

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 MACFARQUHAR 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."

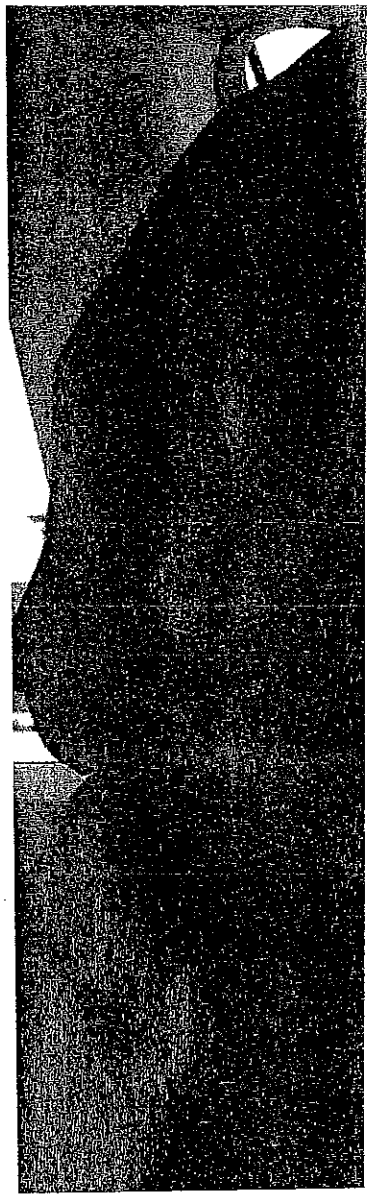
In September, perhaps looking for a way to placate women's rights advocates, King Abdullah granted women

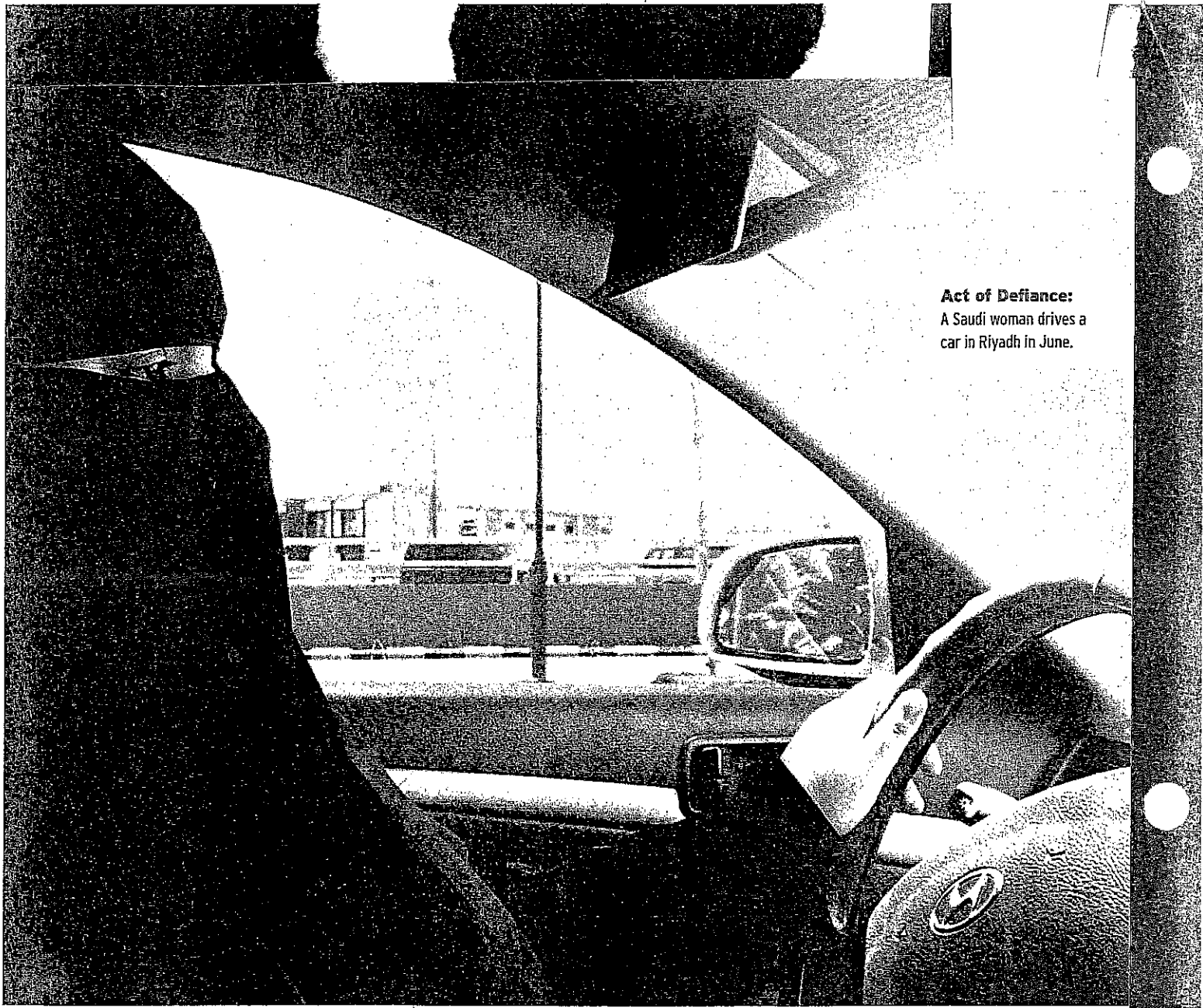
the right to vote and run in municipal elections for the first time, starting in 2015. Ironically, though, political participation for women is less controversial than the right to drive—perhaps because voting isn't likely to have much impact in an absolute monarchy where local elections have little 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 times. They attend girls-only schools and university classes, and they eat in





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

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 in the already strained—and crucial—relationship between Saudi Arabia and

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

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

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," says Waléed Abu

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.'

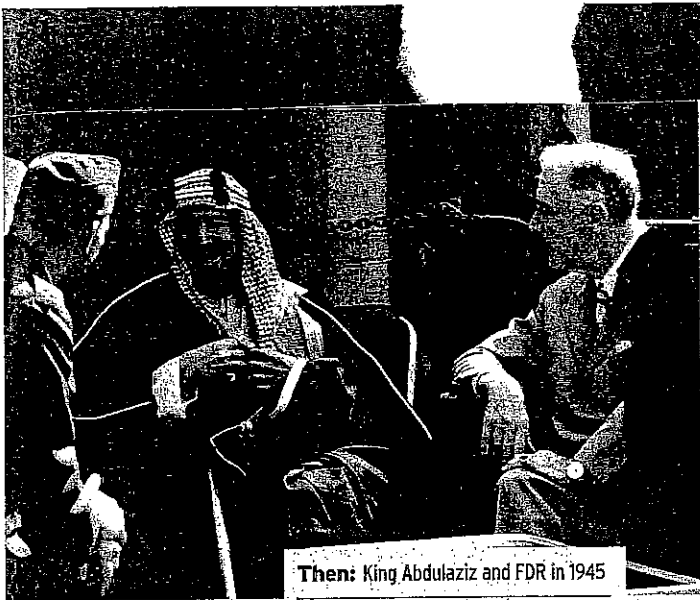
A young woman wearing an abaya at a restaurant with her family

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 beheading for murder. Religious police roam the streets to enforce the

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

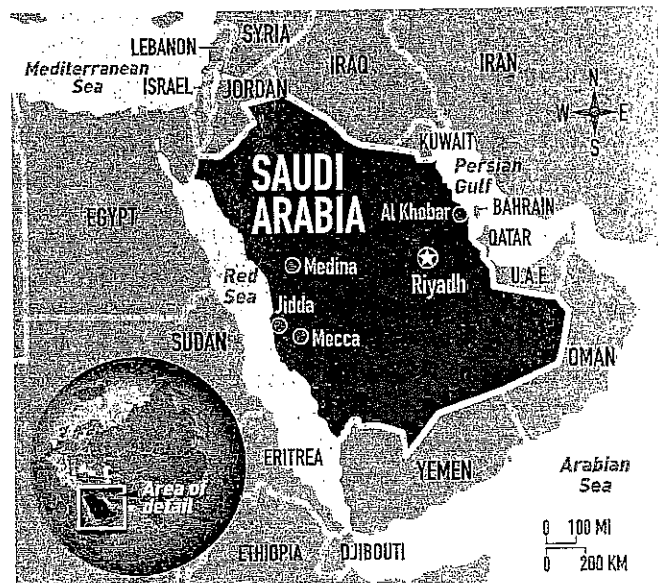
In general, the U.S. is uncomfortable with Saudi Arabia's repressive social policies, but tends to avoid making waves.

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." •



SAUDI ARABIA'S FREEDOM RIDERS



CRITICAL THINKING
In Saudi Arabia, where a strict version of Islamic law restricts nearly all facets of women's lives, women are fighting for something that their peers in many countries take for granted: the right to drive.
→ Why is the right to drive so important to the women who are

protesting? How could it transform their lives?
→ Why do you think Saudi leaders have refused to grant women driver's licenses?
→ Do you think granting women the right to drive would ultimately lead to the lifting of other restrictions? Why or why not?

WRITING PROMPT

The article describes many restrictions on women's rights in Saudi Arabia. Which restriction do you think has the greatest impact on women's lives? Why? Write an essay explaining your view.

DEBATE

Support or refute: The U.S. should take a strong stand supporting the rights of women in Saudi Arabia, even if it means alienating the Saudi government.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Why do you think allowing Saudi women to drive is more controversial than granting them the right to vote?

What similarities and differences do you see between Saudi women's struggle for rights and the fight that U.S. women waged for equal rights beginning in the 19th century?

What role does Islam play in Saudi society and in women's quest for

expanded rights?

How critical a role do you think social media are playing in Saudi women's struggle? Explain.

Does it surprise you that the U.S. is one of Saudi Arabia's allies? Why or why not?

FAST FACT

Women make up nearly 60 percent of Saudi Arabia's university students but only 10 percent of the nation's workforce. ●

WEB WATCH

cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html

The CIA World Factbook page on Saudi Arabia provides data on the nation's people, government, geography, and more.

