemeni, an Iraqi and a Sudanese.⁵

This riot ended in total failure, and Juhayman’s organization was completely disassembled in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, the Mecca uprising greatly agitated the regime because the regimen ever expected its adversaries to come from the religious circle. Saudi authorities decided to fortify the religious power and its control over the society so that Saudi regime may prevent such turmoil from happening again.

Juhayman’s revolt had been the subject of a significant numbers of interpretations. First one came from the Saudi officials, saying that this riot had been the outcome of foreign ideological influences, mainly from Egypt⁶ and Syria. However, the most influential foreign ideology on Juhayman sector

5. Hegghammer and Lacroix (2007), 115.

6. When Nasser started imprisoning members of Muslim Brothers, many of them fled to Saudi Arabia and King Faisal was happy to accept opponents of Nasser’s regime. He also ensured they were given top jobs to spread pan-Islam. One of the most notable Egyptians to move to Saudi Arabia was Muhammad Qutb, brother of Syed Qutb. Muhammad Qutb was employed as a lecturer at Jeddah University and would later go on to become one of Osama bin Laden’s teachers. Juhayman also met members of Muslim Brothers during his studies at Medina University. They spoke about Nasser having abandoned the path of God by not strictly ruling by their version of Islam. Hence this had made him an apostate who deserved death. Juhayman was directly inspired by these issues.

did not emanate from Egyptian extremists group but from al-Albani's Ahl al-Hadith school which are apolitical, non-violent school⁷. Therefore, it is fair to assume that these foreign influences were not the primary reason for this revolt which showed clear characteristic of political radicalization.

Secondly, the western academic literature viewed this riot as a modern replay of the 1920s Ikhwan revolt. It is apparent that the memoir of the brave Ikhwan surely influenced Juhayman in one way or another however, the motivation for restoring the first Ikhwan only seems to be a minor reason. Another common interpretation suggests that Juhayman and his colleagues were apocalyptic who had their beliefs in the mahdi, a prophesied redeemer. It is apparent that Juhayman's belief in the *mahdi* was pure and genuine, indicating that this factor could have been a major driving force behind the revolt. However, Nasir al-Huzaymi, one of the adherents to Juhayman, argued that not all of his colleagues believed the messianic aspect of his theory. These men decided to remain in the sect because they were convinced by other factors, such as the need for moral and religious purification. Consequently, one can assume that Juhayman's sect represent not only a messianic aspect but also a political aspect. This is further corroborated by the fact that the movement quickly gathered such strength at this particular point in time.

Last interpretation, advocated by the leftist at the time of revolt, characterized this revolt as a "people's rebellion," whereby Saudi's enslaved working class stood up to Saudi's rich elites. After the riot, the Arab Socialist Labour Party in the Arabian Peninsula declared its support for the revolt. Other leftist parties also took part with Juhayman's revolt, with the purpose of establishing republic and democratic society and government. This antisocial flow was caught by Saudi authorities, which had been a total threat from the poor and

7. Hegghammer and Lacroix (2007), 115.

the disenfranchised.

However, this Juhayman's riot of attacking Grand Mosque in Mecca cannot be regarded simply as a rebellion stemming from disenchantment because of the diverse social, religious and ideological circumstances at the time in Saudi Arabia. Juhayman was deeply influenced by the group known as al-Jama'a al-Sallafiyya al-Muhtasiba (JSM)⁸. Juhayman's riot exposed radical offensive which had been generated from a larger and more moderated organization, JSM, after the process of political and internal debate.

Juhayman al-Utaybi and his colleagues' revolt had been identified as a short-lived event however, there are many signs which could be traced in certain Islamist circle until today. They were identified as "rejectionist Islamism," meanwhile the rest of the Islamist may be identified as "reformist Islamism." Its ideology had been characterized by a withdrawal from society which clearly showed its adherents were mostly the marginalized who avoided state education and employment altogether. It had an impact on a radical Islamist faction of extreme social conservatism, strongly emphasizing ritual matters, and showing skepticism towards the state and institutions. This event brought important social changes in Saudi Arabia as the revolt openly questioned the state's legitimacy, criticizing its policies through rather aggressive ways to change the every aspect of the society which resulted in rigid and conservative application in women's issues in the Kingdom.

8. It was formed by a small group of religious students who for some time had been proselytising in the city's poorer neighbourhoods. Having been influenced by al-Albani, they were driven by a general conviction that the mainstream schools and tendencies in the Muslim world at the time – including the official Wahhabism of the Saudi religious establishment – needed to be purified of innovations and misperceptions. The emergence of the JSM seems to be linked to three important societal changes in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s and 1970s.

First was the slow but steady push toward increased social conservatism from a religious establishment which sensed that it was losing its grip on an increasingly liberal society. Second was the arrival of new ideological currents that provide alternatives to the established political and religious order. Third were the socio-economic tensions resulting from Saudi Arabia's rapid modernisation process.

Establishment of Islamic Republic of Iran and Its Influences

The year 1979 marked one of the most important years in the modern history of Middle East because of the Iranian Revolution. Sometimes called the Islamic Revolution, it was a revolution led by an Islamic republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini that dethroned the Iran's monarch, the Pahlavi dynasty. This revolution gave rise to political Islam which provoked social mobilization as well as radicalization of the marginalized people. It also demonstrated the political capacity of Islam and the instability of the nearby region. Pre-existing regional political situation had been strained to the breaking point due to the extreme level of dissatisfaction, tyranny, widening gap between the social classes, and the failure of economic system. The revolution actually did not target any new formation of Islamic paradigm however, it ignited dissatisfied Arab people who were desperate for a change. After the revolution, political Islam gradually emerged and intensified, then started to influence other Islamic countries. Afshin Shahi explained the influence on his editorial as follows:

The activist movements either with a political or with a religious agenda now were convinced that with Islam they have the winning card, it can be employed as a potent political mechanism to, politicize, mobilise, radicalise the masses in order to confront the authoritarian states across the Middle East. The voice of the Iranian revolution was heard across the world from an early stage and particularly alarmed the countries with the substantial Muslim minorities. The political foundations of the neighbouring countries were shaken especially of those who had significant Shiite population, namely, Saudi, Kuwait, Bahrain and Iraq.⁹

9. Afshin Shahi, "Thirty Years On: The Iranian Revolution and Its Impact on the Region" <http://www.e-ir.info/?p=611> (accessed March 30 2010).

Its impact on the Middle Eastern countries, especially on Saudi Arabia had been enormous. Particularly three aspects of Iranian revolution troubled the government of Saudi Arabia: the resurgence of Shiites minority, the replacement of monarchy by an Islamic Republic, and growth of opposing sentiment of Westernization. As a natural consequence, Juhaymal al-Utaybi's Riot and the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca had happened shortly after the Revolution, and a Shiite minority's followed. Shiite's demonstration spread rapidly and occupied strategically important oil fields and turned from *Ashura*'s¹⁰ procession into a pro-Khomeini demonstration. These two events directly convinced Saudi government to recognize the urgent necessity to silence the opposition, the Shiite minorities. Saudi government noticed that religion had a special unifying power even in the country where all the political systems were oppressed by dictatorship.

The Iranian revolution overthrew monarchy and the replaced it with an Islamic republic, and these facts alerted the Saudi government which was also a monarchy made up of mostly Sunni but including a notable size of Shiites. Sunni dominated countries did not welcome the emergence of Shiite, nor supported them to prosper. This view was clearly illustrated in an interview with King Abdullah of Jordan with *The London Times* in January 26, 1982, where he even compared the Shiite fundamentalism to Zionism.¹¹

Saudi Arabia also agreed with King Abdullah's point of view and started to modify its political system. This governmental process was harmonized with Islamism, especially the conservative sector, and reinforced the political system including existing (operative) law. Saudi government noticed the political capacity of Islam, and political Islam and Islamism quickly became the answers

10. *Ashura* is the most secret event of Shiite calendar which celebrates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, a defining figure in the Shiite faith.

11. Shahi, "Thirty Years On."

for Saudi Arabia to navigate through the situation. Islamic fundamentalism was likely the best solution for complicated situation in Saudi Arabia, and the government began to supervise and oppress every part of the society, particularly women's issues.

The Iranian Revolution made Saudi Arabia retrograde in terms of human rights. Despite the economic growth and rapid development of techniques in short span of time, beheading practices and comparatively low status of women are still normal in the twenty-first century. The Saudi government still refuses to pay attention to human rights and democracy. However, lack of democratic structure in the politics and failure to amend various social problems are causing disputing voices to speak up. It is interesting to note that these voices are raised not only by individuals and human right organizations all around the world but also by some intellectuals inside Saudi Arabia.

After Iranian Revolution, Saudi Arabia concentrated on lifting three aspects of Iranian revolution which were mentioned previously. Their solved the problems by reinforcing the social system as well as the political system. However, such attempt ended up fortifying barbaric social practices and sexual discrimination in Saudi Arabia.

Islamism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The events in 1980s gave rise to the ultraconservative and political movement of Islamism in most of the Arab world. The Islamism urged the government to institutionalize Islamic laws and social regulations. Even though Saudi Arabia was already established under the ideology of Wahhabism with the Qur'an and the Sharia as its constitution, the country could not be exempted from this ultraconservative trend.

In the 1970s, the country had been developed in many different fields, experiencing liberal practices and openness to the world. However, after the

failure of the Grand Mosque siege in Mecca, the ultraconservative movement had arose from the marginal and had become the center of the society to push into conservative direction, providing polarity between the Westernized and the rest of the society. The movement was known as “Islamism,” characterized by its conservative revival. Its impact could be clearly noticed in almost every part of the society from individual to the government level. The revival particularly influenced government policies, relationship with foreigners, growth of religious programs through media, and mosque sermons.

The most apparent changes in individual lives happened especially in women’s behaviors. Women usually wore the traditional Saudi Islamic *abaya*¹² but did not covered their faces formerly. After the revival, some women began to cover their faces with nontransparent cloth while some wore the *abaya* when they traveled abroad to identify themselves as sincere Muslims. Another change could be traced in the ritual ceremonies for example, the *mawlid* rituals¹³ was revived which was banned by King Abdul Aziz al-Saud when he conquered the Hijaz. The *mawlid* rituals had been performed by women from time to time before the ban; however, when the ritual was revived, women had been completely forbidden from performing the ritual ceremony.

The Saudi government also increased the number and the force of the *mutawwiin*¹⁴ mainly to control behaviors that defied the conservative ideology of Islamism. For example, in November 1990, a group of women protested to obtain their right to drive. This demonstration was blocked by *mutawwiin*

12. Saudi Islamic *hijab*, literally a curtain or a veil, a black cloak, black face veil, and hair covering and sometimes with long black gloves to hide the hands.

13. A gathering for communal prayer on the occasion of Muhammad’s birthday, or to celebrate the birth, mourn a death, bless a new house, or seek God’s favor in fulfillment of some wish, such as cure of an illness or the birth of a child.

14. Religious police, organized under the authority of the king in conjunction with the *ulama*. They were charged with ensuring compliance with the puritanical precepts of Wahhabism. Primarily, they enforced public observance of such religious requirements as the five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, the modesty of women’s dress, and the proscriptions against the use of alcohol

who suggested all women protestors be punished. Saudi government heeded to the *mutawwiin's* advice and punished them by flogging publicly, confiscating their passport, and firing them from their work places. Furthermore, women's driving became officially illegal which had only been unofficially discouraged prior to the protest. While this issue will be discussed further in the later part of this chapter, it is adequate enough to show that the movement of Islamism ultimately became an ignition point especially to degrade women's status in the society.

Family matters were also institutionalized and interpreted through the conservative religious approach. For example, women only used to need to be accompanied by a male guardian, *mahram*, when traveling foreign countries, but from the late 1970s, as a new policy, submission of a written permission letter from a *mahram* became a requirement for a woman to travel overseas. One of the prominent outcomes of this rule was that it limited women's wish to study abroad and made them give up their basic right to further their education abroad. The nationwide reinforcement of the *mutawwiin* brought rigid atmosphere in individual life not only for women but also for men. Formerly, *mutawwiin's* responsibility only included passively watching and guiding the attendance of men in the mosque at prayer time however, because of the influence of Islamism movement, their duty have been expanded to include observing public abstinence during Ramadan, watching shops to close at prayer time, and forcing women to wear modest clothing. Foreign women were also required to wear abaya while men and women who were not a family member might be arrested for being in the same car by *mutawwiin*.

The conservative character of Islamism also influenced the life of foreign inhabitants especially their religious activities. Previously other religious services were not encouraged but were not prohibited. For instance, in the 1920s, when the Salafi revival broke up, Christian doctors were allowed

to hold a service in the country. Up to 1980s, Christian services were not prohibited they were actually permitted in private level as long as they did not stimulate the local Saudi people. However, following the end of the Persian Gulf War, reinforced *mutawwiin* began to search other religious services and arrest them.

Another significant change toward conservatism occurred among religious scholars who submitted a petition to the king to establish a consultative council. They asked for more participation in decision making and amendment of all laws, including administrative and commercial regulations to concord with the sharia. Their first concern revolved around the possibility of losing Muslim identity because of the military dependence on the West and overwhelming Westernization. They believed that secular education, devastation of extended family, employment of women, and the media imbalance may accelerate the destruction of the important value system of family and society. Therefore to solve these problems, they recognized the religion Islam as the source of strength for the society.

In addition, the nation itself needed legal authenticity to maintain itself as an “Islamic country.” The government concentrated on religious education and tried to instill Islamic culture in every part of the society. They applied the religion Islam as the foundation of the society, employing it as the primary social adhesive among people.

The reason for the emergence of Islamism in Saudi Arabia could be summarized as follows it was the reaction against to Western and modern ways, especially due to rapid urbanization and politicization of marginal people such as lower-class and bazaar-class men and women. There were roughly two faces of Islamism in Saudi: a militant one, marked by extremity and violence, bent on toppling the monarch and a moderate one, characterized as progressive and self-reflective, focused on transforming the society. However, both parties’

trend had been greatly negative for women's rights.

Furthermore, before the Islamist movement in Islamic countries, Muslim women's organizations were established together with men's groups around the late 1920s. The participants were mostly educated, upper and middle class women who partly patterned after Western women. However, Islamism started to limit women's freedom of movement, greatly hindering on their ability to convene as a group, leading to the downfall of many women's organizations.

Islamism's influence on women's issues in Saudi Arabia has been exceedingly negative. Women's issues had been quite acceptable before the introduction of the movement, but after Islamism movement, the status of women has suffered a backlash in Saudi Arabia that the country remains the only nation in Middle East that has not adopted women's universal suffrage. Saudi Arabia employed Islamism movement to solve some critical and complicated problems. However, when it comes to gender equality, manifold elements have to be considered to reach a reasonable solution.

THE PRACTICAL INFLUENCES OF WAHHABISM ON WOMEN'S STATUS IN PRESENT DAYS

Certain argument of the persistence of women's separation in Saudi society is due to the shortness of its exposure to the West. Wahhabi ulama insisted on returning to the teachings of the Prophet and represented Islamic chauvinism which prevented flows from the West and keeps their own belief. The 1920s marked the beginning of modern Arabia, and the King Abd al-Aziz was about to open to the potential advantages of Western technology. During the Wahhabi revival in the 1920s, the government had prepared to enforce compli-

ance with Islamic laws and reinterpretation of Islamic value for the country. However, the Wahhabi *ulama* refused the reinterpretation of the Qur'an and apparently settled by the early jurists. Even orthodox Muslim scholars confess that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his followers were rough and uneducated Bedouins who has emphasized exceedingly on minor point of practices, such as the forbidden of wearing silk and gold for dress, the use of rosary in prayer, or even louder laughter and weeping at funerals.

Under the Wahhabis, the ban was expanded to trivial matters and forcibly criticized the participation of women in the birthday celebration in particular. Prayers at saints' tombs were also prohibited along with the vowing rituals. In fact, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab prohibited both men and women to attend any of the rituals, but the restrictions on men and women are not equal. Eleanor Abdella Doumato stated in her book *Getting God's Ear*, "First, men still had the mosque, where they were daily invited to perform correct worship together. Second, women were considered uniquely susceptible to particular type of polytheistic rituals because of perceived weaknesses in their nature that needed to be controlled. Mourning, for example, was generally proscribed, but only women's mourning practices were specifically forbidden."¹⁵

Maggie Michel stated in the Washington Post article, "The question of women's rights in Saudi Arabia is a touchy one. In a country where no social or political force is strong enough to affect change in women's rights, it is up to the king to do it. Even then, the king must find consensus before he takes a step in that direction."¹⁶ From this article, it is obvious that even Saudi king himself does not have full authority over women's issues but should consult with the Wahhabi *ulama* first. Saudi rule is legitimated by its willingness to

15. Doumato, Eleanor Abdella. *Getting God's Ear*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 122.

16. Maggie Michael, "Saudi Monarch Grants Kingdom's Women Right to Vote, but Driving Ban Remains in Force," *The Washington Post* 2011.

implement Islamic law and rule in affiliation with the *ulama* who determines what Islamic law is¹⁷ Supreme Council of Senior Ulama who adheres in one form or another to the Wahhabi principles¹⁸ still exercises higher authority over public policy than anyone else in the state, and shows particularly conservative viewpoints especially on women's issues.

However, it is interesting to acknowledge that during the early twentieth century, when al-Saud family was advocating Wahhabism and adopting it as a tool of uniting his new state, Wahhabi *ulama* never actually issued any fatwas concerning women driving or being in the workplace or traveling without guardian, because these issues about women were not contested matter of the time.¹⁹ The most contested issue at that time was to establish correct ritual practice, to represent obligatory prayer in the mosque only for men and to eliminate intercessory rituals among all the inhabitants in every part of the Peninsula where Wahhabi dominance was not authenticated. Then incorrect practice was identified as something exercised not only by the groups the Wahhabi abhorred such as Shiite, or mystics, but also as something done by women, or as something associated with women, or as something to be condemned only if done by women.

Wahhabis considered that women were associated with spirit, and marked for seeking intercession through offerings at shrines, or caves. Likewise, Wahhabis apprehended that women were emotionally weak, and blaspheme God by using spiritual power which belongs to God alone through practicing witchcraft, telling the future, or acting like a polytheist. Restrictions and constraints women faced were actually originated from the principle of the Hanbali school who believed that women's whole body is sexually provocative

17. Doumato (2000), 231.

18. Abou El Fadl, Khaled. *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 173.

19. Doumato (2000), 222.

and private; therefore, women are not allowed to be seen by unrelated men. This principle of the Hanbali school was adopted by Wahhabis, paving the way for the rigid view of women.

The hegemony of Wahhabi *ulama* who are official interpreters of religion for the country, still influence the way society classifies people based on sex differences. The perception of women is not merely from the texts of sacred book but from more distant past, Wahhabi Islam. Doumato stated in her book, "At the same time, women's modesty was defined according to the principle of the Hanbali school, reiterated by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab himself; all of a women's body is *awrah*, meaning her body is entirely sexually provocative and private and therefore it is not permitted for women to be seen by unrelated men."²⁰ Hamad al-Baadi stated the modesty and separation of women in his Ph. D. dissertation,

Women's mobility outside their home was reduced to the absolute minimum. Modesty of attire was forced on all women. We have no reliable data on whether pre-Wahhabi Arabian sedentary women veiled their faces or not...Wahhabism however, considered the facial veil (ghita) to be a require part of the Islamic hijab and in the towns and villages where Wahhabism ruled, the veil became complete; a woman above ten or eleven years of age would not venture outside her home unless fully covered from the top of the head to her heels with and 'abat, a black cloak worn over her regular clothes...There were not many occasions to wear the abat, anyway, as the Wahhabis preferred that women never venture into the public sphere except under utmost necessity.²¹

20. Ibid.

21. Hamad Al-Baadi, "Social Change, Education, and the Roles of Women in Arabia" (Stanford University, 1982).

Legal opinions on women were issued by the most influential shaikhs simply rephrasing the status of women described in Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's Kitab at-Tawhid and his commentaries. According to Shaikh ibn Baz, Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia for the past twenty-five years said that women "became a trial for others" because of "their little patience" and also because "they are a temptation or trial for the living because the woman is awrah and by her going out and being visited by men she is not related to she becomes a trial and may lead to a great sin."²²

In Saudi Arabia, women's legal opinions are issued by the Permanent Council for Scientific Research and Legal Opinion (CLRO), the governmental bureau in Saudi Arabia authorized with issuing Islamic legal opinions. The legal responses issued by CLRO usually serve as the foundation for official state law. The responses of the legal settlement about women are issued by jurists, and some translated legal opinions by jurists are as follows;

On Women Driving : It is impermissible for women to drive an automobile, for that would entail unveiling her face or a part of it. Additionally, if her automobile were to break down on the road, if she were in an accident, or if she were issued a traffic violation, she would be forced to commingle with men. Furthermore, driving would enable a woman to travel far from her home and away from the supervision of the legal guardian. Women are weak and prone to succumb to their emotions and to immoral inclinations. If they are allowed to drive, then they will be freed from appropriate oversight, supervision, and from the authority of the men of their households. Also, to receive driving privileges, they would have to apply for a license and get their picture taken. Photographing women, even

22. al-Musnad, Muhammad bin Abdul-Aziz. *Islamic Fatawa Regarding Women*. Translated by Jamaal al-Din M. Zarabozo, (Riyadh: Darussalam), 1996, 28, 45.

in this situation, is prohibited because it entails fitnah and great perils.

On the Legality of Women Wearing Brassieres : Some women have grown accustomed to lifting their breasts or supporting them with a piece of cloth, using them as a way of appearing younger of life virgins or something like that. If it is done for that purpose, then it [i.e., wearing brassieres] constitutes unlawful deception. But if it is done in order to avoid a particular injury or ward off pain or anything of a similar nature, then it is permissible in proportion to the need [for wearing the brassiere], and God knows best.²³

On the Dangers of Women in the Workplaces of Men : When a woman leaves her home, which her dominion and place of vivacious liberty in this temporal life, she opposes that which her inherent disposition inclines toward as well as the natural proclivity that God created within her. In an Islamic society, the call for women to join men in their workplaces is a grave matter, and intermingling with men is among its greatest pitfalls. Loose interaction across gender lines is one of the major causes of fornication, which disintegrates society and destroys its moral values and all sense of propriety.²⁴

These legal opinions by *ulama* were issued and expected to be adopted in daily practices; however, the implication of these *fatwas* seems quite far from even the reality of women in Saudi Arabia. Interpretation of women's matters by the Supreme Council of Senior Ulama who are still influential experts of public policy shows particularly conservative viewpoints due to the relation with Wahhabi principles.

23. This fatwa was issued by Ibn Jibrin in *Fatawa al-Lajnah*, p. 205

24. Abou El Fadl (2001), 289.

Despite of this rigid theology of Wahhabi influences on women's issues, certain areas of the society show some confidential advancement. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2010,

Among 134 countries, Oman (122), Syria (124), Egypt (125), Morocco (127), Saudi Arabia (129) and Yemen (134) occupy the bottom half of the region's rankings. Saudi Arabia's performance over the last five years puts it among the highest climbers of the 114 countries that have been included in the Report since 2006. Between 2009 and 2010, the labour force participation rate of women has climbed from 20% to 22%, the perception of the wage gap for similar work has improved, literacy rates have improved and women's enrolment in tertiary education has increased from 35% to 37%. Saudi Arabia remains the lowest-ranking country in the region on political empowerment, with the lowest possible score of zero.²⁵

Due to an active progressive movement, however, which is pushing to improve women's bargaining power in Islamic family law courts and to create parity with men in terms of civil rights, including the right to vote, drive, work, and obtain better access to health care and educational opportunities,²⁶ women's right in education and employment show advanced results. Yet, as reported in Global Gender Gap, women's political participation still ranks bottom.

Recently Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, known as a reformer by the standard of the ultra conservative nation, announced that women will have the right to vote and run in local election due in 2015:

25. Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson, and Saadi Zahidi, *The Global Gender Gap Report* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2010), 27.

26. Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Saudi Arabia," in *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress Amid Resistance*, ed. Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin (New York: Freedom House, 2010), 425.

In itself, Sunday's decision to give the women the right to vote and run in municipal elections may not be enough to satisfy the growing ambition of the kingdom's women who, after years of lavish state spending on education and vocational training, significantly improved their standing but could not secure the same place in society as that of their male compatriot. "We didn't ask for politics, we asked for our basic rights. We demanded that we be treated as equal citizens and lift the male guardianship over us," said Saudi activist Maha al-Qahtani, an Education Ministry employee who defied the ban on women driving earlier this year. "We have many problems that need to be addressed immediately."²⁷

Moreover, Saudi king Abdullah also said in his five-minute speech that women will be allowed to be appointed to the Shura Council selected by the king that is currently all-male. "Because we refuse to marginalize women in society in all roles that comply with Sharia (Islamic law), we have decided, after deliberation with our senior ulama(clerics) and others... to involve women in the Shura Council as members, starting from the next term... Women will be able to run as candidates in the municipal election and will even have a right to vote."²⁸

It is a giant step forward in ultraconservative kingdom, yet the Saudi government has a long history of breaking promises to women. Nadya Khalif, Middle East women's right researcher in Human Rights Watch, stated, "When Saudi Arabia held its first municipal elections in 2005, women were excluded from voting and running as candidates. The government promised that women would be able to participate in the next elections, which were scheduled for 2009. The government reneged on this promise and again excluded

27. Michael (2011).

28. Asma Alsharif, "Saudi King Gives Women Right to Vote," Reuter 2011.

women from the elections, which, after a two-year postponement, are to take place next week. A woman from Jeddah who attempted to register to vote was arrested for her trouble.”²⁹

For this reason, many women are still doubtful that King Abdullah’s decision will contribute to real change for Saudi women. However, the signs look positive. King Abdullah is a reluctant reformer in ultraconservative kingdom and may want to follow his brother, King Faisal, who introduced mandatory schooling for girls in the 1960s. Moreover, this eighty-seven year old king who is not in the best health may think his legacy during his reign as the provider of “basic rights and freedoms that have long been enjoyed by other women around the world.”³⁰ He has encouraged education and employment for women and allowed himself to take picture with thirty-five women participants in the seventh National Dialogue Forum in Najran, in 2010. Surprisingly, this photograph was published on the front page of local newspaper *Okaz*, for the first of its kind. The reason for the surprise was that there is a *fatwa* on the prohibition of photographs, and the king himself went against this prohibition³¹. There have been several signs which could be viewed as the clear indication that the king is trying to take initiative to annihilate some of the discriminations on Saudi women in daily lives. Even though women will have to wait four more years to exercise their right to vote, it seems to be a promising step forward which might be the beginning of the “Arab spring” for Saudi Muslim women.

29. Nadya Khalife, “Getting the Vote Could Herald Real Change for Saudi Women”, The Guardian <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/29/getting-vote-could-herald-real-change-saudi-women?tr=y&aid=9599589> (accessed September 30 2011).

30. Khalife, “Getting the Vote.”

31. The *fatwa* says: Authentic tradition from the Prophet have established the prohibition of depicting any being that possesses a soul, whether human or not.

SUMMARY

Indeed, all forms of specific gender discriminations in contemporary Saudi society, such as the strict segregation in public, women's intellectual and emotional inadequacy, their dependency on men, originated from the Wahhabi teaching. The devaluation of women in Saudi society is deeply related to the Wahhabi principles, and these attitudes about women have permeated throughout daily practices and have been consciously infused through the bureau or the Saudi state. However, it is also certain that Saudi government faces new phase of understanding women which might come from the phenomena of post-Wahhabism.

Even though Wahhabi Islam has been the absolute and decisive ideology from the beginning, when Abd al-Aziz was advertising and using it to control his newly conquered land, there is also a growing appetite of Saudi women who desire to improve their status as the same in society with their male partners. In Saudi Arabia, Wahhabi that has dominated and shaped government social policies including women's issues for two and half centuries is perhaps ready to yield its way to this compelling and forceful stream

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