

Saudi Arabia women test driving ban

http://www.time.com/time/video/player/0,32068,1001241117001_2078454,00.html (video)

http://upfront.scholastic.com/issues/10_24_11/book#/12

Jason Burke

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At just after 10 o'clock in the morning on Friday, June 17, 2011 Maha al-Qahtani swapped places with her husband, Mohammed, and took the wheel of the family car.

For the next 50 minutes, she drove through the Saudi capital of Riyadh, along the six-lane King Fahd Road, and down the upmarket Olaya Street with its shopping malls, Starbucks, Apple store and boutiques.

The only problem with this was that this is Saudi Arabia, the only country in the world that bans women from driving motor vehicles.

The prohibition forces families to hire live-in drivers, and those who cannot afford the \$300 to \$400 a month for a driver must rely on male relatives to drive them to work, school, shopping or the doctor.

Qahtani was part of a small but striking movement of women determined to do something about it.

The exact number of Saudi women who protested was unclear. It was certainly not a mass movement.

By mid-afternoon a handful had driven in Riyadh, a few in the southern port city of Jeddah, a couple in Dammam in the east, perhaps 30 or 40 overall in a country with a population of 27 million.

But it was a breakthrough. In the closed and authoritarian kingdom, such open and premeditated dissent is extremely rare. Under the spotlight of international attention, Saudi Arabia's rulers had clearly decided to allow the protest to go ahead.

"It is not the issue of women's driving itself which poses a problem, it is the challenge to authority," said a political analyst, Khaled al-Dhakil. "But ... change is eroding that authority."

This was the closest Saudi Arabia has yet got to the revolutionary upheavals of the 2011 Arab spring.

In May 2011 seven women were arrested for driving. Manal al-Sharif, a 32-year-old who had posted a video on the internet of herself at the wheel, was held for 10 days, made to sign a pledge not to drive again and banned from talking to the media.

It was a bold move that earned the ire of the authorities. She was charged with disturbing the peace and inciting protests.

On Friday, a different mood prevailed by the authorities. Police appeared to be under orders not to intervene. In Jeddah, one woman said she had been detained by soldiers and escorted home. Others reported being ignored.

Qahtani, who holds American and international driving licenses, was stopped after 30 minutes by police, given a ticket for driving without a Saudi license, and sent home. "When we lived in the U.S. I always drove my kids to school," she said.

"If no one sacrifices, no one will get their rights," she says. "It's my right. I didn't do any crime, I didn't kill anyone, I didn't sell drugs. Those people need to be in jail. Not me for doing my rights."

Al Qatani and dozens of women like her have taken to the streets. They are leaving their drivers at home, and taking their positions behind the wheel. They are driving to the grocery store, to the doctor, or to pick their kids up from school. Those thankless errands may plague women round the world, but for some women in Saudi Arabia they are a long dreamed of privilege. One by one, with no fanfare and no banners, they are claiming their rights with a simple spin of the steering wheel.

Driving, says al Qatani, is not a woman's right but a human right. Driving, she says, "is just the first step."

The question now is whether this signals forthcoming concessions from the authorities. King Abdullah, a relative moderate reigning since 2005, is known to be sympathetic but constrained by a conservative religious establishment.

The support of the clergy has been crucial to the house of Al Saud and successive kings have been careful not to antagonize them. Earlier this year, clerics issued a fatwa against challenging the royal family's authority.

Many clerics claim the driving ban prevents vice by stopping women interacting with male strangers.

Wajeha al-Huwaider, the activist who filmed Sharif's drive, said the "big campaign" might make the government rethink.

"Driving is a basic simple right. Denying it is hurting the image of the country. Even if the ban is nothing to do with religion, it is also hurting the image of Islam," she said.

Social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook have been key for the women drivers, providing support networks and, crucially, publicity outside the kingdom.

The legal situation is unclear.

The issue of women driving occupies a gray area in Saudi Arabia. It's not banned by any formal law, and in some desert communities women do drive unmolested. But in the major cities it has been long prohibited by religious rulings backed by an official order from the Interior Ministry.

The ban is rooted in conservative traditions and religious views that hold giving freedom of movement to women would make them vulnerable to sins.

Supporters say it is justified by both religious fatwas and the rulers' own statements. Critics say there is nothing in Islam to back the ban and that there has never been a royal decree.

"How come women get flogged for driving, while the maximum penalty for a traffic violation is a fine, not lashes?" Zein el-Abydeen said. "Even the prophet [Muhammad's] wives were riding camels and horses because these were the only means of transportation."

Women in Saudi Arabia are also banned from voting or from leaving home without a male guardian.

Previous campaigns to overturn the ban have failed. One, in 1991, resulted in nearly 50 women who drove losing their jobs and being banned from foreign travel. The critical question now is broader public opinion.

Saad, a 24-year-old engineer who recently returned from government-sponsored studies in the US, said that Saudis should "get over" the issue.

"There are much more important issues here than women driving. We need to be more broad-minded," he said.

But many others disagree. Abdullah al-Otaiba said that women driving was a "bad idea".

"You have your ways of doing things in the west and that's fine for you. We are conservative people. We are not democratic. We have another religion and women should not go alone," he said.

There is room for compromise – the most likely outcome, experts says. Some younger clerics would accept women being allowed to drive in case of emergency.

The women, most of whom learned to drive overseas, say their campaign will continue until a royal decree is issued allowing them to drive "without any conditions".

"It's our right. We have to have it. We will continue until we can decide ourselves," said Maha al-Qahtani.

"I'm really excited," said Eman Nafjan, 32, who drove round her Riyadh neighborhood for 15 minutes .
"We need to do it again."

Lashing

One woman, Shaima Jastaina, was found guilty of driving in Jeddah in July 2011. She was subsequently sentenced to 10 lashes with a whip for breaking the country's ban on female drivers.

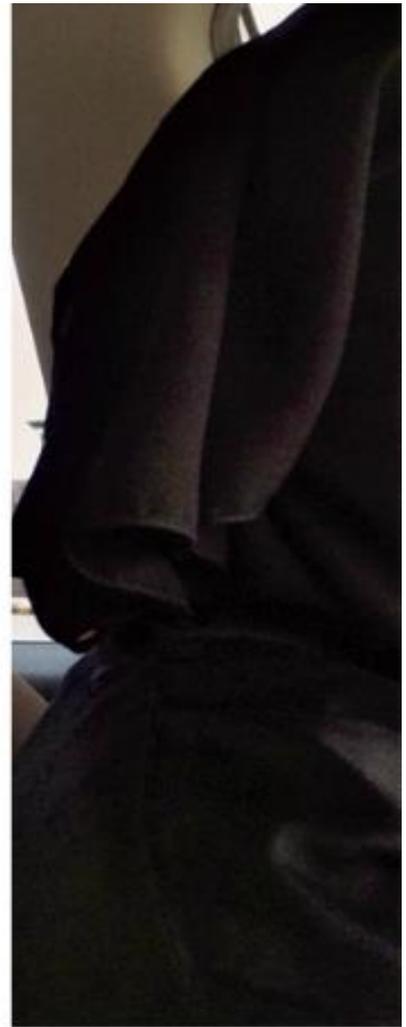
It is the first time a legal punishment has been handed down for a violation of the longtime ban in the ultraconservative Muslim nation.

Police usually stop female drivers, question them and let them go after they sign a pledge not to drive again. But dozens of women have continued to take to the roads since June in a campaign to break the taboo.

Saudi Arabia's Freedom Riders

In a country where women's rights are severely limited, some Saudi women are demanding the right to drive

BY NEIL MACFAROUHAR IN SAUDI ARABIA



Maha al-Qahtani, an information technology specialist for the Saudi government, got in her car one day early this summer and did something revolutionary: With her husband seated next to her, she took the wheel and drove for 45 minutes around the capital city of Riyadh.

Her defiance is part of a nationwide right-to-drive campaign that involved more than 40 women taking to the road to protest the fact that Saudi women are not allowed to drive. They say their campaign is inspired by the uprisings this year in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world known as the Arab Spring.

Some of the female drivers, like

Qahtani, have been stopped by police and ticketed. Others have been arrested. Last month, a Saudi court sentenced a woman to 10 lashes after she was found guilty of driving in Jidda. (The king overturned the sentence a few days later.)

"If Saudi police think arresting women drivers is going to stop what has already become the largest women's rights movement in Saudi history, they are sorely mistaken," the Saudi Women for Driving coalition said in a statement. "On the contrary, these arrests will encourage more women to get behind the wheel in direct defiance of this ridiculous abuse of our most basic human rights."

In September, perhaps looking for a way to placate women's rights

advocates, King Abdullah granted women the right to vote and run in municipal elections for the first time, starting in 2015. Ironically, though, political participation for women is less controversial than the right to drive—perhaps because voting isn't likely to have much impact in an absolute monarchy where local elections have little influence.

No Dating

The ban on driving is just one of many restrictions on women in Saudi Arabia, which is probably the most strictly gender-segregated country in the world.

As soon as they're considered adults, Saudi women must wear *abayas*, black head-to-toe cloaks, in public at all



Act of Defiance:
A Saudi woman drives a car in Riyadh in June.

times. They attend girls-only schools and university classes, and they eat in special “family” sections of restaurants, which are partitioned from the areas used by single men. Riyadh, the capital, has women-only gyms, boutiques, and even a shopping mall. While many Saudi women go to college, very few get jobs afterward—largely because of the logistical difficulty of maintaining gender segregation in the workplace.

Saudi girls are not allowed to date—or even be friends with boys—and their marriages are arranged. Most Saudi girls meet their husbands for the first time on the day they become engaged.

While Saudi Arabia has taken some small steps toward democratic reforms in recent years, Saudi women are still

denied the basic equality and rights that women in the West, and even in many Arab countries, take for granted.

They need written permission from a male relative before they can get a job, leave the country, travel within the country, or even undergo a medical procedure. In court, a woman’s testimony does not carry the same weight as a man’s. And despite the king’s **decree** granting a limited right to vote, women may have few chances to participate in politics given the ban on mingling with men.

The restrictions are part of the country’s very conservative interpretation of Islam, although many Muslims dispute that Islam calls for any of these limitations.

“Women are treated like **perpetual** legal minors in Saudi Arabia,” says

Christoph Wilcke of Human Rights Watch. “It’s hard to think of another country where women’s rights are so systematically restricted.”

Of all the rights denied to women, the ban on driving is perhaps the most sensitive. Most Saudi women are shuttled around by foreign male drivers in cars with tinted windows. For religious conservatives, the ban is a sign that the kingdom still holds to its traditions and has not caved in to Western pressure.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton seems to understand the sensitivity. Not wanting to create a diplomatic rift

With additional reporting by Nada Bakri, Dina Salah Amer, and Steven Lee Myers of The Times, and by Patricia Smith.

in the already strained—and crucial—relationship between Saudi Arabia and the U.S., she has expressed support for the protesters, but has been careful to emphasize that they're acting on their own initiative, not that of the U.S. (See sidebar, facing page.)

“What these women are doing is brave, and what they are seeking is right,” Clinton said. She added, “I am moved by it, and I support them.”

King Abdullah's family has ruled Saudi Arabia since the country's founding in 1932. The country is a near-absolute monarchy, but the royal family depends on support from conservative

beheading for murder. Religious police roam the streets to enforce the rules, arresting and sometimes flogging those caught violating them.

The campaign to allow women to drive seems to have struck a particular nerve. When Manal al-Sharif, a 32-year-old woman from Al Khobar in eastern Saudi Arabia, posted a video on YouTube of herself driving an S.U.V. last May, she was arrested and jailed for nine days.

“Women in Saudi Arabia see other women in the Middle East making revolutions, women in Yemen and Egypt at the forefront of revolutions, being so bold, toppling entire governments,”

the royal family confiscated their passports and fired those who worked for the government. Many went into hiding for their own safety.

But unlike in the past, this time the government's harsh treatment of Sharif—her arrest and nine-day detention—did not quash the debate. Instead, the Internet buzzed to life in Sharif's defense. Twitter and Facebook overflowed with comments denouncing both Saudi Arabia's ruling princes and the clerics who called for her to be flogged. More than 30,000 comments about Sharif's arrest showed up within days on Twitter, mostly from supporters.

“Are you accusing a woman of being a sinner because she went to jail for driving? What kind of religion would come up with that?” wrote a woman in Jidda.

Social media, which helped spur protests across the Arab world last spring, seems tailor-made for Saudi Arabia, where public gatherings are illegal and women are strictly forbidden to mix with men they're not related to. Virtually any issue that contradicts official Saudi policy now pops up online.

The women's driving campaign shows what

online organizing can accomplish—and what it cannot.

Saudi activists say they realize social media alone will not bring changes, but it exposes issues and links organizers.

“If you can reach the public, it will put pressure on the royal family to modernize,” says Abdulaziz AlGasim, a lawyer and activist in Riyadh. But he adds, “Change will come from demonstrations, not from talking.” ●



‘Women are treated like perpetual legal minors in Saudi Arabia.’

A young woman wearing an abaya at a restaurant with her family

religious leaders, so it must tread carefully in terms of implementing reform.

A strict fundamentalist interpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism governs all aspects of life in Saudi Arabia, with the Koran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad effectively serving as a constitution. The justice system is governed by Islamic law, known as *shariah*, and includes punishments such as cutting off hands for stealing and

says Waleed Abu Alkhair, whose wife drove around the city of Jidda in protest. “The women of Saudi Arabia looked at themselves, and they realized, ‘Wow! We can't even drive!’”

30,000 Tweets

The last time Saudi women tried to challenge the ban on driving was in 1990. Clerics branded the 47 women who got behind the wheel as amoral;



Then: King Abdulaziz and FDR in 1945



Now: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal

A CRITICAL ALLIANCE

The long, close relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia boils down to the importance of oil

BY PATRICIA SMITH

Sailing home from the Yalta Conference in the closing months of World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt made a detour that would have an impact on U.S. foreign policy for decades to come.

His unexpected stop was a meeting with Saudi Arabia's King Abdulaziz. In 1945, Saudi Arabia was little more than a desert. So why did Roosevelt bother?

Because eight years earlier oil was discovered there, and FDR knew that a secure supply of oil was critical to America's war effort and future growth.

OPEC

Six decades later, the two countries remain dependent on each other: The U.S. needs Saudi oil, and Saudi Arabia needs American political and military support.

As one of the most powerful members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the Saudis have enormous **leverage** over

the supply and price of oil. And though it is no longer the world's largest oil producer (it's now Russia), Saudi Arabia remains the largest oil exporter.

Politically, Saudi Arabia shares U.S. concerns over the growing power of Iran, which has been ruled by radical anti-American clerics since 1979. Iran has defied the U.N. by pursuing a suspected nuclear-weapons program.

During the 1991 Gulf War, after Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein overran neighboring Kuwait, the U.S. sent 500,000 troops to Saudi Arabia to protect it from an Iraqi invasion. (This was during the first Iraq war, as opposed to the second Iraq war, which began in 2003.)

The U.S. troop presence angered some Saudis and became a rallying cry for fundamentalists like Osama bin Laden, who came from a wealthy Saudi family. In fact, 15 of the 19 Al Qaeda hijackers in the 9/11 terrorist attacks were Saudis, and the U.S. remains concerned that

Saudi money and influence are helping to spread its strict interpretation of Islam around the world.

ARAB SPRING

In general, the U.S. is uncomfortable with Saudi Arabia's **repressive** social policies, but tends to avoid making waves.

This past year, the U.S.-Saudi alliance has been further strained by the wave of democratic uprisings across the Arab world. The U.S. has been more supportive of

the demonstrators than have the Saudis, who fear instability at home and in the region at large.

Whatever the strains in the relationship, common interests will prevail, says Greg Gause, an expert on Saudi Arabia at the University of Vermont.

"I think in the end, the Saudis will want to deal with us, and in the end we'll want to deal with them," he says. "So we'll each hold our noses about the things we don't like about the other." •

