SAUDI ARABIA BETWEEN
CONSERVATISM, ACCOMMODATION AND REFORM

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January 2012

Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction

This report falls within the research programme 'Strengthening Knowledge of and Dialogue with the Islam/Arab world', in short Islam Research Programme (IRP), initiated by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As part of this larger programme, the Riyadh programme started in April 2010 and ended in December 2011. The project was executed by three junior researchers (Joas Wagemakers, Mariwan Kanie and Annemarie van Geel) and was supervised by three senior researchers (Roel Meijer, Karin van Nieuwkerk and Paul Aarts). It covered three topics on Saudi Arabia: civil society; the position of women; and intellectual debates. During the course of the project, the junior researchers spent at least three periods in Saudi Arabia doing fieldwork; they spent between one and two days a week on the project during this whole project, except for a brief interval during which the project was evaluated.

One of the most interesting developments during this research period was, of course, the Arab Spring. Although Saudi Arabia has hardly been affected by the uprisings elsewhere in the Arab world, some of our research has touched upon some of the more sensitive political aspects of Saudi society that can in the end have an impact on the forces pushing for reform. The first is the role of civil society, which in other countries in the Middle East has played a role in bringing about revolt in different countries (its importance is being debated). The other is the role of the Shiite minority in Saudi Arabia, considered by both Mariwan Kanie and Joas Wagemakers, the first as part of civil society and the latter as part of the intellectual debates in Saudi Arabia. In the case of the position of women, feminist activism has re-emerged in the famous women claiming their right to drive actions, which van Geel and Wagemakers touch upon in the important issue of gender segregation (*ikhtilat*).

All in all, we believe that this research project has been a fruitful endeavour. As well as the three sub-reports presented in this final report, the group has published and will publish articles, other reports, perhaps a book, and even a Ph.D. on the material that we have collected. During the research period, Aarts has published an article on state–society relations in Saudi Arabia,[1]

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1   Paul Aarts, 'Maintaining Authoritarianism: The Jerky Path of Political Reform in Saudi Arabia', *Orient*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (2011), pp. 29–42.

Meijer an article on reform and gender segregation in Saudi Arabia,[2] and Meijer and Wagemakers will soon publish an article on the Shiite minority in Saudi Arabia and civil rights.[3] Van Geel will certainly publish several articles in the future, as well as her Ph.D. on gender segregation. In addition, Aarts, Kanie and Meijer participated in the workshop 'Potential and Limits of Civil Society in the Gulf Region' at the Gulf Research Meeting 2011, which was held at the University of Cambridge from 6–9 July 2011.

Historical Overview

Origins

Saudi Arabia remains fascinating to many: its huge oil reserves, its strict interpretations of Islam (a religion that was founded on its soil), its political culture of conservatism and patronage, and the fact that fifteen of the nineteen terrorists directly responsible for 9/11 were Saudis have ensured that Saudi Arabia is closely watched by academics, journalists and policy-makers alike. The story of Saudi Arabia began in 1744, when the tribal leader Muhammad b. Sa'ud (d. 1765) made a pact with the religious reformer Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) to conquer the Arabian Peninsula under the former's leadership and based upon the latter's strict interpretation of Islam. Their efforts eventually led to the first Saudi state. Although this state collapsed in 1818 as a result of the Ottoman Empire's military attacks, the pact between the ruler and the scholar remained valid during the second Saudi state (1824–1891) and the current, third Saudi state (1932–present).

The ideology espoused by the scholars abetting the rule of the Sa'ud family (the Al Sa'ud) is often labelled 'Wahhabism' by outsiders, after its eponymous 'founder', Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, and is a form of Salafism that originated in the Central Arabian region called Najd. Salafism in general can be described as the Islamic trend whose adherents try to emulate the first three generations of Muslims (*al-salaf al-salih*, 'the pious forefathers') as closely and in as many spheres of life as possible, and adjust their lifestyles, their reading of the sources of Islam and their worship of God along these lines. Although Wahhabism is doctrinally slightly different from Salafism as a whole, the two terms broadly refer to the same religious trend. Wahhabism focuses particularly on the unity of God (*tawhid*), not just in the sense of believing in one God but also that he alone should be the focus of worship and rituals and is totally unique in every way. Wahhabis therefore categorically reject anything that deviates from this norm, such as religious innovations (*bida'*, sing. *bid'a*) and particularly polytheism (*shirk*), a category in which they also include the veneration of saints.

There has always been opposition to the strict Wahhabism espoused by Saudi rulers from groups that did not fit easily into this Salafi framework or who simply disagreed with it. Resistance to Saudi rule did not just come from opponents to Wahhabism, however. The constant process of balancing ideological purity and political and economic interests proved difficult for many of Saudi Arabia's rulers. As a result, protests erupted against what some perceived as the sidelining of ideological purity for reasons of political expediency. The most famous of these is perhaps the revolt of the *Ikhwan* (brothers), the group of Wahhabi-inspired fighters who had helped 'Abd al-'Aziz (1880–1953), the first king of today's Saudi state, to

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2   Roel Meijer, 'Reform in Saudi Arabia: The Gender Segregation Debate', *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (winter 2010), pp. 80–100.

3   Roel Meijer and Joas Wagemakers, 'The Struggle for Citizenship of the Shiites of Saudi Arabia', in Sami Zemni and Brigitte Maréchal (eds), *The Dynamics of Sunni–Shia Relationships: Doctrine, Transnationalism, Intellectuals and the Media* (London: Hurst, 2012 forthcoming).

conquer large parts of the Arabian Peninsula. When the king proved too lenient in their eyes towards neighbouring countries, new technology, Shiites and the British, they protested against his decisions and were eventually defeated in 1929. Similarly, when the 1970s brought unprecedented wealth but also drastic social changes (including regarding the role of women), and what some perceived to be widespread decadence as a result of the oil boom,[4] Wahhabi-inspired radicals increasingly began to see the Al Sa'ud in a less than favourable light. This ultimately resulted in the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by a group of rebels led by Juhayman al-'Utaybi (d. 1980) in 1979, which took the authorities two weeks to overcome.

The Wahhabi-inspired resistance to Saudi rule showed more than anything that donning the mantle of Islam could be a double-edged sword: whereas the state drew legitimacy from its use of religion, the opposition employed it to demand that the rulers live up to the high standards that they set for others. Thus, in order to take the wind out of the radicals' sails, the aftermath of the 1979 rebellion saw a greater public display of religiosity by the state, more control over civil society by both the government and the official *'ulama'*, increasingly limited rights for women and a broader mandate for the state's Islamic scholars. This, in turn, abetted a more politicized group of Wahhabi students and scholars, who were referred to collectively as the *Sahwa* (revival). Although their sometimes critical attitudes towards the Saudi state and its policies long remained hidden, they came to the surface during the Gulf War in 1990, when King Fahd (ruler from 1982–2005) asked for US military help against the threat of an Iraqi attack and 500,000 American troops landed on Saudi soil. The protests resulting from this decision led to a process of development and reform, whose repercussions we can still see.

Phases of Reform

With the arrival of non-Muslim troops on Saudi soil during the 1990–1991 Gulf War, a new dynamic had entered the relationship between the state and the population. The *first* push to political reform came in the aftermath of the war, with the promulgation of the Basic Law in 1992 and the introduction of the (appointed) *Majlis al-Shura* (consultative council) one year later. At the same time, new administrative laws were passed that led to the instalment of provincial councils. These initial steps, ironically, were the result of pressure from not particularly democratic quarters—that is, a group of Salafi clerics outside the religious bureaucracy, who later came to be known as the *Sahwa* or 'awakening' clerics. They were enraged by the king's decision to allow US troops on Saudi territory and, more importantly, were angry with the clerical establishment's sanctioning of the move.

In 1991 and 1992, several petitions were submitted to King Fahd, with both an Islamist flavour yet encompassing many demands with which liberal critics of the regime could identify.[5] The texts called for an end to corruption and nepotism, the appointment of a consultative council, and more freedom of expression. At the same time, similar demands were being propagated by dissidents in exile or living abroad. The introduction of the Basic Law and the promise to

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4   Daryl Champion, The Paradoxical Kingdom: Saudi Arabia and the Momentum of Reform (London: Hurst, 2003), pp. 76–130; and Shirley Kay, 'Social Change in Modern Saudi Arabia', in Tim Niblock (ed.), State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia (London: Croom Helm, 1982).

5   The first petition, the 'Letter of Demands' (19 May 1991), indeed had quite a few liberals among its 453 signatories. The second petition, the 'Memorandum of Advice' (July 1992), was signed by religious scholars and was bolder and distinctly oppositionist. For the rest, Kapiszewski reminds us that already in December 1990, a group of 43 'liberals' and 'secularists' circulated a reformist petition; see Andrzej Kapiszewski, 'Democratizing the Arab States: The Case of Monarchies of the Gulf, 1991–2004', 2004, pp. 78–79, accessed online www.abydos.com/~andrzejk/Kapiszewski-political_reforms-KSM.pdf.

establish a Consultative Council did not, however, satisfy the opposition and calls for further reform continued, leading to the formation of the more radical Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights (CDLR) in May 1993.

The Shura Council started working in the mid-1990s and gradually gained some relevance. In 1997, the number of its members was enlarged from 60 to 90 and three Shiite Muslims were among the newly appointed members (in 2001 the Council was expanded again to 120 members and in 2005 once more to 250). Although the Council's role is reactive overall, it takes its role of advice, scrutiny and criticism seriously. It is able to receive petitions, complaints and suggestions from the general public and can serve as 'an ideal sounding board for the testing of future reform plans, and may act as the ideal vessel for their introduction as well'. It would be naive to extrapolate from the foregoing that the *Majlis al-Shura* (and the provincial councils) could easily be converted into representative bodies, although that possibility might arise in a situation where the kingdom would be confronted with a new threat to its stability. That 'opportunity' came with 9/11.

A *second* 'wave' of reforms followed in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States, when Saudi Arabia came under an unflattering and harsh spotlight (having delivered fifteen of the nineteen hijackers). 9/11 led to the portrayal of the Saudi kingdom as a breeding ground for terrorism, based on its anachronistic, closed and illiberal political culture. Initially, political pressure to reform came from the outside, the Bush administration in particular. Broadly speaking, it led to the US administration's 'forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East' and, more specifically, the US Congress introduced the Saudi Arabia Accountability Act in November 2003.

This pressure from the outside—which soon subsided—energized many reform-minded groups inside Saudi Arabia. They viewed this as an opportunity to intensify the push for political, social and educational change. Pressure came from different circles: Islamists; liberals; and Shiites. It was not, however, until the arrival of al-Qaeda (or al-Qaeda-inspired) terrorism on its own soil in 2003 that a much greater urgency was felt, leading to heated deliberations on the need for improved governance, while terrorism became the subject of intense public debate. In 2003, Crown Prince Abdullah received no fewer than five petitions, not only from Salafi reformists but also from women's right campaigners, constitutionalists, and Shiite activists. The regime reacted with a 'flurry of quasi-democratic proposals', such as a modest expansion of the powers of the *Majlis al-Shura*, the sponsoring of National Dialogue sessions and the establishment of a quasi-independent National Human Rights Commission. In late 2003, the Crown Prince announced that municipal council elections would be held within twelve months.

During 2003 and 2004, three National Dialogue rounds were held, a potential break from a long-established tradition of monolithic discourse. Saudis from different religious backgrounds (including Sufis and Shiites) and political orientations were brought together to discuss all kinds of sensitive issues in an unusually frank atmosphere. Together with the 'petition sphere', there was a kind of optimism and, in hindsight, the 2003–2004 period can be viewed with a tinge of nostalgia, despite its imperfections. The red line that was breached, however, was the reformers' call for a constitution, leading to the arrest of a dozen pro-reform activists in March 2004. Since then, no similar new petitions or organized calls for reform have been launched.

Ironically, after some time, the violent attacks of May 2003 ('the kingdom's 9/11') were followed by the successful implementation of non-democratic counter-terrorism measures, thereby killing the open, 'reformist' atmosphere that had been created by the very same violent incident. Soon the Saudi regime realized that it should again proceed cautiously so as not to antagonize Saudi Arabia's large conservative constituency, which both opposes violence and enjoys popular legitimacy, 'however conservative their views'. So instead of losing credibility because of the May 2003 bombings, the conservative branch within the Al Sa'ud—represented by Prince Nayif,

Minister of Interior since 1975—managed to gain ground, reshaping national discourse and making Saudi Arabia's security the country's number one priority.

In this rather bleak setting, it was the municipal elections—for half of the nearly 12,000 seats in Saudi Arabia's 179 municipal councils—that drew the most attention internationally among media and policy-makers. Originally announced for 2004, the municipal elections took place in three regional rounds in early 2005. The other half of the seats were to be appointed; the councils deal not with 'political' issues but only with local services and planning matters; women were barred from either standing or voting, albeit for 'logistical' and not legal reasons; and no group campaigns, platforms or manifestos were allowed—let alone political parties. From the perspective of the post-1960s era, the 2005 elections looked like a significant development, both in themselves, and for the way in which they evolved, including the atmosphere that developed around them. So far, however, the councils have largely proven toothless, although a few (some ten out of the total 179) of these councils, especially in the Hijaz and the Eastern Province, did have some success and have been able to create a basic form of 'popular support'.

After the modest, often cosmetic and seemingly calculated reform initiatives of 2003–2004, a period of static set in, during which the initial reforms begun by King Abdullah effectively ground to a halt. It would take another five years before Saudi Arabia entered a *third* wave of reforms. In February 2009, King Abdullah announced a range of new ministerial, legal and bureaucratic appointments that were surprising in scope and timing. It was the king's first major reshuffle since his ascension to the throne five years earlier. One significant appointment was that of Prince Faisal b. 'Abdallah b. Muhammad as the new education minister, who is regarded as progressive. No less noteworthy, although probably of less significance, was the appointment of a woman as deputy education minister, in charge of girls' affairs. As if that was not a sufficient affront to the conservative, misogynist Saudi clerical establishment, King Abdullah also used his powers to make sweeping changes in its leadership. Not only was a hardliner removed as head of the Supreme Council of Justice (replaced by the king's close adviser, Salih b. Humayd, the President of the *Majlis al-Shura*), but also the heads of the Commission of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, of the Permanent Council of Religious Research and Fatwas, and of the Council of the Supreme Judicial Council of Judges were removed, while part of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars was replaced. In the following months, the debate between reformists and conservatives culminated in several rather dramatic events. The zenith was reached in August 2010, when King Abdullah took position in the 'fatwa chaos'—one decree even more embarrassing than the other—and declared that only a limited number of 'approved' senior clerics were allowed to issue fatwas.

These last series of reforms look more profound than the earlier ones. The reform process's wavering character, however, persisted. In May 2009, it was announced that the municipal councils' mandate was extended for another two years, effectively postponing the elections. Also, very little was heard about improving women's rights, including the right to vote. In general terms, one should realize that the reform process is totally dependent on the grace of King Abdullah and has not acquired a momentum of its own among the Saudi citizenry (notwithstanding the 'explosion' of anti-clerical articles in the Saudi press). One could (and should) even argue that with the weakening of the power of the clerical establishment, the Al Sa'ud has increased its power. True, the present king enjoys a level of popularity that is seldom acquired by a ruler with such extensive powers, but the 'devil is in the succession'. The recent appointment of Prince Nayif as second deputy prime minister was greeted with alarm by the reformists. It is a euphemism to say that his commitment to following the path set by King Abdullah is far from guaranteed and 'he might well prefer to revert back to the more conventional, less consultative rule of King Fahd'. Undeniably, progress is easily reversible and the path of reform remains far from certain.

It is well known that the House of Sa'ud has unremittingly ruled Saudi Arabia since 1932 in an authoritarian fashion, and the centre of power has remained firmly closed off from contestation. Nonetheless, as shown above, there were times of 'openings'—however small they have been—followed by 'closings' (of different shapes and sizes). Let us now have a look at how this can be analysed in terms of inclusion and exclusion, knowing that these are two sides of the same coin in so far as both are invoked to maintain power.

The Report

The three sub-reports presented here in the overall report are part of our research proposal, which is a response to the original tender as it was drawn up by IRP. It is therefore fitting to start out by referring to the link between the tender and the research proposal and how we have found ways to answer the basic questions that we were posed and how they fit into the broader historical background sketched above.

Civil Society

The original tender stated that this sub-project attempts to understand what civil society means in the context of Saudi Arabia. It held that this 'is a fundamental question, since there is little systematic knowledge about the extent, character, or effectiveness of civil society organizations in the Kingdom'. It proceeded to ask:

> [...] what does the concept 'civil society', or al-mojtama' al-madani, mean in the context of Saudi Arabia? What forms does it take in real life: does it refer to NGO-like organizations as well as 'traditional' gatherings of men or women to socialize and discuss matters of mutual interests? What is the position of political parties, religious institutions, or charity organizations in civil society? Are these really 'civil', or 'un-civil', as in an extension of the state?

In the project proposal, senior researcher Paul Aarts responded to these questions on a rather pessimistic note:

> [...] contrary to optimistic predictions, and after more than two decades of civil society promotion, not much improvement has been made and it increasingly looks like civil society is not the force of democratization as it was supposed to be. According to critics, civil society, defined as 'the zone of voluntary associational life beyond family ties but separate from the state', can be a source of democratic change but it is not inherently one.

Aarts argued that most civil society organizations support the status quo: '[...] despite its impressive growth in many countries, [they] have not made a real dent in the region's surprisingly resilient authoritarianism. While this applies to the Middle East in general, it seems that Saudi Arabia is the case where this applies *par excellence*'.

Despite these warnings, the research report that Mariwan Kanie has written is much more optimistic and presents more promising prospects for civil society. Kanie argues that in the literature on civil society, 'the emphasis on the state's power to create, control and incorporate civil society organizations has underestimated the significance of civil society organizations as a counter-weight to authoritarian power'. Contrary to the pessimists, Kanie adopts a different point of view: 'without ignoring the role of the state in regulating and subjugating societal forces, this research goes beyond the state-centric approach of analysing the relationship between the

state and civil society. Instead, it looks mainly at the dynamics within civil society itself and its political and semi-political roles'.

The main reason for optimism, Kanie argues, lies in the common language of civil and human rights that these civil organizations speak. Based on the theory of 'speech-acts', he demonstrates that language has the force to change society and that the neglect of language in research on civil society in Saudi Arabia has underestimated the potential for change that these organizations present. Kanie's original approach throws a different light on civil society in Saudi Arabia in all its different forms.

The Position of Women

In regard to the position of women, the original tender stated that 'there is still little in-depth knowledge about the position of women in Saudi Arabia. The information that is available is often one-sided. Women in Saudi Arabia are often presented as lacking civil rights and having limited possibilities to be active in the public sphere'. It went on to argue that 'over the past twenty years Saudi women's access to education has, however, increased sharply. But while an increasing number of Saudi women are graduating from colleges and universities, they are not yet gaining secure employment or taking on income-generating activities'.

The tender's assignment was to research the position of women in education, employment and participation in civil society. It held that 'these are three areas where change is relevant and might be viable'. It furthermore asked:

> What are the main obstacles that women encounter in their search for education and employment? Who are the main agents of change in the field of women's education and employment and what are their main goals? Which forms of civic participation do women in Saudi Arabia engage in? What are the main objectives of women's charity organizations, and which women are actively involved in these organizations?

Senior researcher, Professor Karin van Nieuwkerk, responded in the research proposal by stating that 'Western development policies regarding Arab women are often criticized for their Western conceptual framework and lack of understanding of the cultural, historical and religious background of the region'. She is critical of the Western assumption in regard to the position of women in the Arab world: 'the concepts of "Women in Development", "Autonomy", and recently "Empowerment" have been debated for their (un)suitability for Arab women'. Van Nieuwkerk pointed out that 'in the 2005 Report—completely devoted to the position of women in the Arab World—the descriptive term "the Rise of Women" is preferred'. She pointed out that the report 'affirms the principle of difference between the sexes without implying discrimination or the comprehensive superiority of one sex over the other'. Additionally, the report argues that 'making the most of this difference, and ensuring human dignity, can be a strong basis for human advancement'.

Karin van Nieuwkerk then proceeded to define the angle that the report should adopt in analysing the position of women in Saudi Arabia: 'this proposal works from the idea that policies can only be successfully implemented if it works from the own understandings and experiences of women in the region'. As gender segregation (*ikhtilat*) is a cornerstone of the Saudis' interpretation of Islam, this should be the starting point for the research. Van Nieuwkerk argued that 'in Western analyses female segregation is usually understood as an important barrier to women's advancement and participation. Yet in accordance with the *Arab Human Development Report*, it could also be understood as epitomizing "difference between the sexes" of which "the

most should be made"'. She ended the research proposal by stating that 'this is at least what appears to be done by Saudi women themselves as they create—or demand the state should create—parallel female institutions in many social fields, including education, the labour market, civil society, leisure and consumption'.

Based on the suggestion to study the position of women from the perspective of Saudi women themselves, the topics advanced by IRP—such as women and the labour market and women and education—have been researched within the framework of gender segregation. The assumption was that 'women seem to appropriate the state discourse on segregation in order to reach their own aims. How and why and in what ways they intend to do so will be investigated in this project'. This led to the main research question: 'how far do Saudi women perceive and experience the creation of parallel female spaces in education, the workforce and civil society as a viable strategy for furthering the "rise of women"?'

It furthermore raised related questions, such as: What forms or level of segregation or desegregation do women aspire for in public spaces? Which new developments enforced by the state or initiated by women are taking place with regard to segregation? What kind of religious idioms are used by the state and religious actors, as well as by women, to support their claims and ideas? Which practical opportunities and constraints are experienced by women as pertaining to the fields of education, labour and the institutions of civil society? How far do differences exist in views between the older generation of elite women and younger generations of Saudi women? Who are the benefactors of and power holders in the segregated spaces? Which other strategies for enhancing women's participation in public life are envisaged? How do women themselves define the 'empowerment' of women or strive for 'the rise of women' in Saudi Arabia?

Intellectual Debates

In relation to the third topic, intellectual debates, the tender text stated that 'in recent years there has been a more and more lively public debate in Saudi Arabia about a number of societal issues, including the position of women and their political and societal participation'. It specified that:

> [...] in the various discussions on the role of civil society, the position of women and human rights, one is often confronted with divergent views and discourses. Therefore the question arises as to what are the different debates in Saudi society on the concepts of civil society, (human) rights and the position of women. What are the venues of these debates, and how are they disseminated and communicated?

The assignment was to concentrate on 'How do various groups in Saudi Arabia define the concept of human rights? What are the discussions on said themes in fora such as the Shura Council, Centre for National Dialogue, the Human Rights Commission and within societal groups such as the business community, *'ulama'* and rights activists?' IRP was specifically interested in issues related to 'constraints (political, technical, or cultural) for public debates in [Saudi Arabia], who are able to speak out and who are not, and who are listened to and who are not, and how are people able to claim a position of authority?'

In the project proposal, Roel Meijer and Joas Wagemakers responded by stating that:

> [...] the limited freedom of expression as a result of the authoritarian nature of the regimes does not mean that there are no debates or that the Middle East does not have a lively press. Although there are red lines that should not be crossed,

divergent points of view can be found in both the official and independent press, as well as television broadcasts.

They went on to confirm that the increased importance of satellite channels such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiyya, which are difficult to control and monitor by national governments, has added extra vigour to the debates taking place. They confirmed the importance of debates and acknowledged that 'in Saudi Arabia the protests and even the terrorist attacks we have seen over the past two decades were not simply attempts to stage coups, but were often accompanied by fierce and lively intellectual debates about the role of the state, transparency, accountability, human rights, equality, religion and freedom of speech and organization'.

Meijer and Wagemakers came up with the following research questions: 'to what extent are free intellectual debates taking place in Saudi Arabia and what is their potential for social and political reform?' They were especially interested in the subjects discussed in these debates, whether women are involved in these debates, who the different players are in these debates, to what extent the state tries to control them, or whether the debates simply reflect the infighting between the different princes, making them fairly inconsequential. They were also interested in the role that religion and the religious scholars play in these debates, and whether they take on a national Saudi character or whether the debates are much more universal and/or religious in nature. They were also highly interested in the debates on Shiites.

The sub-report on intellectual debates ultimately concentrated on three subjects: the debate on the position of women and *ikhtilat*; the position of Shiites in Saudi Arabia; and debates on social and political reform.

As Joas Wagemakers' contribution can be read as a general introduction to the main issues in Saudi Arabia and corresponds to the other two reports by Mariwan Kanie and Annemarie van Geel, we decided to reverse the sequence of studies and put his contribution first, followed by that of Mariwan Kanie and then the study by Annemarie van Geel.

1. Arguing for Change under Benevolent Oppression: Intellectual Trends and Debates in Saudi Arabia

Joas Wagemakers

This section deals with intellectual trends and debates in Saudi Arabia and focuses on three themes: disputes about gender segregation; Shi'a discussions on Saudi citizenship; and nationwide Saudi debates on social and political reform. Because of the dominance of Wahhabism in Saudi society, participants in these debates are divided into three groups: conservative Wahhabis; pragmatic Wahhabi reformers; and anti-Wahhabi reformers. The section concludes that in all three areas, lively debates are taking place between (and among) these three groups, and that reformist ideas are gaining more adherents. At the same time, however, this has not led to substantial social or political reform but has mostly resulted in token measures to make the current system more bearable without actually changing it. Yet because Saudi Arabia is not a brutal dictatorship but has a regime that needs to take society's views into account, reformers may in the long term be victorious.

1.1 Introduction

In dealing with the topic of intellectual trends and debates in Saudi Arabia, it is important to bear in mind the ideological context in which all of these debates take place. Wahhabism, the Saudi state's version of Islam, is a constantly present factor in Saudi society through Saudi Arabia's laws, education, television programmes, regularly issued fatwas on social and moral issues, the judicial system and religious organizations such as the Committee for Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong (*Hay'at al-Amr bi-l-Ma'ruf wa-l-Nahy 'an al-Munkar*). Consequently, the participants in any intellectual debates taking place in Saudi Arabia have to deal with Wahhabism, or at least cannot simply ignore it as if it does not exist. For this reason, it is justifiable to categorize the participants in current intellectual debates in Saudi Arabia according to their stance towards Wahhabism. As such, we can distinguish three basic categories of people who take part in the debates that are dealt with in this section of this report:

- *Conservative Wahhabis*, a category that consists of religious scholars as well as lay people who resist social and/or religious liberalization and adhere strictly to the teachings of Wahhabism. The Saudi state should, in their view, be the political expression of the true form of Islam as embodied by Wahhabism, and they are consequently highly sceptical of changes other than those that take Saudi Arabia in a more conservative, religious direction;
- *Pragmatic Wahhabi reformers*, who can be divided into two further categories: 1) pragmatic Wahhabis, who—like conservative Wahhabis—want to retain the religious Saudi system of social influence and the institutes in which it is expressed, but who realize that a total resistance to change is unacceptable to the people, so are therefore willing to make small concessions in order to preserve the system as a whole; and 2) Wahhabi reformers who are more liberal in their religious ideas than conservative Wahhabis and whose views are also more broadly informed, incorporating concepts derived from (international) politics and philosophy;
- *Anti-Wahhabi reformers*, who can also be divided into two groups: 1) Shi'a reformers, whose own religious background, although Islamic, is fundamentally different from Wahhabism and who are therefore positioned outside Wahhabi religious discourse altogether; and 2) liberal reformers, who are generally religious themselves but who place their efforts to reform Saudi Arabia in a mostly secular framework.

The point of this categorization is not that all thinkers and intellectuals take Wahhabism as their intellectual point of departure, but that all Saudis—simply because they live in Saudi Arabia— will have to take Wahhabism into account whether they like it or not, even if only as something that they reject.

The categorization mentioned is obviously complemented by other considerations, such as proximity to the rulers and the system over which they preside, particularly regarding religious scholars, who are sometimes employed by (and thus dependent on) the state, while others are more independent, giving them more freedom to say what they want. With this in mind, the following sections will analyse intellectual trends and debates in Saudi Arabia through the prism of the categorization given above, focusing on three different themes: disputes on gender segregation (*ikhtilat*); Shi'a discussions on Saudi citizenship; and nationwide Saudi debates on social and political reform.

The research methodology employed consists of discourse analysis of texts produced by Saudi scholars, thinkers and writers of different political and religious persuasions on all three issues. These textual sources include books, newspapers, websites, Facebook and Twitter, although the latter two were used more to discern what issues were discussed at any given moment by Saudis than for real input into the intellectual debates that are dealt with here. Given the diversity of the authors responsible for the texts used, the character of the sources ranges from conservative to liberal and from espousing the various viewpoints of Wahhabism to propagating the many ideas of the Shi'a. The discourse analysis consisted of analysing the use of the terms that are central to the Saudi debates and how authors from various traditions tried to appropriate these for their own cause.

The textual research conducted for this report was complemented by fieldwork, consisting of some 25 semi-structured (group) interviews with thinkers, activists, local leaders, religious scholars and businesspeople, ranging in age from young adults in their 20s to middle-aged men and women, as well as many more informal conversations. The choice of interviewees was partly a conscious one to include a broad cross-section of society, but it was also dictated by circumstances. Because of this author's gender, it was difficult to interview Saudi women; conservative scholars also refused any requests for an interview. Similarly, incidental meetings were sometimes cancelled because of the tense situation in the Eastern Province in 2011. Fortunately, the two groups that were largely unavailable—that is, women and conservative

religious scholars—are dealt with in this report in, respectively, Annemarie van Geel's research and the textual analysis of religious scholarly writings. The fieldwork was greatly assisted by my Saudi counterpart, the critical journalist Husayn al-'Alaq, who arranged appointments and interviews for me.

1.2 Disputes on Gender Segregation

1.2.1 Contextual Factors

Regarding the debates on gender segregation at work, at school, in waiting rooms and in other public places, two more contextual factors have to be taken into account. The first is the position of women in an Islamic state, which is what Saudi Arabia is said to be. Saudi women's limited rights can be attributed to the country's Wahhabi heritage, which has ensured that their position has become emblematic of the kingdom's character as an Islamic state in the eyes of conservative Wahhabis and, moreover, can relatively easily be controlled.[1] Given the importance of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, women's rights should thus be seen as far more important than simply a moral issue, but have actually become what might be called the litmus test of Saudi Arabia's status as an Islamic society.[2]

The second contextual factor that is relevant here is the influence of state-employed religious scholars. Since at least the nineteenth century, the power of the scholars has decreased to such an extent that they have become wholly subservient to the regime.[3] This decline of their influence over politics was often offset by an increase in power in social and religious issues, however, including (especially) women's rights in society. Considering the increasingly limited powers that Wahhabi scholars are given by their rulers, it is not surprising that they have exploited their mandate to the full by elaborating greatly about relatively insignificant religious issues regarding women, such as menstruation, birth, dress and gender segregation.[4]

1.2.2 Conservative Wahhabis on Ikhtilat

Given these contextual factors, it is only fitting that we look for a definition of *ikhtilat* in conservative Wahhabi writings. It is striking, however, how little effort is made in their work to say exactly what *ikhtilat* means. Even those who do try to define the concept remain vague and refer to situations in which men and women meet and in which 'intimacy' and 'informality' may

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1   Eleanor Abdella Doumato, 'Education in Saudi Arabia: Gender, Jobs, and the Price of Religion', in Eleanor Abdella Doumato (ed.), *Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy, Society* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003), pp. 242–243 and 255–256; Eleanor Abdella Doumato, 'Gender, Monarchy, and National Identity in Saudi Arabia', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1992), p. 32. See also Eleanor Abdella Doumato, 'Saudi Arabia', in Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin (eds), *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa* (New York/Lanham, MD: Freedom House/Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), p. 1; and Eleanor Abdella Doumato, 'Women and Work in Saudi Arabia: How Flexible are the Islamic Margins?', *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (autumn 1999), p. 575.
2   Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 130.
3   Guido Steinberg, Religion und Staat in Saudi Arabien: Die wahhabitischen Gelehrten, 1902–1953 (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2002), pp. 427–469.
4   See also Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*, pp. 129–131.

materialize between them.[5] It is nevertheless on the basis of this somewhat vague idea of *ikhtilat* that the discussion about the mixing or segregation of sexes takes place in Saudi Arabia.

The most important arguments used by conservative Wahhabis are clearly religious in nature. The first way that this is expressed is by quoting verses from the Qur'an as well as *hadith*s (traditions about the Prophet Muhammad). The number of verses and *hadith*s cited in this respect are far too numerous to reproduce here, but several examples suffice to give an idea of the conservatives' point of view. Although the Qur'an is not quoted very often on this topic, one verse that is regularly mentioned as related to the topic of *ikhtilat* is Q. 24: 30–31, which states: 'Say to the believers, that they cast down their eyes […] and say to the believing women, that they cast down their eyes'.[6] This verse, several authors state, shows that Muslim men and women who are not married and unrelated may not look at one another. The reason is that this can create feelings of lust and lead to adultery (*zina*), a grave sin. If this is the case, the authors argue, how can *ikhtilat* be allowed? They believe that the mixing of genders encourages men and women to look at each other and therefore goes directly against this Qur'anic prohibition.[7] This is obviously further reinforced by verses such as Q. 33: 33, which tells the wives of the Prophet to 'remain in your houses'. Although the authors quoting this verse acknowledge that it was first mentioned regarding the wives of Muhammad only, they state that it is agreed by the scholars of Islam that it also applies to modern women, meaning that women can only go outside if they really have to.[8]

The overwhelming number of sources quoted by the conservative Wahhabi participants in debates on *ikhtilat* are *hadith*s. They cite numerous traditions about the life of the Prophet Muhammad in which, among many other topics mentioned, men and women are ordered to walk separately when leaving the mosque[9] and, especially, it seems that the circumambulation (*tawaf*) of the *Ka'ba*, the cubical structure in the Grand Mosque of Mecca, used to be segregated by gender. The implication of the latter point is that if it is forbidden for men and women to mix during this ritual, which is part of the annual *hajj* (pilgrimage) when so many other Muslims can see and correct you, it is even more sinful to meet with the opposite sex in less controlled contexts.[10]

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5   Exceptions include Khalid b. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Shayi', *Al-Ikhtilat wa-Atharuhu l-Shani'a*, online at http://saaid.net/Doat/shaya/48.htm (undated, but accessed on 1 November 2011), originally published in the Saudi newspaper *Al-Iqtisadiyya* on 30 May 2008; and Sa'ud b. Muhammad b. Humud al-'Uqayli, *Mafhum al-Ikhtilat bayna l-Ta'sil wa-l-Tadlil*, online at http://saaid.net/female/0143.htm (undated, but accessed on 1 November 2011). These documents and others downloaded from this website are only available in HTML format, which means that there are no page numbers that can be referred to.

6   This Qur'anic verse is taken from A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Touchstone, 1996 [1955]).

7   See, for example, Abu Sara, *Hadatha hadha.. fi Ihda l-Mustashfayat?!!*, online at http://saaid.net./female/h21.htm (undated, but accessed on 1 November 2011); and Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Rahman al-'Urayfi, *'Ashruna Dalilan 'ala Hurmat Ikhtilat al-Rijal bi-l-Nisa'*, online at http://saaid.net/female/0169.htm (undated, but accessed on 1 November 2011).

8   Ibrahim al-Azraq, *Al-Ikhtilat 'indama Yakunu Manhajiyyan Munazziman*, online at http://saaid.net/female/0142.htm (undated, but accessed on 1 November 2011); and Muhammad b. Ibrahim Al al-Shaykh, *Risala fi l-Ikhtilat*, online at http://saaid.net/female/r56.htm (undated, but accessed on 1 November 2011).

9   See, for example, al-Shayi', *Al-Ikhtilat*; and Sultan al-'Umari, *Akthar min 20 Kalima fi l-Ikhtilat (Nusus wa-Niqashat 'Aqliyya li-Man Kana lahu Qalb)*, online at http://saaid.net/female/0154.htm (undated, but accessed on 1 November 2011).

10 See, for instance, 'Ali al-'Ajami, *Al-Ikhtilat fi l-Tawaf?*, online at http://saaid.net/female/0156.htm (undated, but accessed on 1 November 2011); and 'Abdallah b. 'Abd al-'Aziz al-'Anqari, *La Jadid fi*

The specific texts against the practice of *ikhtilat* already hint at the second religious argument that conservative Wahhabis use to express their opposition to the mixing of genders, namely their belief that women are sources of seduction and that giving in to this may well lead to moral decay and debauchery. One author connects the question of *ikhtilat* with the much more commonly accepted headscarf (*hijab*) and states that both the latter and gender separation serve the same goal: to keep men from looking at women. This must be enforced in order to uphold 'the preservation of the woman (*sawn al-mar'a*), the purification of the man (*tazkiyat al-rajul*) and the protection of society from the spread of depravity (*hafz al-mujtama' min intishar al-radhila*)'.[11] The behaviour of women is clearly seen as a potential buffer against, but also as a possible road to, widespread moral decay. One author describes women as 'a temptation (*fitna*) to men' and lauds the role of religious scholars, who 'stand as an impenetrable barrier (*saddan mani'an*) against the corrupters (*al-mufassadin*)' regarding women's issues.[12] This protection against the seduction of women through the prohibition of *ikhtilat* is needed, one author states, because genders mixing 'is the most important reason for adultery to take place', which, in turn, will lead to children being born out of wedlock. Since the one leads to the other, the acceptance of *ikhtilat* necessarily means the acceptance of adultery and illegitimate children too, thereby rendering the mixing of genders as completely unacceptable.[13]

In order to 'prove' that *ikhtilat* does indeed lead to the kind of moral decay that some authors predict, Western countries—where the mixing of genders in virtually all places is almost universally accepted—are often mentioned as examples of how things can go terribly wrong. European countries are presented as places where homosexuality is widely accepted, apparently as a result of genders mixing, and where being involved in a homosexual relationship is no longer seen as a sin, even by the clergy of some churches.[14] Another author presents statistics showing the numbers of women suffering from sexual harassment in the West as a result of *ikhtilat*. Allowing genders to mix in the West is bad enough, he claims, but it would be even worse if it was allowed in Saudi Arabia, since Western countries provide an alternative to sexual harassment, namely adultery. Since this is also forbidden in Saudi Arabia, allowing *ikhtilat* would apparently open the floodgates of male sexual harassment of women.[15] Considering this strong connection between *ikhtilat* and the West, it is not surprising that several authors claim that efforts to allow genders to mix are actually attempts to spread corruption in Saudi society by 'Westernizers' (*taghribiyyin*), thereby delegitimizing their opponents.[16]

1.2.3   Counter Arguments from a Divided Society

One might expect arguments such as those mentioned by conservative Wahhabi scholars to be considered unacceptable by certain parts of Saudi society, and this is indeed the case. Surprisingly, however, one of the most powerful recent voices arguing in favour of *ikhtilat* turned out to be Sheikh Ahmad b. Qasim al-Ghamidi, who gave two interviews to the Saudi

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Hukm al-Ikhtilat, online at http://saaid.net/female/0166.htm (undated, but accessed on 1 November 2011).

11   Abu Sara, *Hadatha*.

12   Al-'Ajami, *Al-Ikhtilat*.

13   Abu Sara, Li-Madha *l-Nisa' 'indakum la Yukhalitna l-Rijal al-Ajanib ?!*, online at http://saaid.net/female/h34.htm (undated, but accessed on 1 November 2011).

14   Ibrahim b. 'Abdallah al-Azraq, *Al-Ikhtilat bayna l-Jinsayn wa-Zahiratay l-Su'ar wa-l-Shudhud*, online at http://saaid.net/female/0195.htm (undated, but accessed on 1 November 2011).

15   Sa'ud b. Muhammad al-'Uqayli, *Al-Raja'iyyun wa-l-Ikhtilat*, online at http://saaid.net/female/0155.htm (undated, but accessed on 1 November 2011).

16   Ibrahim b. 'Abdallah al-Azraq, *Ihsa'iyyat wa-Arqam min al-Mujtama'at allati lam Tura'I li-l-Ikhtilat Hurma!*, online at http://saaid.net/female/0186.htm (undated, but accessed on 1 November 2011); and Sa'ud b. Muhammad b. Humud al-'Uqayli, *Mafhum al-Ikhtilat bayna l-Ta'sil wa-l-Tadlil*, online at http://saaid.net/female/0143.htm (undated, but accessed on 1 November 2011).

newspaper *'Ukaz* in late 2009 in which he clearly stated that *ikhtilat* is not forbidden in Islam. Not only is al-Ghamidi a religious scholar, but what made his criticism of conservative Wahhabis more painful to them was that he is the head of the Committee for Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Mecca. In other words, he is part of the very same religious establishment as his conservative opponents in this debate.

Al-Ghamidi, who can be classified as a Wahhabi reformer, stated that *ikhtilat* was a natural thing that was not forbidden by any clear texts. Instead, he offers dozens of *hadith*s that seem to indicate that the Prophet Muhammad himself, as well as his companions, regularly mixed with women who were neither their wives nor their relatives.[17] Moreover, al-Ghamidi attacks the evidence presented by conservative Wahhabis against *ikhtilat*. Describing the *hadith*s that they use as 'weak' (that is, whose authenticity is doubted), he dismisses many of the proofs they use and sometimes reinterprets their evidence. He claims, for example, that the circumambulation of the *Ka'ba* was never segregated by gender, unlike conservatives claim, and that the only reason women did not mingle with men inside the *Ka'ba* was because it would result in a crowded situation where men and women touch each other's bodies, which is forbidden. Without this or any lustful intentions, al-Ghamidi claims, *ikhtilat* is not prohibited and it would be sinful to claim otherwise.[18]

As Meijer has pointed out, conservatives did not mince words in their response to al-Ghamidi's views in 2009 and 2010. He was condemned as misguided and ignorant and accused of associating with liberals and expressing his views in the liberal Saudi press. Major scholars, such as the Saudi state's mufti (legal scholars), rejected his views and tried to discredit him as a scholar. Interestingly, however, Saudi Arabia's anti-Wahhabi reformers also generally took a rather dim view of al-Ghamidi, even though one might expect them to stand up for him and his views. Meijer has shown that some Wahhabi reformers may have feared al-Ghamidi's challenge to religious scholars in general and that some liberals felt that one should not assume the power of the mufti by making such seemingly authoritative statements.[19]

Research for this sub-section of this paper confirms and complements Meijer's conclusions that even liberal reformers were generally not very enthusiastic about al-Ghamidi's views. The reason for this is that their views are informed by entirely different sources. While al-Ghamidi remained firmly inside the boundaries of Wahhabi tradition, albeit while reaching a different conclusion, many anti-Wahhabi reformers base their views on global ideas of equal rights and duties, such as those expressed in the 1979 UN General Assembly Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).[20] Several interviewed activists indicated that it was such ideas—and not liberal interpretations of the Wahhabi tradition—that underpinned their views. Their discourse on *ikhtilat* and women's rights therefore basically comes down to saying that it is ridiculous that women do not enjoy equal rights in Saudi Arabia and that they should get them as soon as possible, preferably in the context of general civil and human rights for all in the kingdom.[21] This probably also accounts for their less than

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17 *'Ukaz*, online at www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20091209/PrinCon20091209319589.htm, 9 December 2009 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

18 *'Ukaz*, online at www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20091210/PrinCon20091210319785.htm, 10 December 2009 (accessed on 1 November 2011). For an overview of al-Ghamidi's arguments, see also www.memri.org/report/en/print5444.htm (accessed on 1 November 2011). For a broader analysis of his views and the context in which they were expressed, see Roel Meijer, 'Reform in Saudi Arabia: The Gender-Segregation Debate', *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (winter 2010), pp. 80–100.

19 Meijer, 'Reform in Saudi Arabia', pp. 90–91.

20 See www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm (accessed on 1 November 2011) for the full text of this convention.

21 Interviews with several women's rights activists in Jeddah and Riyadh, March 2011.

enthusiastic views of al-Ghamidi's ideas on *ikhtilat*. Despite his willingness to change, he is still a Wahhabi and remains within the 'fatwa sphere'.[22]

Anti-Wahhabi proponents of women's rights in Saudi Arabia similarly dismiss efforts by pragmatic Wahhabis to make concessions to societal demands for change while trying to preserve the religious system as a whole. The important Wahhabi scholar 'Abd al-Muhsin al-'Ubaykan, for instance, issued a fatwa in 2010 allowing the breastfeeding of adult men. Since it is not forbidden according to the *shari'a* for women to be in the same room with the men that they suckled, giving some mother's milk to an unrelated man could solve the 'problem' of *ikhtilat* and allow gender-mixing in the workplace. Although this fatwa may well have been intended as an attempt to give in to calls to allow *ikhtilat* while simultaneously trying to preserve the system of religious and scholarly dominance over such issues, al-'Ubaykan and his opinion were ridiculed by Saudi liberals.[23]

To a secularized Western audience, such resistance against anything less than full and equal rights independent of religion may sound admirable. In Saudi Arabia, however, where the Wahhabi ideology dominates the discourse on such matters, it does not. To be sure, liberal Saudis sometimes engage in a religious discourse that is similar to al-Ghamidi's to defend *ikhtilat*,[24] but since particularly anti-Wahhabi reformers want to abandon the religio-political discourse altogether and refuse to make their political and social rights dependent on sacred texts, they mostly use the secular argument of universal equal rights.[25] This may be a principled stance, but it does put them at a disadvantage *vis-à-vis* the exponents of Saudi Arabia's dominant ideological trend: to influence Wahhabis and to be taken seriously by them, anti-Wahhabi reformers have to adopt Wahhabi discourse, but in order to articulate their own rights as they see fit, liberals have to abandon it and refute men such as al-Ghamidi and al-'Ubaykan. This means that while discussions continue in newspapers and in social media like Twitter, many of whose Saudi users mentioned the issue of *ikhtilat* throughout 2011, conservatives are likely to continue to dominate the debate on gender segregation.

1.3 Shi'a Debates on Saudi Citizenship

1.3.1 Contextual Factors

Like the question of *ikhtilat*, Shi'a debates on Saudi citizenship need to be contextualized and, in this case, cannot be detached from the general position of the Shi'a in the kingdom. This position

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22 Interview with a Saudi businesswoman who preferred not to have her name mentioned, Jeddah, 12 October 2011.

23 For an overview of this issue, see Y. Admon, *Controversy in Saudi Arabia over Fatwa Permitting Breastfeeding of Adults*, online at www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/4484.htm, 28 July 2010 (accessed on 1 November 2011). Similar efforts by other scholars to incorporate women's rights into Wahhabi discourse were dismissed by the interviewed activists as nothing more than conservative attempts to stifle women's rights; email messages by women's rights activists from Dammam, Qatif, Riyadh, Safwa and Dhahran.

24 See, for instance, *Al-Riyad*, online at www.alriyadh.com/2009/10/03/article463556.print, 3 October 2009 (accessed on 1 November 2011); and *Al-Watan*, online at www.alwatan.com.sa/Articles/Detail.aspx?ArticleId=2710, 18 October 2010 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

25 See, for example, *Al-Riyad*, online at www.alriyadh.com/2007/03/25/article235890.print, 25 March 2007 (accessed on 1 November 2011); and *Al-Watan*, online at www.alwatan.com.sa/Articles/Detail.aspx?ArticleId=419, 25 May 2010 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

is dominated by two factors: first, their religious background as seen by Wahhabi scholars; and second, their geographical position in Saudi Arabia. Their religious background refers to the fact that Wahhabi ideologues, for whom strict monotheism (*tawhid*) is of paramount importance, often speak of Shi'a Islam as polytheism (*shirk*) because of its adherents' reverence for their Imam 'Ali and his son Husayn, among others. Wahhabis also blame the Shi'a for refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of the first three successors to Muhammad (the caliphs) and often call the Shi'a *rafida* or *rawafid* (rejecters). Such derogatory terms, combined with the accusation of their supposed loyalty to Shi'a Iran, have led to a situation in which the Saudi Shi'a are often viewed not only as deviant or even apostate Muslims, but also as a fifth column in a future conflict with Iran.[26]

The second contextual factor that needs to be taken into account is that most of the Saudi kingdom's Shi'a live in the country's oil-rich Eastern Province.[27] This means that much of Saudi Arabia's wealth is hidden in the ground on which they live, but that the money generated by this source disproportionately benefits the central region of Najd, the heartland of both Wahhabism and the Saudi state. While the Shi'a have attained good positions in oil companies that are active in the Eastern Province, they have not been allowed to rise to the top in business, diplomacy or politics because of the glass ceiling of sectarianism. As such, the Saudi Shi'a often feel frustrated over the discrimination that they suffer in many spheres of life. The Shi'a are surely not the only group in Saudi Arabia that feels discriminated against. Immigrant labourers, for example, are also sometimes treated badly by their employers and as a group enjoy few rights or even means to stand up to the abuse that they suffer. Their position is distinct from the Saudi Shi'a, however, since the Shi'a are Saudi nationals, while immigrant temporary workers are non-citizens whose cause concerns human rights rather than civil rights.[28]

1.3.2 Citizenship as an Alternative

The Shi'a in the Eastern Province have responded in different ways to the discrimination that they have suffered. While some expressed revolutionary ideas in the past, one increasing trend among Saudi Shi'a intellectuals is to argue for full citizenship (*muwatana*) in Saudi Arabia for all citizens.[29]

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26 Guido Steinberg, 'Jihadi-Salafism and the Shi'is: Remarks about the Intellectual Roots of anti-Shi'ism', in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (London/New York: Hurst & Co./Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 107–125, esp. pp. 111–116; and Joas Wagemakers, '*Soennitische islamisten en de erfenis van de Islamitische Revolutie*', *ZemZem*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2009), pp. 55–59.

27 Medina in the west also has a Shi'a community, and the south of Saudi Arabia is partly inhabited by Isma'ili Shi'a. These are far less involved in intellectual debates and trends, however, and will therefore not be dealt with in this report.

28 For a detailed overview of the Shi'a's position in the Eastern Province and a more elaborate discussion of the concept of citizenship in Shi'a discourse, see Roel Meijer and Joas Wagemakers, 'The Struggle for Citizenship of the Shiites in Saudi Arabia', in Brigitte Maréchal and Sami Zemni (eds), *The Dynamics of Sunni–Shia Relationships: Doctrine, Transnationalism, Intellectuals and the Media* (London: Hurst & Co., forthcoming 2012).

29 For a detailed description of the transition from revolutionary ideas to moderation among Shi'a thinkers, see Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia* (London and San Francisco, CA: Saqi Books, 2006), pp. 105–177.

1.3.3 Anti-Sectarianism

Shi'a discourse in Saudi Arabia is dominated by an emphasis on inclusiveness and anti-sectarianism. Tawfiq al-Sayf, for example, a respected Shi'a sociologist, argues against sectarianism and incitement in Saudi Arabia (in religious sermons, schoolbooks, and on television, etc.) and even calls for a law prohibiting this. He writes that all scholars of law and politics know that the 'freedom of opinion (*huriyyat al-ra'y*) is an undisputed right'. At the same time, however, this right must be exercised responsibly, he states.[30] This latter remark, which seems to be directed at Wahhabi scholars such as Sheikh Muhammad al-'Urayfi, who regularly engages in anti-Shi'a discourse,[31] is echoed by many other Shi'a writers.[32]

There is a strong tendency among Shi'a thinkers to blame politics for the use of sectarianism. One author, for instance, refers to sectarianism as 'a political toy' (*lu'ba siyasiyya*),[33] while another believes that it is part of a political agenda that will not only hurt the Shi'a but also Sunnis.[34] The belief that sectarianism is a tool in the hands of Saudi politicians that they can use whenever it suits them—expressed partly in loosening and tightening the reigns of religious scholars using anti-Shi'a rhetoric—is strongly connected to the question of Iran. This is particularly the case with Iran's current government, which sometimes employs a rather confrontational discourse and is allegedly trying to obtain nuclear weapons. Several writers wonder why the Shi'a have only been accused of being loyal to and acting as agents of Iran since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, as if Saudi Shi'a did not exist before that time.[35] Another writer dismisses such accusations as 'women's chatter' (*thartharat nisa'*) and states that these attacks are simply used to stoke the flames of sectarianism.[36]

None of these authors who discern political reasons behind sectarianism deny, however, that there is also a strong Wahhabi component about sectarianism, which is independent of any political considerations. One person who does believe that the problem is entirely political is Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a firebrand Shi'a religious scholar. He views sectarian problems between Sunnis and Shi'a as a ploy by the regime to divert attention from its own discrimination of all Saudis and is convinced that, once the regime stays out of this matter, sectarianism will disappear as well.[37] This does not seem to be a position that is shared by many others, however. In fact, some Shi'a see King Abdullah as their ally in combating sectarian tensions among

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30 Tawfiq al-Sayf, '*Na'am li-Tajrim Itharat al-Karahiyya*', *Rasid*, available online at http://rasid.com/print.php?id=35198, 25 January 2010 (accessed on 1 November 2011), originally published in '*Ukaz* on the same date. *Rasid* is a Saudi Shi'a website that collects and reproduces articles on Shi'a, reform, religion and women's rights, etc., from the Saudi (and Arab) press, and also produces original articles.

31 See Meijer and Wagemakers, 'The Struggle for Citizenship of the Shiites in Saudi Arabia'.

32 See, for instance, the prominent Saudi Shi'a thinker Muhammad Mahfuz in Husayn Zayn al-Din, '*Al-Mahfuz: Al-Tahrid al-Ta'ifi Juz' min 'Ajanda Siyasiyya' Tastahdifu l-Sunna wa-l-Shi'a*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=44026, 21 April 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

33 'Abd al-'Azim Hasan al-Khatir, '*Al-Ta'ifiyya Lu'ba Siyasiyya*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=43360, 13 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

34 Zayn al-Din, '*Al-Mahfuz*'.

35 Muhammad al-Mish'al, '*Limadha l-Shi'a?!*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=43436, 18 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011); and Yusuf al-Nimr, '*Imalat al-Shi'a li-Iran.. 'ala Tawilat al-Tashrih*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=43669, 29 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011). See also Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 15.

36 Sami Ahmad, '*Wala' al-Shi'a li-Iran Thartharat Nisa*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=43442, 18 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

37 Interview with Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, al-'Awamiyya, 20 October 2011.

conservative Wahhabi scholars, stress their loyalty to the Saudi kingdom and emphasize that they are just as much part of the Saudi Arabian nation as others. A famous example of this sentiment can be found in the document titled 'Partners in the Homeland' (*Shuraka' fi l-Watan*), which was signed by 450 prominent Shi'a and presented to (then) Crown Prince Abdullah in 2003. They stress that they are 'an original part [...] of the [Saudi] homeland' and that there is 'no alternative to [Saudi Arabia] for them and no loyalty to anything else'.[38]

1.3.4 Tolerance and Pluralism

As an alternative to sectarian tensions between the various sects, many Saudi Shi'a argue for different societal relations altogether, not on the basis of uniformity, as many conservative Wahhabis would prefer, but on the basis of tolerance (*tasamuh*) between different groups and respect for pluralism (*ta'addudiyya*). One thinker who has been instrumental in advocating this point of view is Muhammad Mahfuz. He argues for what may be described as national reconciliation, leading to a new kind of Saudi nationalism that is not based on any one sect but on respect for all of them. This requires not only openness towards others in society and a willingness to accept differences, Mahfuz claims, but also freedom, democracy and equal chances in the economy, society and politics.[39] Other Shi'a authors concur with these views, with one of them calling on the Saudi government to encourage preachers to focus on national unity in their sermons in order 'to strengthen the ties between the sons of the one homeland'.[40]

The vision of religious tolerance and an acceptance of pluralism is given practical meaning by, among others, the prominent Shi'a religious scholar Sheikh Hasan al-Saffar, who has not only published widely on issues related to citizenship,[41] but is also engaged in actually trying to bring Shi'a and Wahhabis together in order to remove stereotypes about each other. Perhaps partly because of his efforts, Saudi Sunnis seem to become more open to the idea of accepting the Shi'a as equals, although it seems that, unlike the issue of women's rights, this may be mostly confined to Sunni intellectuals and has not (yet) permeated broad sections of Saudi society.[42] Nevertheless, a prominent Wahhabi scholar such as 'A'id al-Qarni has argued against the excommunication (*takfir*) of Shi'a and, conversely, insulting the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, a charge of which Shi'a are sometimes accused.[43] Other, less prominent, scholars—such as the Sunni judge from Qatif 'Isa al-Ghayth—strongly agree with this and wholeheartedly

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38 Shuraka' fi l-Watan, online at
    www.aljazeera.net/Portal/Templates/Postings/PocketPcDetailedPage.aspx?PrintPage=True&GUID=
    {D06168A6-Da8B-4339-9FB7-82866AE12A3C}, 30 April 2003 (accessed on 1 November 2011). An
    English translation of this document is available in Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia*, pp. 257–262.

39 Muhammad Mahfuz, '*Al-Shi'a fi l-Sa'udiyya bayna Tatallu'at al-Islah wa-Dughutat al-Waqi*', online at
    www.aljazeera.net/Portal/Templates/Posting/PocketPcDetailedPage.aspx?PrintPage=True&GUID={
    E99EBEF1-7ECD-4BF3-9F68-818F0DDD5D16}, 3 October 2004 (accessed on 1 November 2011).
    Other publications by Mahfuz on this subject include Muhammad Mahfuz (ed.), *Al-Hiwar al-Madhhabi
    fi l-Mamlaka al-'Arabiyya al-Sa'udiyya* (Qatif: Markaz Afaq li-Tadrib wa-l-Dirasat, 2007); and
    Muhammad Mahfuz, *Al-Tasamuh wa-Qadaya l-'Aysh al-Mustarak* (Qatif: Markaz Afaq li-Tadrib wa-l-
    Dirasat, 2007).

40 Walid Sulays, '*Ruhad al-Tawa'if*', *Rasid*, www.rasid.com/print.php?id=45330, 26 July 2011 (accessed
    on 1 November 2011).

41 For a detailed treatment of al-Saffar's contribution to the propagation of tolerance and pluralism, see
    Meijer and Wagemakers, 'The Struggle for Citizenship of the Shiites of Saudi Arabia'.

42 Interview with Ja'far al-Shayib, Tarut, 11 March 2011.

43 'A'id al-Qarni, '*Inzi'u Fatil al-Fitna bayna l-Sunna wa-l-Shi'a*', *Rasid*, available online at
    http://rasid.com/print.php?id=35242, 26 January 2010 (accessed on 1 November 2011), originally
    published in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* on the same date.

endorse Sunni–Shiʻa unity in Saudi Arabia, even looking to the United States as an example of a diverse but nevertheless successful society.[44]

A rejection of sectarianism and an emphasis on religious tolerance does not necessarily imply that the Shiʻa reject the role of religion in Saudi society, although, as we will see, many do use secular arguments to argue in favour of reforms. One author argues for religious tolerance by pointing to the example of the Prophet Muhammad and his kind treatment of former Meccan enemies after he conquered their city.[45] Another even argues for pious leadership, although he acknowledges that even the Shiʻa imam ʻAli b. Abi Talib—although a very pious man—could not establish a harmonious society.[46] One author even warns against viewing a secular state as a panacea for all sectarian problems and the only road to religious tolerance. He mentions Northern Ireland as a country that, despite having a secular state, has not been able to overcome religious tensions and sectarianism.[47]

1.3.5 Citizenship as an Overarching Concept

As we have already seen in the ideas of, for instance, Muhammad Mahfuz, ending sectarianism and establishing religious tolerance also requires an effort by the state and encourages (if not implies) further political reform as well. This is where the concept of citizenship enters the discussion. An increasing number of thinkers and intellectuals among Saudi Shiʻa argue that an end to sectarianism, the promotion of tolerance and the acceptance of pluralism call for a fundamental redefinition of the relationship between the ruler (*al-hakim*) and the ruled (*al-mahkum*). Whereas the position of the ruler in Saudi Arabia is more or less that of a religious tribal leader or the head of an Islamic family who acts as a patron towards those loyal to him and to Islam, as we will see below, those calling for citizenship argue that loyalty to Islam should not be a factor in this discussion. They state that all citizens should be equal before the law, enjoy the same rights (*huquq*) and duties (*wajibat*), regardless of their sectarian background, and should also enjoy a relationship with their ruler that is based on these rights and duties, not their loyalty or adherence to religion. This, they say, is full and equal citizenship.[48]

One of the most articulate advocates of citizenship in Saudi Arabia is the aforementioned Tawfiq al-Sayf, who integrates Shiʻa rights into the concept of citizenship,[49] but goes beyond that. Based

44 ʻIsa al-Ghayth, '*Al-Ikhwa al-Wataniyya.. al-Sunna wa-l-Shiʻa Namudhajan*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=42334, 14 January 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011), originally published in *Al-Madina* on the same date; and '*Al-Qadi al-Ghayth min al-Qatif Yadʻu ila Tahaluf al-Sunna wa-l-Shiʻa did al-Tashaddud*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=42336, 14 January 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

45 Hasan al-Khatir, '*Thaqafat al-Tasamuh*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=44302, 10 May 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

46 Jaʻfar al-Nimr al-Mubarak, '*Nahw Mujtamaʻ Salih*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=43802, 6 April 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

47 ʻAbbas Hashim Shihab, '*Hal al-Dawla al-ʻIlmaniyya Tashkulu Hallan li-Mushkilat al-Taʼifiyya?*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=45183, 16 July 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

48 See, for instance, Zakariyya Dawud, '*Min Jadid.. Naqd al-Taʼifiyya min ajl al-Din wa-l-Insan*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=43448, 18 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011); Fuʼad al-Fadli, '*Matlab Wahid wa-Wahid li-Shiʻat al-Mamlaka al-ʻArabiyya al-Sa ʻudiyya*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=43629, 28 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011); interviews with Muhammad Mahfuz, Sihat, 11 March 2011; and Thurayya al-ʻUrayyad, Dhahran, 14 March 2011.

49 '*Al-Mufakkir al-Sayf: Al-Muwatinun al-Shiʻa Yuriduna l-ʻAysh bi-Karama*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=41580, 3 December 2010 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

on Western sources such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as well as twentieth-century scholars such as John Rawls, al-Sayf argues for a social contract between the ruler and the citizens of a country. Such a contractual agreement would be based on a reciprocal relationship and would stipulate the rights and duties of both the ruler and the ruled. He states that the American and French revolutions dramatically changed relations between kings and their subjects from one of dominance and obedience to one of equality and rights. In such a situation, religious differences no longer matter, since the political system has laws to deal with discrimination.[50]

Al-Sayf is certainly not the only one to call for a social contract. Interestingly, however, the concepts of 'social contract' (*al-'aqd al-ijtima'i*), as well as 'citizenship', are not just informed by Western political philosophy, as they mostly are in al-Sayf's writings, but also by Islam and particularly Shi'a Islam. While several scholars and activists acknowledge that citizenship can *also* be rooted in Islam,[51] some religious scholars actively try to use their own Shi'a discourse to argue in favour of *muwatana*. Sheikh Hasan al-Saffar, for example, states that reciprocal rights were also discussed by Imam 'Ali and mirror the relationship between the Shi'a idea of a vice-regent of God on earth (*wali*) and his subjects (*al-ra'iyya*). He also cleverly tries to integrate his arguments on this issue in the broader context of the Arab Spring, in what seems like a veiled warning to the Saudi regime to give its citizens their rights. Arguing in favour of full citizenship and a social contract between the ruler and the ruled, al-Saffar states that if these concepts are applied and the will of the people truly becomes the source of power, 'they [the people] will not go the way of military coups and none of them will enforce their power onto the people'.[52] As such, al-Saffar presents the concept of full and equal citizenship as a potential solution to the revolutionary winds that are currently sweeping the Middle East. An increasing number of Saudis—including Sunnis—have come to see citizenship and its related concepts in a similar way and have started viewing them as truly viable alternatives to the current Saudi system, an issue to which we will now turn.

1.4 Nationwide Debates on Political and Social Reform

1.4.1 Contextual Factors

The current debates on political and social reform in Saudi Arabia are rooted in a decades-old tradition of attempts by both pragmatic Wahhabi reformers as well as anti-Wahhabi ones to bring change to the Saudi kingdom.[53] This tradition of reformist action is often traced to the period directly after the Gulf War in 1990. Because the regime controversially invited 500,000

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50 Tawfiq al-Sayf, '*Al-Mas'ala al-Ta'ifiyya: Bahthan 'an Tafsir Kharij al-Sunduq al-Madhhabi*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=43938, 15 April 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011); and interview with Tawfiq al-Sayf, Qatif, 12 March 2011.

51 Interviews with Faysal al-'Awami, Qatif, 12 March 2011; 'Aliya Al Farid, Safwa, 10 March 2011; and Fawzi Al Sayf, Qatif, 12 March 2011.

52 Hasan al-Saffar, '*Al-'Alaqa al-Ta'aqudiyya bayna l-Sulta wa-l-Sha'b*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=43275, 9 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011). See also Husayn al-Mustafa, '*Al-Muwatana fi Fikr Imam 'Ali*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=43793, 6 April 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011); and 'Abd al-Jalil al-Zaki, '*Al-Muwatana al-Saliha fi Fikr al-Imam 'Ali*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=44272, 8 May 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

53 See, for instance, Toby Craig Jones, 'The Clerics, the Sahwa and the Saudi State', *Strategic Insights*, Vol. 4, no. 3 (March 2008); and Gwenn Okruhlik, 'Understanding Political Dissent in Saudi Arabia', *MERIP Online*, available online at www.merip.org/mero/mero102401.html, 24 October 2001 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

American soldiers to protect it from a possible attack by Iraq during the conflict, many reformers—Wahhabis, liberals, Shi'a and women—seized this moment of the regime's weakness to protest or present their own demands through petitions and letters to the king.[54] A similar situation occurred after al-Qaeda started bombing targets in Saudi Arabia, which again caused reformers to present their demands to Crown Prince Abdullah, then the *de facto* ruler of the Saudi kingdom.[55] Reformers from the early 1990s and 2000s are still important figures in today's attempts to reform Saudi Arabia, having developed new and sometimes entirely different ideas.[56] Today's reform efforts should be seen in this historical context because they build on these previous experiences.

A second contextual factor that needs to be considered is the ascent to the throne of King Abdullah in 2005. As crown prince, Abdullah had already called for reform across the Middle East in early 2003, and this trend was continued when he became king. This development received a broad welcome from reformers in Saudi Arabia and the king's intentions in this regard were widely seen as genuine, including among Shi'a.[57] Many interviewees confirmed this view, stating their faith in the king, although they also admitted that his reign had not brought the results for which they had hoped. In general, the king—in a manner similar to what pragmatic Wahhabis try to achieve—seems to have directed most of his efforts towards making the current system more bearable, instead of genuinely reforming the system itself, as we will see.

1.4.2   Social Reform: Pressure and Relief

King Abdullah's reformist policies in the social sphere can be summed up by the phrases 'containing pressure' and 'creating sources of relief'. The king does not actually lift the burden of institutions that impede Saudis' freedom altogether—such as the religious organizations that have a major influence on Saudi everyday life—but contains their influence without abolishing any of them. Conversely, the regime does not really increase the amount of freedom that Saudis have, but creates sources of relief, in the form of places to let off steam that leave the system intact. This way, the status quo is made more bearable, but it is nevertheless maintained.[58]

1.4.3   Pressure: The Committee for Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong

One of the most important sources of social pressure on Saudis is the Committee for Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong (hereafter the *Hay'a*). The name of this committee is derived from the duty to 'command right' (*al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf)* and to 'forbid wrong' (*al-nahy 'an*

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54   See R. Hrair Dekmejian, 'The Rise of Political Islamism in Saudi Arabia', *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (autumn 1994), pp. 627–643.

55   R. Hrair Dekmejian, 'The Liberal Impulse in Saudi Arabia', *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (summer 2003), pp. 400–413.

56   Stéphane Lacroix, 'Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia's New "Islamo-Liberal" Reformists', *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (summer 2004), pp. 345–365; Stéphane Lacroix, 'Islamo-Liberal Politics in Saudi Arabia', in Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman (eds), *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs* (London: Hurst & Co., 2005), pp. 35–56.

57   Toby Jones, 'The Iraq Effect in Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Report*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (winter 2005), pp. 21–23; and Toby Jones, 'Seeking a "Social Contract" for Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Report*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (autumn 2003), p. 44.

58   Independent of this author's own research, this phenomenon is also mentioned in Paul Aarts, 'Maintaining Authoritarianism: The Jerky Path of Political Reform in Saudi Arabia', *Orient*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (2011), pp. 29–42.

al-munkar), which is mentioned numerous times in the Qur'an.[59] The Saudi regime, because of its ideological basis, sees this duty as a clear marker of its Islamic character and has therefore set up an organization to take care of this task in particular: the *Hay'a*. As such, numerous members of the organization roam Saudi Arabia's streets, restaurants and shopping malls to enforce Wahhabi morality, by ensuring that women wear their headscarves, that unrelated and unmarried men and women do not mingle, that shops close at prayer time, etc. Perhaps because the *Hay'a*—as the very epitome of social control—represents a very practical and real infringement of people's personal freedom in public places, increasing numbers of Saudis have started viewing the organization as a nuisance.

A recurring source of irritation about the *Hay'a* is the Book Fair in Riyadh, an annual event during which men and women mingle relatively freely and where controversial books are sometimes sold. Conservative Wahhabi scholars have long viewed the Book Fair as a source of deviation, describing the 2008 Book Fair as a place where you could find 'books of moral and intellectual deviance' (*kutub al-inhiraf al-fikri wa-l-akhlaqi*).[60] Another concern of conservatives is the type of people who visit the Book Fair, including allegedly shady characters from among journalists, writers and intellectuals. A third point that they make is that both men and women buy and sell books and can interact freely during the Book Fair.[61] From the conservatives' point of view, the *Hay'a*'s existence in general, and particularly its presence at the Book Fair, is therefore advantageous.

Other Saudis disagree with their conservative countrymen, but for different reasons. Some people argue, for example, that the *Hay'a* in itself is not the problem, but that it becomes a problem if its members overstep their authority. The *Hay'a* therefore needs a strict system of rules by which it has to abide in order to prevent excesses from occurring.[62] One such excess—a member of the *Hay'a* stabbed a man because his wife had not covered her eyes, which was claimed to cause temptation (*fitna*)—was widely condemned in the Saudi press.[63] Interestingly, Saudi intellectual Turki al-Dakhil criticized the *Hay'a* not only because one of its members had committed a crime, but he also attacked the argument for doing so. 'Why', al-Dakhil wonders, 'does the man of the *Hay'a* not cast down his eyes [as is commanded in Q. 23: 30–31 mentioned above]? How can he know if this woman causes temptation or not? Can he know that if he has his eyes cast down?'[64] Similar arguments were made when the *Hay'a* disturbed the 2011 Book Fair.[65] Still, the arguments presented by these writers do not go any further—or at least not

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59   See, for example, Q. 3: 104; 7: 157; and 9: 71.
60   *Bayan 'an Ma'rad al-Kitab al-Dawli bi-l-Riyad*, available online at http://almoslim.net/node/84399, 24 February 2008 (accessed on 1 November 2011).
61   *Bayan 'an Ma'rad al-Kitab 1431*, available online at http://almoslim.net/node/126293, 3 April 2010 (accessed on 1 November 2011).
62   *Al-Watan*, available online at www.alwatan.com/sa/Articles/Detail.aspx?ArticleId=741, 12 June 2010 (accessed on 1 November 2011).
63   See, for instance, *Al-Watan*, online at www.alwatan.com.sa/Articles/Detail.aspx?ArticleId=3132, 14 November 2010 (accessed on 1 November 2011); and *Al-Watan*, available online at www.alwatan.com.sa/Articles/Detail.aspx?ArticleId=3221, 21 November 2010 (accessed on 1 November 2011).
64   *Al-Watan*, online at www.alwatan.com.sa/Articles/Detail.aspx?ArticleId=3143, 15 November 2010 (accessed on 1 November 2011).
65   *Al-Watan*, online at www.alwatan.com.sa/Articles/Detail.aspex?ArticleId=4738, 8 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

explicitly—than trying to contain the *Hay'a*'s excesses instead of abolishing the organization altogether.[66]

More radical views towards the *Hay'a* are also expressed, however, and not in the least with regard to the issue of women's right to drive. For some women, the fact that they are not allowed to drive means that they have to stay at home; for others, it means hiring a chauffeur to drive them around. Throughout 2011, however, dozens of women defied the ban on driving, with some of them even posting their driving on YouTube or actively writing about it on Twitter. Campaigns to support these women, such as Women2Drive, obviously present a defiant slap in the face of organizations such as the *Hay'a*. Although some of these women were arrested (and sometimes even punished), the king also pardoned some of them but without ordering the *Hay'a* to stop arresting female motorists.

Since the issue of driving also represents greater mobility, independence and freedom for women, it is not surprising that women's rights activists state that they see the *Hay'a* as a major obstacle to freedom, although they acknowledge that its power has been curbed by the king.[67] During a group interview with youngsters in Jeddah, some stated that the *Hay'a* only serves the interests of the religious conservatives, has no legal basis and should preferably be abolished together with the rest of the Wahhabi system.[68] Although most Saudis would probably not go that far, these youngsters' frustration about the strictness under which they have to live was palpable and—if only because their frustration is shared by many others—should be taken seriously.

1.4.4   Relief: The National Dialogue

Rather than removing sources of social pressure such as the *Hay'a*, Crown Prince and later King Abdullah set up several sources of relief for this pressure. Perhaps the most important of these is the National Dialogue. Organized by the King 'Abd al-'Aziz Center for National Dialogue (KACND) in Riyadh, the regime has set up meetings for Saudis from all over the country and from all sectarian groups since 2003, focusing on contentious issues such as women's rights, international relations, education and 'the Other'. The objective of these meetings was to get to know each other, to discuss issues in a friendly and hospitable atmosphere and to solve problems through civil discourse. Although such goals may sound rather modest, considering the lack of real contact between many members of different sects, for example, the idea was quite revolutionary and provided people with an outlet for their grievances. Moreover, since the KACND also focused on teaching courses about dialogue and civility around Saudi Arabia, produced some very slick material about its annual National Dialogues and even has its own magazine, *Al-Hiwar* (The Dialogue), the initiative must have seemed like a way towards greater social reform.[69]

Although all of the interviewees agreed that it was good to sit at the same table with others who hold completely different views and who represent sectors of society that would not usually

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66   *Al-Riyad*, online at www.alriyadh.com/2011/03/05/article610904.html, 5 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011); and *Al-Riyad*, online at www.alriyadh.com/2011/03/09/article612075.html, 9 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

67   Interviews with al-Khulud al-Fahad, Dammam, 14 March 2011; Rasha Hifzi, Jeddah, 11 October 2011; and a women's rights activist who preferred not to have her name mentioned, Riyadh, 7 March 2001.

68   Group interview with approximately a dozen youngsters, Jeddah, 13 October 2011.

69   For more on the KACND, see King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, *A Brief Look* (Riyadh: King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, 2009); King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, *Prologue* (Riyadh: King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, undated).

meet in such a friendly atmosphere, virtually all of them also expressed their disappointment with the lack of results brought about by the National Dialogue. Talking was good, they stated, but it had utterly failed to materialize into any tangible social reform.[70] One reformer simply stated that if the regime really wanted dialogue, it would free the press.[71] In discussions with senior employees at the KACND, however, the National Dialogue was portrayed as having been highly successful because some 500,000 people had participated in it and because it had achieved its desired aim of getting people to talk with one another in a civil manner. In this view, the dialogue itself was not a means towards social reform, but a desirable goal in and of itself.[72]

The National Dialogue can be viewed as one source of relief used by the regime to allow the people to let off steam in confined and controlled contexts while maintaining the system as a whole.[73] It is not clear whether the National Dialogue is a genuine effort by the king to ease societal tensions between different groups—even if it has no policy implications—or a blatant attempt by the regime to have people talking among themselves in order to channel their frustration into a harmless dialogue that does not challenge the regime.[74] In any case, the lack of genuine social reform in Saudi Arabia has a clear equivalent in the political sphere.

1.5   Political Reform: Patron vs. Constitution

1.5.1   The King as a Patron

As mentioned in the section on gender segregation above, the official religious scholars have seen their mandate decrease throughout the years and have become subservient to the regime. This increased obedience has also meant an increased reliance on, and thus loyalty to, the rulers, because they depended on the rulers. Since efforts to achieve political reform usually entail curbing the powers of the king or those of the royal family—by providing the people with more power, making the leadership more transparent, and fighting corruption at the top, etc.—conservative Wahhabi scholars almost reflexively side with the king and denounce reform. Instead, they view the relationship between the king and the people as one of a benevolent patron or even shepherd (*al-ra'i*) who rules over his obedient flock (*al-ra'iyya*), which is also part of the official narrative of the regime itself.[75]

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70 This was a commonly heard answer among interviewees from Jeddah to the Eastern Province, men and women, Sunnis and Shi'a. The one exception I found was Thurayya al-'Urayyad, Dhahran, 14 March 2011, a Saudi intellectual of mixed Sunni–Shi'a background. Also positive, although aware of the lack of concrete results, was a Sunni doctor who preferred not to have her name mentioned; Riyadh, 21 March 2011.

71 Interview with Muhammad al-Qahtani, Riyadh, 21 March 2011.

72 Interview with Fahad al-Sultan, Riyadh, 26 March 2011. Mr al-Sultan is the Deputy Secretary-General of the King 'Abd al-'Aziz Center for National Dialogue.

73 Other examples include the system of scholarships for students to study abroad, allowing them to gain a first-class education in the West without having to bring about true educational reform—with all the social and political implications that would have—at home, and KAUST. The latter, which stands for King 'Abdallah University for Science and Technology, is a recently founded university in which men and women are allowed to mingle, unlike at any other university in the Saudi kingdom. KAUST seems to be a closely guarded exception to the rule, however; not a stepping stone towards more institutes like it.

74 These, according to one interviewee long involved in societal reform, were the two interpretations of measures taken by the king; interview with a Saudi business woman who preferred not to have her name mentioned, Jeddah, 12 March 2011.

75 Gwenn Okruhlik, 'The Irony of *Islah* (Reform)', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (autumn 2005), p. 154.

The *ra'i–ra'iyya* concept became particularly prominent during the early months of 2011, when several parts of the Middle East witnessed revolutions against dictatorial regimes in what came to be known as the Arab Spring. In early March 2011, rumours of protests in mainly Shi'a Qatif in the Eastern Province were apparently so convincing that the Saudi regime increased its military presence in the area and cab drivers often refused to go there, although the demonstrations turned out to be small and entirely peaceful. The regime forbade all protests, however, and the religious establishment was also mobilized to denounce them. The Organization of Senior Scholars (*Hay'at Kibar al-'Ulama'*), for instance, issued a communiqué filled with supposed Islamic evidence in favour of preserving the status quo and against demonstrations. The communiqué stated that Saudi Arabia was 'founded on the Qur'an, the Sunna, allegiance (*bay'a*) [to the ruler] and the necessity of community (*jama'a*) and obedience (*ta'a*)'. Reform could only take place through 'advice (*nasiha*) and not through demonstrations (*muzaharat*) and means and methods that stir up strife (*fitan*) and divide the community'.[76] This was echoed by many other supporters of the regime, with one of them stressing that Saudi Arabia is based on 'the correct Islamic creed (*al-'aqida al-Islamiyya al-sahiha*) and respect (*al-ihtiram*), justice (*al-'adl*), loyalty (*al-wala'*) and mutual respectful understanding (*al-tarahum al-mutabadil*) between the shepherd and the flock (*al-ra'i wa-l-ra'iyya*)'.[77]

This loyalty by conservative Wahhabis and other supporters of the regime was reinforced after the king gave a speech to the people of Saudi Arabia on 18 March 2011, which was at least partly meant to take the wind out of the sails of a potential 'Saudi Spring'. The speech was a typical example of the regime's efforts to 'reform' the system by making it more bearable without actually making substantial changes. The king promised SR500 billion (some US$130 billion) for housing, fighting corruption, hospitals, education, the army, higher wages for civil servants and even a day off the following Saturday, but also for Qur'an memorization schools, the *Hay'a* and other major religious institutions, and decreed that it was forbidden to insult religious scholars from now on.[78] Despite the fact that the speech represented a blatant attempt to buy off criticism and dissent, Saudi newspapers during the next few days were filled with praise for the king's speech.[79] This did not just consist of agreement with the king's political decisions, but the monarch was also lauded as a wise and benevolent father who confirmed his 'love' for every citizen and that 'all [people] are in his heart'.[80] Another writer admiringly spoke about the king's speech as being directed 'towards [the king's] sons and daughters'.[81]

1.5.2   A Constitution as an Alternative

Among Wahhabi and anti-Wahhabi reformers, different views have developed over the years as to how the Saudi state should work. Building on the petitions and letters to the king that were mentioned earlier, several communiqués circulated among activists in the kingdom, listing

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76   *Al-Riyad*, available online at www.alriyadh.com/2011/03/07/article611507.html, 7 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

77   *Al-Riyad*, available online at www.alriyadh.com/2011/03/17article614463.html, 17 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

78   The speech was broadcast on Saudi television and published in full by several major newspapers in the Saudi kingdom.

79   See, for instance, *Al-Hayat*, available online at http://ksa.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/246074, 19 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011); and *Al-Hayat*, available online at http://ksa.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/246087, 19 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

80   *Al-Hayat*, available online at http://ksa.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/246089, 19 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

81   *Al-Hayat*, available online at http://ksa.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/246085, 19 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

reform demands. One of these is *Nahwa Dawlat al-Huquq wa-l-Mu'assasat* (Towards a State of Rights and Institutions). This petition starts by referring to the Arab Spring and the 'serious, radical reform' (*islah jidhri jadd*) that is needed, which means a fully elected parliament (*Majlis al-Shura*), separation of the positions of king and prime minister, more and independent judges, fighting corruption, solving young Saudis' housing problems, promoting the building of civil society, increased freedom and participation, and the release of political prisoners. Another communiqué called *Al-Sha'b Yuridu Islah al-Nizam* (The People want to Reform the Regime) also stresses fighting corruption, greater freedom and participation, and strengthening civil society, but adds more general notions such as establishing a constitutional monarchy with a written constitution, full citizenship for all, and women's rights.[82]

The demands mentioned above are widely shared by many reformers in Saudi Arabia,[83] but they arrive at these demands in different ways. Apart from women's rights and citizenship, which have already been dealt with above, demands often focus on relations between the ruler and the people. The idea behind *ra'i–ra'iyya*, with the king functioning as a patron who bestows favours upon his grateful dependents, is widely criticized. Tawfiq al-Sayf, the aforementioned Shi'a sociologist, states that 'the [European] ruler used to be the "master of the house" (*rabb al-bayt*), and if he changed, his house changed with him'. After the fall of imperialism in the Middle East, al-Sayf worryingly notes, this view that 'the state is an organization independent of society that enjoys absolute powers' became dominant in the region.[84] As such, al-Sayf rejects the concept of an oath of allegiance (*bay'a*), which underpins such a relationship and is propagated by conservative Wahhabis.[85] 'Abdallah Hamid al-Din, an intellectual from Jeddah, agrees with this and rejects *bay'a* because it is a personal pledge of loyalty to a specific ruler, not an institutionalized and contractual relationship with an elected leader whose position—not his person—demands loyalty. He therefore rejects the *ra'i–ra'iyya* relation as one that sees the ruler as a father and the ruled as his children, which does not take the people seriously.[86]

A renewed relationship with the king and the regime also requires renewed citizens. One problem in this respect is the submissive nature of Saudi political culture. This is not only because of the lack of parliamentary participation and the position of the king as a benevolent patron, but also because of the very weak civil society. As Mariwan Kanie's part of this report also makes clear, there is little room to set up organizations that are independent of the state, since these are almost always patronized by princes.[87] As a result, Saudis often see politics as something that is practised only by the elite and are therefore, in the words of one reformer, 'babies' with regard to political participation.[88] This lack of a vibrant civil society and political institutions was mentioned as one reason why a 'Saudi Spring' was unlikely.[89]

Despite Saudi political culture, reformers have nevertheless thought about what their own role as citizens should be. The former Islamist 'Abdallah al-Maliki, for instance, has argued that the

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82   These communiqués circulated on the internet in early 2011. The author is in possession of these two documents.
83   Interviews with Muhammad al-Qahtani, Riyadh, 21 March 2011; Ja'far al-Shayib, Tarut, 11 March 2011; and Muhammad Sa'id Tayyib, Jeddah, 11 October 2011.
84   Al-Sayf, '*Al-Mas'ala*'.
85   Interview with Tawfiq al-Sayf, Qatif, 12 March 2011.
86   Interview with 'Abdallah Hamid al-Din, Jeddah, 10 October 2011.
87   Ana Echagüe and Edward Burke, '"Strong Foundations"? The Imperative for Reform in Saudi Arabia', FRIDE Working Paper No. 84 (June 2009), p. 17; and Okruhlik, 'The Irony of *Islah* (Reform)', p. 156.
88   Interviews with Rasha Hifzi, Jeddah, 11 October 2011; and Tawfiq al-Sayf, Qatif, 12 March 2011. The quote is from Ms Hifzi.
89   Group interview with five to ten youngsters who had demonstrated in March 2011, Qatif, 19 October 2011.

rule of the Prophet Muhammad was not based on his being a prophet but on the consent of the people in Medina, implying that citizens should have an active part in deciding their own fate and should not be dictated to by anyone, even if it is the Prophet Muhammad himself.[90] Several women's rights activists have also argued for this active participation, stressing engagement in politics and society as genuine expressions of full citizenship.[91] Given these views, it is not surprising that the decision by the regime to ban demonstrations in March 2011 was not welcomed by many reformers. Several Shi'a authors argued that demonstrating in Qatif was not only the people's right but they also wondered what else people could do when all other avenues of participation were closed,[92] a view that was echoed by youngsters who actually participated in the protests in the Eastern Province and were imprisoned for them.[93] Similarly, the king's speech was rejected by some reformists as temporary relief at best *vis-à-vis* 'the spirit of change that has continued to hit the countries of the region for months'.[94] Another simply summed up his views on the speech by stating: 'The choice for the royal family is between giving money and giving power. Instead of reforms, we get money'.[95]

1.6   Conclusion

This section of the report has shown that intellectual trends and debates in Saudi Arabia take place within a context that is not only confined by the limits set by the political rulers but that it is also dominated by Wahhabism. Regarding gender segregation (*ikhtilat*), the discourse is dictated by conservative Wahhabi scholars, not because everyone agrees with them but because they set the tone of the debate. While reformers often have secular arguments for *ikhtilat*, the utter dominance of conservative Wahhabis in this area sometimes forces more liberal Saudis to adopt their approach, even though they believe that their rights should not be based on sacred texts but instead on universal human rights. As such, the number of proponents for gender-mixing seems to be growing but, because of the religious system's intransigence, this has as yet had little effect.

Similarly, Shi'a reformist thinkers are up against a political and religious system whose adherents often view them as deviant Muslims at best and disloyal agents of Iran at worst. At the same time, there is frustration among Shi'a citizens in the Eastern Province about living on top of some of the world's greatest oil reserves while seeing most of the benefit go to other parts of Saudi Arabia. Their solution to all of this—citizenship, equated with equal rights and duties between citizens and *vis-à-vis* the ruler—is a concept that Shi'a intellectuals and scholars have grounded in both Western political philosophy and Islamic thought and is acceptable to many Sunni reformers too. It would require fundamental reform of the current situation, however, which is unlikely to happen soon.

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90   'Abdallah al-Maliki, '*Al-Islah al-Dini wa-l-Islah al-Siyasi.. al-Irtibat wa-l-Tazamun*', *Al-Maqal*, available online at www.almqaal.com/?p=578, 10 October 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

91   Interviews with Rasha Hifzi, Jeddah, 11 October 2011; and a Saudi business woman who preferred not to have her name mentioned, Jeddah, 12 October 2011.

92   See, for example, Mu'tazz Faysal, '*Al-Sa'udiyya wa-Man' al-Muzaharat*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=43232, 7 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011); Adib 'Abd al-Qadir Abu l-Mukarim, '*Al-Muzaharat Ta'bir Jamahiri 'an al-Ra'y*', *Rasid*, www.rasid.com/print.php?id=43315, 11 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011); and Zakariyya b. Ma'tuq Al Safwan, '*Difa'an 'an Haqq al-Tazahur al-Silmi*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=43639, 28 March 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

93   Group interview with five to ten youngsters who had demonstrated in March 2011, Qatif, 19 October 2011.

94   Husayn al-'Alaq, '*Al-Sa'udiyya bayna l-Makrumat al-Malakiyya wa-Matalib al-Islah al-Siyasi*', *Rasid*, available online at www.rasid.com/print.php?id=45389, 31 July 2011 (accessed on 1 November 2011).

95   Interview with Muhammad al-Qahtani, Riyadh, 21 March 2011.

Finally, the nationwide debates on social and political reform are several decades old but received a boost with the ascent to the throne of King Abdullah, who many considered a reformer. Little has come of his reformist efforts, however, and most of the measures taken seem to be aimed at further entrenching conservative Wahhabi power over the society as a whole while providing citizens with easier means to escape from it temporarily. The same applies to the political sphere, where similar ruler–ruled relations continue to hold sway in ruling circles, with the king being portrayed as a wise patron and father who knows what is best for his children, occasionally showering them with goodies to keep them quiet. Ideas to change this relationship into a more contractual one, whereby a more participatory political culture is given shape and citizens are allowed to build a civil society that is truly independent of the regime, obviously clash directly with the power and short-term interests of the Saudi royal family and are therefore unlikely to be given much substance in the near future.

Is there no hope left for Saudi Arabia? Interestingly, many reformist thinkers are quite optimistic, and there is indeed good reason for this. Saudi Arabia, unlike some other countries in the region, is not a brutal military dictatorship and does not rely on forceful repression to beat its inhabitants into submission. Despite the relative lack of real reform, intellectual trends and debates are important and reformist ideas are gaining more adherents in Saudi Arabia. The regime, precisely because it is not going to enforce the people's loyalty, needs to take society's views into account. Until now, it has been able to accommodate reformers by an ingenious mix of patronage and repression, but its approach of 'making the system more bearable' without really changing it is obviously not going to last forever. Several interviewees indicated that, ultimately, Saudi Arabia has to become a democracy that provides equal rights for all its citizens or a military dictatorship. If Saudi Arabia drifts towards the latter, it is likely that young Shi'a from the Eastern Province will rebel first, simply because they are discriminated against the most in the religious, socio-economic and political spheres. Yet it is perhaps more likely that the Saudi regime, before it reaches breaking point, gets into a situation in which it can no longer ignore society and simply has to reform. This situation may still be years down the road but it is not unlikely that in such a scenario, the reformers will eventually be pulling the long end of the stick.

2. Civil Society in Saudi Arabia: Different Forms, One Language

Mariwan Kanie

The research in this section deals with civil society in Saudi Arabia, its various forms, roles and challenges. Special attention has been given to its contributions and limitations, the key strengths, challenges and future prospects. The scholarly search on this topic is extremely rare and there is a lack of basic information. This contribution tries to fill this gap and presents a complex image of Saudi civil society under the authoritarian rule of the Saudi state. It distinguishes three forms of Saudi civil society: non-political; semi-political; and political. Each form contains different kinds of organizations, implementing a different range of activities, while having different relations with the state. One common element among all three is the language that they use—namely the language of human rights and respecting diversity. The development of this language has been seen in the framework of this research as a means to challenge the hegemony of conservative religious forces in the country.

The dominant theories on the role of civil society in the processes of change in the Arab world have a strong tendency to underemphasize, if not ignore, the role and capacity of civil society in societal and political changes. Much attention has been given in the academic literature to the power of the state to regulate, direct and manipulate different social and political actors, including civil society. In these analyses the state incorporates and reshapes civil society to 'upgrade' its authoritarian role or to reinforce the status quo.[1] In this literature, the emphasis on

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1   'Upgrading authoritarianism' is one of the dominant theories in studying Middle Eastern political systems, including Saudi Arabia. It emphasizes the mechanisms of re-establishing, enduring and reproducing authoritarianism, even through talking democratic language, or even implementing some 'democratic reforms' when needed. Of course, this approach generates important insights into how modern authoritarian states work, how the authorities function and how the context is regulated, but it leaves one very important point behind: it does not see the limits of the 'upgrading' processes and overemphasizes a rigidly regulated political and intellectual in which the political subjects, including agents of civil society, in the Middle East find themselves. This approach also does not look at how new discourses function and how new ideas and agencies emerge. See Steven

the state's power to create, control and incorporate civil society organizations has underestimated the significance of civil society organizations in an authoritarian context. By giving attention to the language of civil society, the discourses that it uses and the expectations that it has within the dynamic matrixes of power relations, this research projects a more dynamic image of civil society than most of the existing literature. Without ignoring the state's role in regulating and subjugating societal forces, this research goes beyond the state-centric approach of analysing the relationship between the state and civil society. Instead, it looks mainly at the dynamics within civil society itself and its political and semi-political roles.

This chapter of the report is divided into six sections. The first section deals with the research methodology. The second section gives a short theoretical and critical elaboration on the notion of civil society. The third section distinguishes different types of civil society. The fourth section studies the political, religious and cultural context in which the debate about the role and practices of civil society in Saudi Arabia takes place. The fifth section studies the landscape of civil society, its different organizations and fields of activity in Saudi Arabia. Finally, the last section presents the main conclusions.

2.1 The Research Methodology

The project uses a social science methodology, which combines fieldwork research with the study of relevant theoretical literature on the topic. During the fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, in-depth interviews were conducted with members of civil society in different parts of the Saudi kingdom. During a two-week stay in June 2010, fieldwork was carried out in Riyadh and Jeddah. This was complemented in January 2011 by two weeks of fieldwork in Riyadh and the Eastern Province. The aim was to obtain an insight into the ideas and expectations of representatives of Saudi civil society and to find out whether they intended and/or could play a positive role in the processes of change in the Saudi kingdom. The research also depends on the study of theoretical literature and involves the use of secondary literature and analysis of newspapers and websites. Special attention is paid to the language of different civil society organizations. Language has not been seen as a neutral means of communication, but as a tool to construct and reconstruct social reality—as a 'performative' power. In this sense, language does generate agencies that could in the long run turn into a social force for change (see the next section).

The research questions that have been posed are the following: What were the main developments of political and social reform in Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the 1990–1991 Gulf War and what are the main drivers of change? What is civil society and which forms does Saudi civil society adopt? And what role can civil society play in the transformation of Saudi Arabia? What contributions can it make and what are its limitations, its key strengths, challenges, and future prospects?

Analytically, the research distinguishes three types of civil society: non-political; semi-political; and political forms of civil society. This division is based on the topics and questions that

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Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, The Saban Center at The Brookings Institution, No. 13 (October 2007). For recent insights of the same approach, see Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, 'Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience: Regime Responses to the 'Arab Awakening', *Globalization*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (2011), pp. 647–653. See also Thomas Carothers, 'The End of the Transition Paradigm', *Journal of Democracy*, January 2002, pp. 5–21; Amy Hawthorne, 'Middle Eastern Democracy: Is Civil Society the Answer?', *Carnegie Paper* No. 44 (March 2004); and Sean L. Yom, 'Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World', *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (December 2005).

concern each branch, the activities that they are practising and the ideas that they are producing.

This chapter pays special intention to analysing the historical context in which Saudi civil society functions and highlights the constraints and opportunities that it has in implementing social, cultural and political changes.

2.2   Civil Society: Definition and Approach

Civil society is a Western concept that is strongly related to liberal ideas and practices of ruling. It is part of a specific Western articulation of the relationship between state and society. But this Western origin does not prohibit the concept from emigrating beyond its place of origin into new contexts. The ongoing globalization of the concept spreads civil society's ideas, language and institutions to different parts of the world.[2] But in the literature on civil society,[3] there is still a lot of definitional dispute, conceptual confusion and operational vagueness about the concept.[4]

This research uses a minimalist definition of civil society that sees civil society as 'the zone of voluntary associational life beyond family ties but separate from the state'. This definition includes a 'wide variety of associations, such as advocacy NGOs, service-oriented NGOs, labour unions, professional associations, ethnic associations, student groups, cultural organizations ('from choral societies to bird-watching clubs'), sporting clubs and informal community groups (including coffeehouses)'.[5] In other words, civil society refers to uncoerced associational life that is distinct from the family and state institutions. The remaining question concerns the position of the market in relation to civil society. 'Some thinkers, particularly liberals and especially libertarians', write Chambers and Kopstein, 'include the economy in civil society. Others, especially but not exclusively those on the left, exclude the economy'.[6] Economic relations are included in this research only to the extent that they are folded into associational life, for example professional associations such as chambers of commerce and trade unions, but professional companies are not included. Furthermore, non-organizational actors and online activists are included as parts of civil society and civic activism. In the case of Saudi Arabia, online activism or digital civil society deserves special attention, because it is one of the few

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2   John Keane, *Global Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

3   Thomas Carothers, 'Civil Society, Think Again', *Foreign Policy* (winter 1999), pp. 18–29. Also see Jeremy Jones, *Negotiating Change: The New Politics of the Middle East* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007). Different typologies of civil society exist. See, for instance, Asef Bayat's 'six types of activism', which are expressed in urban mass protests, trade unions, community activism, social Islamism, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and quiet encroachment, in 'Activism and Social Development in the Middle East', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (February 2002), pp. 1–28. Also see Oliver Roy, 'The Predicament of "Civil Society" in Central Asia and the "Greater Middle East"', *International Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 5 (October 2005), pp. 1001–1012; Yom, 'Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World'; and Francesco Cavatorta and Vincent Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World: The Dynamics of Activism* (London: Routledge, 2010).

4   Finn V. Heinrich, *CIVICUS: Global Survey of the State of Civil Society* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2007).

5   Hivos, Knowledge Programme: Civil Society in Closed Societies, Programme Plan 2008–2010 (2010), unpublished document.

6   Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein, *Civil Society and the State*, Oxford Handbooks Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), available online at http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/oso/private/content/oho_politics/9780199548439/p039.html#oxfordhb-9780199548439-chapter-20, accessed on September 2011.

forms of activism that is not directly controlled by the state and that operates in a free—although not unlimited—cyberspace.

Another important point to be raised here is the normative dimension of civil society. It is mostly believed that civil society as such is good. It is assumed that the development of civil society will automatically lead to transparency and accountability, and will create a stable, democratic society, thus empowering citizens. According to this vision, civil society is another name for social and cultural progress, for doing 'the good and the right things'.[7]

Actually, this positive and normative approach to civil society has been criticized in the light of more than two decades of the promotion of civil society worldwide. It seems that few of the high expectations have materialized.[8] According to these critics, 'civil society *can* be a source of democratic change but it is not *inherently* one'.[9] The reason is simple: 'The majority of civil-society organizations and movements support the status quo, are single-issue oriented organizations with small constituencies. Moreover, they are largely dependent on foreign funding, advocating conservative reforms, and in most cases are apolitical'.[10]

While this critique of the normative approach to civil society is accepted, I have doubts about the hasty conclusion that civil society is usually apolitical and does not challenge the status quo. This type of argumentation is hampered by a narrow conception of politics that reduces politics to the struggle between the state and society. More fundamentally, it ignores the political role of language in the process of change and its impact as an essential part of public speech, which is directly related to political life.[11] Even in a country like Saudi Arabia, the majority of civil society organizations speak the language of rights, ranging from the discourse of abstract human rights to the more concrete rights of children, women, orphans and prisoners, etc. They also speak the language of respect, pluralism and diversity. Most literature on civil society and authoritarianism does not take this linguistic dimension into account. It is true that civil society in the Arab world, especially in Saudi Arabia, is not *the* liberating force, but ignoring this dimension of language, discourse and ideas, and disregarding its long-term potential to instigate change, is also a mistake.[12]

Language is not only a neutral means of communication but it is also a tool to construct and reconstruct social reality—that is, language has a 'performative' power. Language generates

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7   Hivos, Knowledge Programme: Civil Society in Closed Societies.
8   For two recent collections on the resilience phenomenon, see Oliver Schlumberger (ed.), *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); and Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michele Penner Angrist (eds), *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005). On the specific limitations of 'the politics of democratization' through civil-society promotion, see Nicola Pratt, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2007). Another critical survey is given by Mervat Rishmawi and Tim Morris, 'Overview of Civil Society in the Arab World', *Intrac: Praxis Paper* No. 20 (October 2007); and several contributions to Sarah ben Néfissa *et al.* (eds), *NGOs and Governance in the Arab World* (Cairo and New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2005).
9   Hivos, Knowledge Programme: Civil Society in Closed Societies, p. 6.
10 Hivos, Knowledge Programme: Civil Society in Closed Societies, p. 6.
11 Hanna Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
12 The power of the language of rights was obvious in the Arab revolts of recent months. Suddenly we have been witnessing a mass of angry people from Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria and Bahrain, etc., speaking a proto-liberal language of individual and collective rights and demanding different forms of freedom. This language was created during the last two decades and different agencies have participated in the processes of its creation, including segments of civil society, intellectuals, some state institutions, and transnational satellite television.

agencies that can turn into a social force for change. Political life has a strong linguistic nature and the political functions and content of language cannot be understood adequately by theories that regard language merely as a vehicle of communication, representation and the exchange of information. A civil society that speaks the language of human rights and pluralism in an authoritarian context cannot be reduced to another instrument of control on the part of the authoritarian regime. On the contrary, it can turn into a force that challenges the authoritarian regime and leads to serious contestation. As Bourdieu argues, modes of domination and exclusion are enacted and sustained through linguistic exchanges and, as such, language becomes a force that challenges domination and exclusion.[13]

Let me explain the 'performative' dimension of language by shortly elaborating on Judith Butler's elaboration of this concept.[14] For Butler, a 'performative' act is 'the repetitive and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.'[15] It is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names.[16] Butler studies this 'performative' power of language in relation to the creation of masculine and feminine gender identity. According to her, gender is not something that is given, or something that one is; it is something that one does, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a 'doing' rather than a 'being'. In Butler's view, gender identities are constructed and constituted by language; language performs the masculine and feminine identity. This means that discourse creates subject positions and linguistic structures construct the self. The point that Butler tries to make is that there is no gender identity that precedes language; it is rather through repetition, citation and recitation of the masculine language that the masculine identity becomes a dominant reality.

For the purpose here, this chapter will argue that the discourses that circulate and the language that different groups use are important aspects of societal and political life. This new condition politicizes citizens, albeit slowly. It gradually opens up new spaces outside the institution of the state and makes political contestation more likely in the long run. This does not mean that a new popular movement will emerge immediately, but it does mean that the emergence of different societal stories in the long run can work as a counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges the official story and the legitimacy of the state.

2.3   Types of Civil Society

In most of the academic literature, civil society is understood as a sphere that is distinct from, yet has a particular relationship with, the state. This relationship to the state is diverse and cannot be reduced to either oppositional or independent. New approaches to conceptualizing civil society have analysed different forms of relationships between civil society and the state. Two theorists distinguish six perspectives on this relationship between civil society and the state.[17]

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13   Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990). See also Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Economy of Linguistic Exchanges', *Social Science Information*, Vol. 16, No. 6. (1997), pp. 645–668.

14   The relationship between language, thinking and acting has been an important theme in modern literature. In his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell writes about Newspeak as a very limited language with very few words as a means of controlling and disciplining society in an authoritarian system. The government in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* aims to cut back the Newspeak vocabulary. Through introducing Newspeak, the government wishes to alter the public's way of thinking. Newspeak narrows the range of thought and shortens people's memories.

15   Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex' (London: Routledge, 1993).

16   Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 13.

17   Chambers and Kopstein, *Civil Society and the State*, chapter 20.

Civil society *apart from* the state. In thinking about civil society as separate from the state, three features stand out: the voluntary nature of participation; the plural quality of activities, and the negative character of civil society's boundaries. The last feature means understanding civil society as something that is separate from the state—establishing a boundary primarily to keep the state out.

Civil society *against* the state. In this role, civil society is not simply a sphere that is separate from the state; it is, or can be seen as, an agent that interacts with, and indeed opposes, the state.

Civil society *in support of* the state. The relationship between civil society and the state to emerge from this view is complex and often reflects a love/hate dynamic. On the one hand, civil society underpins and supports the state. On the other hand, it represents a certain amount of opposition towards the state.

Civil society *in dialogue with* the state. In this case civil society is in a creative and critical dialogue with the state. This means that the state has a certain degree of accountability and generally gives an account of its actions in answer to the multiple and plural voices that are raised in civil society.

Civil society *in partnership with* the state. In this case, the state is in need of civil society and its specific functions. The state cannot cope, as national and even regional policies are determined by local and international developments. The state cannot deliver goods or services without the help and mediation of non-state-sector associations. To answer these new challenges, the state thinks about the system of multi-level governance, subsidiarity and new public management. In this situation, civil society becomes a partner of the state.

Civil society *beyond* the state. This refers to a global transnational civil society and civil organizations that cross state boundaries.

These six perspectives on society–state relations 'are not mutually exclusive, nor do they necessarily compete with each other. As will become clear, it is possible to subscribe to a number of these views at the same time'.[18] These different perspectives indicate that civil society can organize itself in different ways, not only in opposition to or independent from the state. In the case of Saudi Arabia, this point is crucial, because a large section of Saudi civil society cannot and does not organize itself against or independent from the state. It is controlled by the state and is forced to be in support of, or in partnership with, or in the best case in dialogue with the state. The Saudi state forces a corporatist character on the organizations of civil society and tries not only to incorporate them into its structures but also to use them to consolidate its political power. The state does not hesitate to use any method, including violence, to prevent the emergence of independent civil society organizations if they constitute a threat.

As already mentioned, three types of civil society in Saudi Arabia are distinguished here: non-political; semi-political; and political. Generally speaking, the non-political and semi-political organizations fall within categories three to five mentioned above: they *support* the state; form a *partnership* with it; and are in continuous *dialogue* with its agencies. The political form of civil society, however, falls within the first and second categories, and is forced to work *separately* from the state and in some cases even in *opposition* to it. Most political civil society organizations are not licensed and work, according to the Saudi law, illegally. These organizations are exclusively human rights organizations.

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18   Chambers and Kopstein, *Civil Society and the State*, chapter 20.

2.4 The Political Context of Saudi Civil Society: New Social and Political Dynamics

The Saudi state is based on an absolute monarchy without a constitution, political parties, legally protected unions or associations. The country does not experience any real division of power among the executive, legislative and judicial branches. The royal family, the Al Saud, dominates the government. The authoritarian regime maintains a strong public security apparatus and bans all associations operating without official licence and supervision. Yet there are still a few small openings in contemporary Saudi society: there is much talk about reform, human rights, tolerance, and cultural and religious pluralism.[19] This discourse is adhered to by different state institutions, the moderate segment of the religious establishment and the kingdom's liberals.[20] Steps have also been taken to translate this discourse into a well-calculated reform programme of some aspects of Saudi social, religious and cultural life. The number of civil society organizations in Saudi Arabia has grown, their scope of activity has increased, human rights organizations have been established; in short, Saudi media have become diversified and enjoy relative freedom, and the internal life of some segments of civil society organizations has undergone some democratic changes.[21] In the 1990s the phenomena of *al-istirahat* ('places of rest' or private meetings) emerged, during which members of different social groups meet to relax and talk about different social, cultural and political issues. According to a Saudi sociologist, 'every segment of the Saudi society made use of *al-istirihat*, both the conservatives as well as their opponents'.[22] As meetings were increasingly also held in cafes, instead of just in the mosque, the scope of the meetings and the issues discussed became much wider than before.[23] This trend was given a tremendous boost by the rise of transnational Arabic satellite television stations, which have broken the monopoly of the national broadcasting company.

Although the Saudi government's reform is not progressing as rapidly as promised,[24] not all optimism in Saudi Arabia has died. Different societal agencies ask for, and expect, changes in the coming years. One independent journalist and blogger in Jeddah told me enthusiastically that Saudi Arabia in fact is witnessing 'a new renaissance and the Saudi civil society will be the motor of that'.[25] This is, of course, a very optimistic view, but it is not entirely unfounded. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the general environment in Saudi Arabia has been relatively open to change. This relative openness became more significant after 2005 when Abdullah became king. Compared to the earlier period when change in the Saudi kingdom was often seen as bad, even

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19 A good example of this trend is the second report of the National Society for Human Rights, in which the organization criticizes heavily the condition of human rights in the Saudi kingdom. See National Society For Human Rights, *Second Report on the Status of Human Rights in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2010). This human rights organization is established by the Saudi state itself.

20 Pascal Ménoret, *The Saudi Enigma* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2005). See also Daryl Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom: Saudi Arabia and the Momentum of Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

21 For example, the union of writers and artists can have its own independent elections, which was impossible some years ago. For an overview of civil society organizations in Saudi Arabia, see Caroline Montagu, 'Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (winter 2010), pp. 67–83.

22 Abulaziz al-Khdhr, *Al-S'udiya sira al-dawla wa al-mujtama'* [Saudi Arabia: Biography of a State and Society] (Beirut: *Al-Shabak Al-Arabiya Lilabhath wa Al-nashr* [Arab Network for Research and Publishing], 2010), p. 445.

23 Al-Khdhr, Al-S'udiya sira al-dawla wa al-mujtama', p. 445.

24 See Paul Aarts, 'Maintaining Authoritarianism: The Jerky Path of Political Reform in Saudi Arabia', *Orient,* Vol. 52, No. 1 (2011), pp. 29–42.

25 Interview by the author with a Saudi journalist, Jeddah, June 2010.

sinful and against Islamic principles and condemned as innovation (*bid'a*), people are increasingly dissatisfied with the limited space for change and its slow tempo. Calls to allow greater freedom of speech, to increase the rights for women, and to end discrimination and intolerance are increasingly being heard. However, as one commentator put it, 'there is little that is radical about the reform movement in Saudi Arabia. It consists primarily of intellectuals, academics, religious scholars and elite activists who have, for the most part, carefully avoided direct criticism of the royal family and have not called for their ouster'.[26]

The 'Arab Spring' may help to open up the process of change and force the government to implement further and wider reforms. Until now the regime has survived this 'spring' and secured a domestic calm through buying off the population and implementing a massive government subsidy package. As Bernard Haykal remarked:

[…] abruptly, some $130 billion was added to spending projections over the next five years. Salaries for all public servants, a majority of the national work force, were raised, as was the total number of public-sector jobs. King Abdullah pledged large numbers of new housing units, an important gesture in a country where young people, especially young married couples, cannot easily access the housing market.[27]

The Arab uprisings also affected Saudi Arabia in other ways. It energized, for example, the Saudi women's movement, which has achieved some gains since March 2011. Women won the right to vote and run for election in the next municipal council elections in 2015 and to accept appointments on the *Majlis al-Shura*, the Consultative Council.

The demands for change in the kingdom go back to the beginning of the 1990s. Three different groups that criticized the Saudi rulers publicly, developed a new language of rights and demanded reforms can be discerned. These are the 'liberals' or the 'modernizers', the *Sahwa* Islamists and the Shiite intellectuals and religious leaders.[28]

The modernizers are not adequately organized, but they act collectively through websites, organizing lectures, organizing meetings in the *diwaniyat*,[29] publishing in the daily newspapers, and writing petitions and books.[30] Writing petitions is this group's most spectacular form of

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26 Toby Craig Jones, 'Saudi Arabia Moves to Maintain Regime Stability', Combating Terrorism Center (April 2011), available online at http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/saudi-arabia-moves-to-maintain-regime-stability, accessed in August 2011.

27 Bernard Haykel, 'Saudi Arabia vs. the Arab Spring', Project Syndicate (16 August 2011), available online at www.project-syndicate.org, accessed in November 2011. See also Mehran Kamrava, 'The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counter-Revolution', *Orbis*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (2012), pp. 96–104.

28 Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: A History of Islamism in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). On the new generation of Islamists in the kingdom, see Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). On liberals in Saudi Arabia, see R. Hrair R. Dekmejian, 'The Liberal Impulse in Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (2003), pp. 400–414. See also Roel Meijer, 'Liberals in Saudi Arabia', paper presented at the 2011 Gulf Research Meeting, workshop on 'Potential and Limits of Civil Society in the Gulf Region', University of Cambridge (6–9 July 2011).

29 *Diwaniyat* are private cultural forums or salons in which weekly lectures are organized. This specific form of civil society in Saudi Arabia will be elaborated upon later.

30 An example of a writer in Saudi Arabia who gives much attention to the question of human rights is Zaki Milad, who works as a journalist for the newspaper *Okaz*. During the first six months of 2010, Milad published a large number of articles in *Okaz* defending the idea that there is no contradiction between human rights and Islam and that there is no reason to consider human rights a 'Western invention'. There are other small human, social and women rights organizations and initiatives, such as the National Intercommunications Committee, the Committee for Women Driving, the Family Law Initiative, and the Committee against Minor Marriages.

public activity. The tradition of writing public petitions to the king started at the beginning of the 1990s. In 2003 and 2004, the modernizers drew up new petitions asking for the widening of civil and human rights, freedom of speech, greater roles to be given to women and a fundamental reform of the educational system.[31] Saudi Arabia's leadership did not react to these developments in a uniform way. Some members of the Sa'ud family, who adhered to a more liberal view, opposed narrow-minded interpretations of Islam and were in favour of social reform, advocated a conciliatory view.[32] Although the influence of the modernizers remains moderate, they made an important contribution by introducing a new language of political activism, individual and group rights and the necessity of reforms.

The Islamists campaigned for change on a far greater scale, using lectures and sermons in mosques and religious centres, reproducing these lectures on cassette tapes and circulating them widely in society. They aimed to mobilize larger sections of society behind their demands. Although most Islamist leaders did not address the real challenges facing Saudi society, others 'did produce a discourse which emphasized the concept of civil and human rights, while emphasizing that Islamic law was the determining criterion and sole source of human rights'.[33] On these topics they were introducing essentially the same language as the liberals, calling for the same rights. The Islamists were, for example, asking for the complete banning of torture and respect for the dignity of the individual under interrogation. In addition, they valued the right of the assistance of lawyers to defend them, and the notion that an accused is innocent unless a court of law proves otherwise.[34]

Leading Shiite intellectuals and liberal *'ulama'* have also adopted this trend. In fact, the Shi'a community should be regarded as an important branch of 'liberal' thinking in Saudi Arabia from the 1990s onwards.[35] In opposition to the Sunni jihadist movement, they began to formulate their collective and individual cultural and religious demands in the language of human rights.[36] They gradually exchanged their more radical Shiite political ideas, inspired by the Iranian revolution, for a political programme that was based on tolerance, openness and respect for pluralism, emphasizing citizenship, national unity, women's rights and respect for diversity within national unity.[37]

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31   Dalia Dassa Kaye et al., More Freedom, Less Terror? Liberalization and Political Violence in the Arab World (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), pp. 103–122. See also Tim Niblock, Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 103–104.

32   As a result of these developments, King Fahd announced his intention to reform the system and he established the *majlis al-shura* ('a Consultative Assembly') in 1993 and decreed a new *Majlis al-Shura* Law in 2000. See Ménoret, *The Saudi Enigma*, pp. 124–125.

33   Niblock, *Saudi Arabia*, p. 185.

34   See Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2005*, available online at http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2005/saudi-arabia, accessed in October 2011. See also Niblock, *Saudi Arabia*, pp. 185–187.

35   For a comprehensive view of the situation of the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia, see Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia* (Beirut: Saqi Books, 2006). See also (in Arabic) Ibrahim al-Hatlani, *Al-Shi'a Al-S'udiiwn* [The Saudi Shiites] (Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 2009).

36   Madawi Al- Rasheed, 'The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia: A Minority in Search of Cultural Authenticity', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1998, p. 121. See also Toby Matthiesen, 'The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads', *Middle East Report Online* (6 May 2009), available online at http://www.merip.org/mero/mero050609, accessed in October 2011.

37   The writings of the most prominent Saudi Arabian Shi'a religious personality, Sheikh Hasan al-Saffar, are examples of this intellectual work. To name a few of al-Saffar's books: *Al-Khitab Al-Islami wa Huquq Al-Insan* (Casablanca: *Al-Markaz Al-Thaqafi Al-Arabi*, 2007); *The Islamic Discourse and Human Rights* (Casablanca: *Al-Markaz Al-Thaqafi Al-Arabi*, 2007); *Al-Ta'adwdiya wa Al-Huriya Fi Al-Islam* (Beirut: *Markaz Al-Hadhara Litanmiya Al-Fikr Al-Islami*, 2010); *Pluralism and Liberty in Islam* (Beirut: Centre of Civilization for the Development of Islamic Thought, 2010); *Al-Silm Al-Ijtima'i* (Beirut: *Dar al-Saqi*, 2002); and *The Social Peace* (Beirut: *Dar al-Saqi*, 2002).

All of these developments brought a new dynamic to the ways in which the state and society interacted in Saudi Arabia. The petition movement and the activities of some segments of the Islamists, and the commitment of some Shiite intellectuals and organizations, were the voices of Saudi civil society asking the Saudi state to reform. The discourses on human rights, pluralism and tolerance prepared the ideological and cultural ground for a relatively more active role by civil society and created a new common language between the different agencies of civil society. The role of different women's groups and individuals in pushing for more women's rights in the kingdom is one of the important factors behind important changes in Saudi Arabia. Before obtaining the right to vote and to be elected, different women's groups and individuals had organized a long campaign on the internet and Facebook asking for these rights.[38]

The above-mentioned developments, plus the events of 9/11 and the increased international pressure resulting from it, as well as the attacks on the Saudi state in 2003 and 2004 by radical segments of Wahhabi groups, pushed the regime to re-examine the nature of the Wahhabi movement, its relation to it and the influence that this movement has on Saudi society.[39] Globalization and the introduction of new communication technology opened Saudi Arabia to a wide variety of alternative ideas and cultures that compete with established Wahhabi views. The Saudi government started to rethink the division of tasks between itself and the official religious establishment. Traditionally, the royal family had concentrated on matters of state and the survival of its rule, whereas the *'ulama'* focused on matters of society. In exchange for its religious legitimacy, the state had guaranteed the *'ulama'* a strong position in society.[40] The government, however, now realized that steps had to be taken to create a new balance in society, to articulate a new political message as a counterweight to the powerful religious establishment, and to recognize the need to encourage less rigid attitudes, as well as to recognize the national and religious diversity in the kingdom while finding new ways to protect national unity. The reign of King Abdullah from 2005 onwards started by taking these challenges seriously.[41]

All those changes and developments brought Saudi civil society into a new social, political and intellectual environment. The slowly diminishing power of the Wahhabi religious establishment and its decreasing control over society created more structural space for civil society. The state sometimes actively tried to curb the power of the conservative Wahhabi scholars and to encourage the activities of those branches of civil society that challenge the conservative ideology of the religious establishment to expand. For instance, Saudi newspapers—often

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38 For a comprehensive view on women's issues in Saudi Arabia, see Annemarie van Geel's contribution to this research project, 'Whither the Saudi Woman? Gender Mixing, Empowerment and Modernity'. See also 'The Free Saudi Liberal Network', available online at http://www.humanf.org:8686/vb/showthread.php?p=1512155, accessed in September 2011.

39 Thomas Höhne-Sparborth, 'Social Change in Saudi Arabia: Regime, Religion and the People', *Orient* II, (2008), p. 6.

40 Since the emergence of the Saudi state, the state's legitimacy has basically been based on the religious approval of the conservative Wahhabist religious elite. But from the end of the 1970s this doctrine became more than only an instrument for legitimizing the rule of the royal family; it developed into something like a political ideology. Wahhabism became a set of beliefs about society and the state, interpreting events and aiming at organizing and filtering social and cultural life. The state actively participated in this process by creating the needed space for the Wahhabi *'ulama'* to achieve this goal, although the Wahhabi elite dominated the education system, ran the legal system and established and controlled a huge network of mosques and religious centres. See Höhne-Sparborth, 'Social Change in Saudi Arabia', p. 5. On Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, see David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

41 Abdullah was crown prince from 1982. From 1996, when King Fahd was incapacitated by a major stroke, he acted as *de facto* ruler. He was formally enthroned on 3 August 2005.

owned by liberal princes—are full of articles criticizing the rigid interpretation of religion and defending personal choices and freedoms. It is especially the introduction of a new common language of rights that has challenged the dominant language of Wahhabism.

The discourse on rights creates a new intellectual and ideological space for civil society. A certain shift from a conservative Islamic language to a liberal or semi-liberal language—emphasizing individual rights—has taken place. This language is received and reinterpreted in a complex context of development that enhances its impact, such as the wider use of the internet, the demographic bulge of youth under 30 years of age, sending young students to study abroad, and rising discontent on account of growing unemployment, etc. On a deeper level, toleration of this language, and sometimes even the promotion of it, exemplify a slight shift in the Saudi state's political thinking during the last ten years. This new language could assist the state in the processes of homogenizing society, bringing conflicting groups into dialogue with each other and reacting in a more flexible manner to the threat of new, rising forces in the country. Saudi Arabia, despite its official and rigid Wahhabi creed, is a pluralist society. Yet despite the plurality of religious and cultural groups, the existence of liberals and moderate religious groups, this pluralism is not reflected in its political structure and ideology. Political power is concentrated in the hands of the royal family and, ideologically, Saudi Arabia is still largely governed by the religious code of the Wahhabi religious establishment.

A good example of the Saudi government's cautious attempt to recognize the diversity of Saudi Arabia is the establishment of the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue.[42] This new institution focuses on pluralism, dialogue and national unity through promoting dialogue and the notion of citizenship. For this reason, the centre started organizing different meetings. The first national dialogue (2003) addressed the question of national unity and was attended by a number of religious figures, including the important Shiite cleric Hassan al-Saffar. The second national dialogue (2003) addressed the question of extremism and moderation. The third (2004) focused on the role of women. In later years the centre has addressed other issues, including questions about the youth, education, and labour and employment.[43]

In conclusion, one can state that, on the one hand, the new social and political context contains some structural and intellectual spaces that could be used in favour of further development of Saudi civil society and enhancing its capacity. Different groups are active within civil society and some elements within the state also favour further reforms. On the other hand, Saudi civil society is still confronted with the authoritarian state that aims to control it and co-opts an important part of it.

2.5   The Landscape of Civil Society in Saudi Arabia

As mentioned above, the landscape of civil society in Saudi Arabia contains three forms of civil society: non-political; semi-political; and political organizations. One common thread among all

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42   See Mark Thompson, 'The King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue: The Impact of Dialogue Training Initiatives', paper presented at the 2011 Gulf Research Meeting, workshop on 'Potential and Limits of Civil Society in the Gulf Region', University of Cambridge, 6–9 July 2011.

43   Meanwhile, eight meetings have taken place. According to Shiʿa writer, researcher and human rights activist Jafar Mohammad Alshayeb, 'The national dialogue in Saudi Arabia is still at the beginning of a long road, but it has overcome many barriers of various religious, intellectual and sectarian approaches; besides that, it must set suitable common grounds for dialogue between different components of Saudi society. The most prominent obstacle is that dialogue is still limited to an elite group and did not prevail broadly among members of the society'. See online at http://www.alshayeb.org/?act=news&sec=3&id=44&exp=0, accessed in August 2011; and also an interview by the author with Alshayeb in Dammam, January 2011.

is the language of rights. Obviously, one speaks this language louder and more adamantly than the other.

2.5.1   Non-political Organizations

The non-political organizations of civil society in Saudi Arabia cover a wide range of organizations. The most important of those associations are the following.

1. Charitable organizations

These form the largest part of Saudi civil society and can be found in almost every Saudi city and village. Charitable work is basically seen as one of the foundations of Islam. Traditionally, the imam is trusted to receive the alms that are collected to be distributed to the poor. Commonality and solidarity, as part of the culture of the people, are the other origins of charity work. Charity is an important support to the state in overcoming its shortcomings to deliver the basic needs to different segments of the Saudi population, which is set to double within 20–30 years.[44]

Charitable work has grown to such an extent that it contributes to the well-being of society as a whole. As a specialist in civil society in Saudi Arabia, Caroline Montagu states that charitable organizations have become 'service-providers of housing, health, education, social and housing benefits, and disability provisions. So too have some of the foundations been set up by particular companies or individuals, such as Al-Rajhi Banking and the Prince Walid bin Talal or Abdul Latif Jameel Foundations. The umbrella charities, such as Al-Birr, have expanded'.[45]

Despite the non-political character of most of these charity organizations, the sector provides a social space for political competition between different agents. Hence, 'royal donations have traditionally been used as a means of consolidating power by assuring the loyalty of subjects'.[46] The princes also compete for the title of the most generous or the most committed to the kingdom's development. In one way, these activities of the royal family can be regarded as the personalization of the distribution of oil rent. The royal family, however, is not the only institution using the charity sector to consolidate its power; the religious elite in Saudi Arabia does the same. Both use charitable organizations to enhance their prestige and legitimacy.

Some examples from different regions of Saudi Arabia illustrate the importance of this sector in the social and economic life of different segments of Saudi society. The Charitable Project for Assisting Youth to Get Married, in Jeddah, assists young people who are unable to get married. According to this organization, 64 per cent of crimes in Saudi Arabia are committed by unmarried young men. It is believed that helping these men to marry will increase their sense of responsibility and will protect Saudi society. The organization offers financial and material assistance, educational programmes, and programmes concerning a successful family and good sexual life. It completely depends on donations and annually receives US$ 7 million. It is not only the rich who give support, but also Saudis with an average income donate a monthly percentage of their income to this organization.[47]

ZemZem, which is also in Jeddah, is another example of a rapidly growing category of civil society organizations in Saudi Arabia. ZemZem concentrates on health care for the poor.

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44   Salman Baqer Al-Najar, *Al-Dimuqratiya Al-'Siya Fi Al-Khalij Al-Arabi* [The Inaccessible Democracy in the Arabian Gulf] (Beirut: *Dar al-Saqi*, 2008).
45   For comprehensive information on different charity associations in Saudi Arabia, see Montagu, 'Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia', pp. 67–83.
46   Club de Madrid, Strengthening Dialogue and Democratic Discourse through Freedom (Madrid: Club de Madrid, 2009), p. 144.
47   Interview by the author with the manager of this project in Jeddah, June 2010.

ZemZem has voluntary teams of doctors and nurses who travel to distant villages and towns. One of their activities, called the 'Medical Caravan', has made 28 trips during the last year to outlying villages and districts to provide medical services to the people, and 243 voluntary doctors participated in those trips. ZemZem started in 2005 with a budget of one million Saudi Riyal (SAR); four years later this had increased to SAR 21.5 million.[48]

In Riyadh, charity organizations dealing with different aspects of societal difficulties and problems exist.[49] The Bin Baz Project for Assisting the Youth in Riyadh is one of these. It deals with problems that emerge as a result of rapid urbanization and immigration from the countryside to big cities, concentrating on family problems between parents and children, husband and wife, and brothers and sisters. The people who work for the Bin Baz Project are highly qualified: they are mostly professional social workers and psychologists. In the last four years the Bin Baz Project has assisted almost 20,000 cases. Between 40 and 50 clients are helped monthly via telephone. The organization is careful to protect its clients' privacy rights and has its own research centre.

In the Eastern Province there are also quite a number of charity organizations. Um al-Hamam Charity Association in the village of the same name is an example. This organization takes care of orphans, the poor and sick people. It also has a football stadium, a hospital and different halls for parties and marriage parties. This organization also has a branch for women, which puts a lot of effort into educating and training women for the labour market. It offers programmes for learning English, computer skills and sport. Um al-Hamam engages 150 volunteers and 140 paid employees, and every three years the members elect the board of the organization.

2. Business community, well-being work and empowerment.
Cooperation between big businesses and civil society organizations is another form of civil engagement in Saudi Arabia. This kind of cooperation is called 'Corporate Social Responsibility': the companies assist groups or communities in society who need financial support. The assistance aims at creating possibilities for development and empowerment of the community. The cooperation between Nasma Holding Co. Ltd. and the al-Birr association for assisting orphan children in Jeddah is an example of this kind of civil engagement and work. The general manager of human recourses at Nasma explained the difference between their work and the work of a formal charity organization as follows: 'The charity organizations make people passive and dependent, but we try to empower them. Our philosophy is: don't give someone a fish but teach them how to fish'.[50]

Al-Birr in Jeddah is responsible for the well-being of 3,000 orphan children. The orphan children at Al-Birr receive support from the elementary school level until the end of their education, sometimes even until they obtain their Ph.D. from Saudi universities or abroad. Even after their studies they get the advice and assistance that are needed to find a job. This includes writing application letters, drawing up a CV, English-language training and computer courses. According to the general manager of human resources at Nasma, this form of corporate social responsibility is a growing trend in Saudi Arabia.

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48   Interview by the author with the manager of this project in Jeddah, June 2010.
49   For an overview of those organizations, see Montagu, 'Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia'. As an example, according to the Bin Baz Project manager, the divorce rate in Saudi Arabia is higher than 25 per cent. Interview by the author with the manager of Bin Baz, Riyadh, January 2011.
50   Interview by the author with the manager of Nasma in Jeddah, June 2010.

3. Chambers of Commerce

Chambers of Commerce in Saudi Arabia are organizations for the private sector's business community. The Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry is the umbrella organization for all of Saudi Arabia's local chambers. This organization is influential and helps mediation between Saudi companies and the state. The members of the chambers are businessmen and women who come together to defend their individual and collective interests, to act as a pressure group and to coordinate their efforts. The chambers are one of the kingdom's few organizations that are financially independent. Their activities are financed by members' subscriptions and they hold elections for their committees. The chambers provide information to the government and lobby for their members' plans and projects. All ministries in the kingdom and the *Majlis al-Shura* consult the central Council of Saudi Chambers on any proposed business legislation.

Although these chambers concentrate more on lobbying than act as political pressure groups, their activities go beyond mere economic activity. For instance, they participate in social development, assisting local civic organizations to organize themselves, and train local people in different skills to participate in the labour market. They are also well connected with state institutions and sometimes even with the king himself. In this regard, Montagu writes 'Through an order from King Abdullah, then Crown Prince, every ministry has to involve the private sector and therefore consult the Council, including on all government tenders. It acts as a pressure group, appealing finally to the King as a last resort for resolving disputes'.[51]

Particularly striking is the active participation of women in the chamber in Jeddah, who form a group of intelligent and assertive women who fight for their rights in the business industry. The Alsayedah Khadijah bint Khwailed Businesswomen's Center (AKBK) is an illustration of this kind of engagement in the business world in Saudi Arabia. AKBK is part of the Chamber of Commerce in Jeddah, and was established in 2004. Khadijah is the name of the first wife of the prophet Muhammad. According to the AKBK, she was 'a first-class merchant with a wide network that allowed her to plan and implement her strategies'.[52] She is seen as the greatest role model for all contemporary businesswomen and their source of inspiration, determination and ambition. The organization promotes the empowerment of women so that they will become active partners in the national development. In recent years, especially since the reign of King Abdullah, AKBK has intensively communicated with the Saudi government to break down the obstacles that hinder women's emancipation. It has achieved important successes. For instance, it succeeded in changing article 114 of the Labour Regulatory Laws, which stated that the mixing of genders in the workplace is forbidden, and replaced it with a new article for both men and women requiring them to abide by *shari'a* law in the workplace, with no further mention of forbidding the mixing of genders. They also succeeded in abolishing those obstacles that prevented a businesswoman from investing in certain business sectors and from holding leadership positions in the private sector. Women are now allowed access to all businesses without exception, including contracting, real estate and general services. Women can also become board members in private companies.

There are also women's sections of the Chamber of Commerce in other parts of Saudi Arabia. In the eastern part of the kingdom there is the Eastern Province Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Even in Riyadh, which is more rigid and socially conservative than the rest of Saudi Arabia, women have developed their women's section in the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

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51   Montagu, 'Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia', p. 75.
52   Interview by the author with a member of AKBA, Jeddah, June 2010.

4. Community centres and neighbourhood centres

Community centres are a new kind of grassroots organization in Saudi Arabia. In the Eastern Province, for example in Qatif, you will find *majalis al-ahiya* ('neighbourhood committees'), which are independent voluntary grassroots organizations. Their main task is to supervise the municipal policies. They play the role of consultant between the community and the local authorities.

Jam'iya marakiz al-ahliya ('the neighbourhood association centres') are another example of this kind of civil organization. They have branches in Mecca, Jeddah and Taif. Since 2007, the organization has opened centres in several neighbourhoods in those cities. In Jeddah, for example, they have 28 neighbourhood centres, eleven for females and seventeen for males. Each centre has three main programmes. The first is called 'the community of the neighbourhood', which aims at improving social relationships in the neighbourhood and solving the problems that can emerge between families. The second programme, 'Men of the Future' and 'Pioneering? Women', aims at preparing young people to lead their life and community in the future. The programme entails the development and expression of talents, exchanging ideas and opinions, while discussing and developing a sense of citizenship and patriotism. The third programme is called 'Our Neighbourhood Reads', and it is lead by Dr Khadija al-Saban, Professor of Arabic Language and Literature. Dr al-Saban explained: 'In this programme the people from the neighbourhood read a book every month. In an organized meeting in the neighbourhood they discuss it among themselves under the supervision of one expert. Between 20 and 100 persons participate in these meetings. Because we do not want to discuss only religious books, we choose the books for the people'.[53] They are planning to organize elections in the neighbourhoods to elect the members to lead the local centres. Dr Khadija adds: 'The relationship between those neighbourhood centres and the mosques in the neighbourhoods is not strong, but the mosques do not attack the centres. We legitimize our existence also on religious grounds, but we propagate openness and moderation as an essential part of religion'.[54]

2.5.2 Semi-political Organizations

1. The literary and cultural clubs

Saudi Arabia has sixteen literary and cultural clubs. The club of Jeddah is the oldest one (established in 1975). Until early June 2010, the board members of these clubs, always ten persons, were appointed by Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Culture and Media. No internal elections were held and the ministry stipulated who presided over the clubs.

A new charter, which was introduced and published by the Ministry of Culture and Media in June 2010, laid down new regulations, giving the clubs the possibility of holding independent elections to elect the president and the club's board members. Women also obtained the right to become candidates for both the board and the chairmanship of the clubs.

These clubs draw up annual programmes. The Jeddah club, for example, invites 30 intellectuals each year to discuss different topics, including dicey topics that touch upon cultural and religious taboos. The participants of these clubs are mainly young people, particularly students—both males and females. Despite the fact that these clubs do not engage in political activities, they treat topics that have political implications.

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53   Interview by the author with Dr Khadija al-Saban, Jeddah, June 2010.
54   Interview by the author with Dr Khadija al-Saban, Jeddah, June 2010.

The majority of the members of these literary and cultural organizations consist of liberal-minded writers and intellectuals who criticize and discuss the dominant religious views and morality in Saudi society. This critical approach is also present in the works written by women in the kingdom, particularly in novels.

Saudi women novelists have become something of a phenomenon. Since the early 1990s, Saudi Arabia has experienced an enormous increase in novels written by women.[55] The most important names are Qamasha al-Aliyan, Raja al-Sani', Saba al-Hazar, Warda Abdul Malik, Zainab Hanafi and Miral al-Tahawi. Social oppression, problems relating to women's sexuality, and abuse and discrimination of women in the parental house, in marriage and in society as a whole are dealt with extensively in these novels. Marriage is often presented as a prison, with the husband or a male member of the family as the guardian of that prison, and religion as the law regulating prison life.[56] These novels break taboos by targeting and heavily criticizing the religious elite.

For example, in her short novel of 101 pages, *al-Awba* (The Plague), Warda Abd al-Malik creates the figure of a religious sheikh who manipulates an illiterate woman and has her recite the Qur'an at the moment when he is practising anal sex with her. Criticism of the religious police in these works is also prominent. Members of this powerful institution in Saudi Arabia are often portrayed as indecent, sexually perverse and morally corrupt.[57] Seba al-Harz goes even further and describes the world of lesbians in Saudi society, as well as the oppression of the Shiite minority. In her best-selling book *al-Akhariyyat* (The Others), al-Harz tells the story of a teenager at a girls' school in the Shiite Eastern Province. Through this character, she introduces the readers to a secret world of lesbian parties in Saudi Arabia.[58] In *al-Firdaws al-Yabab* (The Wasted Paradise), Laila al-Jahni criticizes the government for prohibiting Saudi women from driving and for mismanaging Jeddah.[59]

According to the president of the Jeddah literary club, Professor al-Nami, this wave of novels in Saudi Arabia is:

> […] a result of the changes in attitude of the Saudis in the 1990s. In the 1980s the Saudis thought that they did not need anyone in the world. They thought: we have wealth, oil and the key to paradise; we need nothing more. But in the 1990s Saudis realized that they needed America to fight the threat of Saddam Hussein. Suddenly a lot of Saudis started to ask questions like 'who are we?', 'where are we going?', and 'how to go further?'[60]

In this context the Saudi novel emerged and critical questions started to be asked.

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55   For an overview of the development of Saudi women's novels, see 'Abd al-Rahman bin Mumamad al-Wahabbi, *Al-Riwaya Al-Nisaia Al-Sa'udiya wa Al-Mutagairat Al-Thaqafiya* [The Saudi Women's Novel and the Cultural Changes] (*Al-Elm wa el-Eman Lilnashir wa Al-tawzi'*, 2010). See also Saddeka Arebi, *Women and Word in Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Literary Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

56   For the role of men in the Saudi women's novel, see Hassan al-Na'mi, *al-Riwaya al-Sa'udiyya* [The Saudi Novel] (Riyadh: Ministry of Culture and Media, 2009), pp. 58–61.

57   Warda Abd al-Malik, *al-Awba* (Beirut: *Dar al-Saqi*, 2006), p. 101.

58   Seba al-Harz, *al-Akhariyyat* (Beirut: *Dar al-Saqi*, 2006).

59   Laila al-Jahni, *al-Firdaws al-Yabab* (al-Shariqa: The Media and Culture Publication, 1997).

60   Interview by the author with Professor al-Nami, Jeddah, June 2010.

2. Virtual civil society and the new media

There is a large and complex network of new media in Saudi Arabia and a sizeable number of Saudis are participating in it.[61] According to two Saudi pedagogues who researched internet use by youths aged between sixteen and nineteen, in six schools (three for boys and three for girls) in the region of Hafer al-Baten, 93 per cent of boys and 94 per cent of girls at secondary schools are using the internet. According to their findings, the average number of hours per day being spent on the internet is between four and five for girls, and four for boys. Furthermore, 55 per cent of the boys and 30.3 per cent of the girls confirm that they have made 'friends' in foreign countries through the net, and that 91 per cent of youngsters are enthusiastic about the internet and claim that they develop their knowledge and skills because of it.[62]

In the Arabic version of her book on the challenge of the new generation in Saudi Arabia, Mai Yamani emphasizes the politicization of youth in the Saudi kingdom as a consequence of massive use of new media and the internet.[63] According to Yamani, youth in Saudi Arabia—the majority of the population—wants 'more civil freedom, citizenship and patriotism'.[64] Yamani sees the internet—she labels it the 'technology of globalization'—as the 'greatest challenge' to the country's rulers.[65] According to her, the number of internet users is 7.7 million of a total population of 25 million, and in 2009 more than 97 per cent of them were massively using Google. In Yamani's view, this has created a 'new political culture'.[66] Furthermore, the internet has given different groups in Saudi society the opportunity to express and develop their identity outside the reach of the Saudi state and to make these identities visible. Yamani gives the example of Shiite and Ismaili websites, which defend the Shiites and Ismailis against insults and discrimination by extremist Wahhabi clergymen.[67]

Given these developments, one could speak of the emergence of a 'virtual Saudi civil society', a cyberspace in which different individuals and groups can act freely. One simple example is that all of the Saudi newspapers are currently on the internet, and readers can freely comment on the articles that they read. Hundreds of responses are frequently posted, so a whole discussion ensues. A human rights activist who is especially interested in the readers' comments said: 'Those comments show the rise of a critical conscience of the average Saudi reader. The Saudis now have a better understanding of freedom in general and of freedom of opinion and expression in particular'.[68]

Perhaps more important and effective than the capacity to react to the published pieces in the newspapers is the capacity to use Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to spread messages and to establish groups and social communities. One example that shows the effectiveness of the new media is the manner in which these media were used during the flooding of Jeddah in 2009. The official media initially denied the scope of the destruction and refused to acknowledge the deaths that the flood had caused in the city. But young people were quick to publish pictures on

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61   According to optimistic Saudi journalists who are actively engaged in this digital network, Saudi Arabia is witnessing *al-Nahda al-Jadida* ['a new Renaissance']. The role of Facebook, Twitter and blogs on the net is, according to them, vital in creating this renaissance. 'The new media has given the people not only possibilities of developing new ideas, but they also facilitated the rising of new groups and new initiatives'. Interview by the author with two journalists, Jeddah, June 2010.

62   *Al-Hayat*, 26 June 2010.

63   Mai Yamani, *Hawiyat Mutaghayyira: Tahadi al-Jil al-Jadid fi al-Saʻudiyya* [Changed Identities: The Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia] (Beirut: *Riad El-Rayyes* Books, 2010).

64   Yamani, *Hawiyat Mutaghayyira*, p. 12.

65   Yamani, *Hawiyat Mutaghayyira*, p. 13.

66   Yamani, *Hawiyat Mutaghayyira*, pp. 13–14.

67   Yamani, *Hawiyat Mutaghayyira*, p. 33–34.

68   Interview by the author with two journalists, Riyadh, January 2011.

Facebook and Twitter of the dead victims and the catastrophic impact of the flood on the city. Short films were placed on YouTube, which showed a totally different picture of Jeddah than the rosy picture that had been portrayed by the official media. 'The new media put the official media in a very difficult position and people started to realize that the state lies to them', said a journalist who is active on the net.[69] He continued by saying that:

> […] the role of this modern media in mobilizing people to face the flood was also amazing. Through Facebook and Twitter the young people organized themselves in voluntary groups to assist the victims and to fight the negative consequences of the flood. For the first time people, particularly the youth, did not wait for the state's action and intervention. They organized themselves in groups to help the victims. Now the state has discovered the strength of these new media, it wants of course to keep Twitter and Facebook under its control, but it is impossible to control everything. The state chose another strategy, namely to be present on the net as well and to use it to reach the youth. The Minister of Culture and Media, for example, has his own page on Facebook.[70]

At present the government and other agencies, including the *'ulama'*, use the internet on a large scale. In short, the new technology has created a relatively free space for discussion, the exchange of ideas and even mobilization of people when needed. The role of this technology during the 'Arab Spring' was prominent, but one must still be careful not to exaggerate the role of the modern media. What happens on the internet can also be seen as mere compensation for what is lacking in real life. Cyberspace can be used as a way to flee the hard reality and to take refuge in the worldwide web.

3. Diwaniyyat

The *diwaniyyat* (sing. *diwaniyya*) are informal groupings that are mainly based on family, tribal, intellectual or business ties. They are privately held weekly social meetings in the homes of prominent families. The gatherings can be compared to the nineteenth-century literary *salons* in Europe. The total number of *diwaniyyat* in the Kingdom is unknown, but a 2008 conference organized by the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue brought 65 of these *diwaniyyat* together. Remarkably, there is no law that organizes their work. Different activities are organized in these weekly meetings, ranging from reciting poetry to debating serious political questions. Sensitive issues, such as the conservative role of religion and even state policies, are debated. Critical voices, especially liberal voices, can speak out during these meetings and heated debates take place. In a meeting in Riyadh that I attended, there were more than 70 participants who critically discussed the role of religion in Saudi Arabia and the negative role of the Saudi state in it. Participants criticized the pact between the Saudi state and the country's conservative religious establishment. The evening's conclusion was that society cannot develop itself on the basis of religion alone. The Saudi state must listen to all the voices in the country, including those of secularists and liberals.

Several women's, but not gender-mixed, *diwaniyyat* exist. Some twelve years ago, a number of Riyadh women, led by an academic, Hatun al-Fassi, created an informal discussion group known as *al-Multaqa al-Ahadi* (The Sunday Group), which organized annual programmes that included topics such as women in society, family violence, municipal elections and, in 2006, Saudi literature. This group formed a lobby encouraging women to stand in the 2005 municipal elections, using media, television and government officials to promote their cause. In 2010 they started the same campaign for participation in the next municipal elections.

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69   Interview by the author with a journalist, Jeddah, June 2010.
70   Interview by the author with a journalist, Jeddah, June 2010.

4. Different organizations in the Eastern Province

Almost everything in the Eastern Province, where the majority of the Shiite population lives, is political. They feel heavily discriminated against and unjustly treated. The prominent imam and intellectual Hassan al-Saffar elaborates on this point:

> The Shiites in Saudi Arabia are politically marginalized, they cannot reach important positions within the state, and there is not one single Shiite minister, even under-minister, in the country. In the Shiite province there is not even one director in the state bureaucracy. On the religious level, the Shiites cannot build their own mosques. In Najran there are half a million Shiites but they cannot build a mosque for themselves. In Dammam, with almost a 25 per cent Shiite community, there are no graveyards for Shiites and they have difficulty in burying their dead persons. In the province of Ahsa, where 60 per cent of the population is Shiite, there are 400 schools, but you cannot find one single school director who is Shiite.*[71]*

Al-Saffar continued, 'I can say we are now in Saudi Arabia busy with creating a culture of respecting diversity, but not the reality of respecting diversity. For instance, two months ago a *fatwa* was issued according to which it is forbidden to sell land to Shiites in Riyadh'.[72]

There are a huge number of organizations dealing with different aspects of the social, cultural and religious life in this part of Saudi Arabia. Some examples are:

- *Shabab Min Ajl al-Taghyir* (Youth For Change). This organization aims to develop the abilities and talents of youth in its province and, more particularly, organizes workshops on human rights.
- *Markaz al-Ibda' li-l-Funun* (Centre for Art innovation). In the early stage of its activities, this organization focused on developing art in the Eastern Province, but now its basic activities concentrate on creating a culture of peace, respecting diversity and encouraging acceptance.
- *Al-Siyaha al-Ma'rifiyya* (Knowledge of Tourism). This organization emphasizes the cultural and intellectual developments in the province, focusing on the cultural elite and trying to develop cooperation with intellectuals in the rest of the Arab world. It also has a relationship with UNESCO and other international organizations.
- *Lajna al-Tawasil al-Watani* (National Contact Committee). This organization was established four years ago and has fifteen members, men and women. The National Contact Committee 'organizes visits from Qatif to the homeland and from the homeland to Qatif', one of its members explained.[73] The purpose of these visits is to make people from other parts of Saudi Arabia learn more about the social, political and cultural life in Qatif and to facilitate contacts between religious, cultural and intellectual personalities, and between men and women.
- *Mashru' al-Musawat* (The Equality Project). This organization focuses on spreading knowledge of human rights. It organizes lectures and publishes brochures on the topic.

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71   Interview by the author with Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, Dammam, January 2011.
72   Interview by the author with Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, Dammam, January 2011. For more details about the Saudi Shi'a, see Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia*; and Al-Rasheed, 'The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia'. See also International Crisis Group, 'The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Report* (Amman/Brussels/Riyadh: International Crisis Group, 19 September 2005); and Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
73   Interview by the author with a member of the National Contact Committee, Dammam, January 2011.

2.6   Political Organizations

Although the Saudi regime does not permit independent civil society organizations—by either incorporating pre-existing organizations or bringing the new established ones under state control and banning all others—there are still some organizations that comply with this standard image. In Saudi Arabia a few unofficial, bottom–up organizations—located outside the state's control mechanisms—exist. These organizations have been established by individual Saudi citizens without the government's approval. The main field of activity of these organizations is human rights. Before elaborating on these organizations, it is first important to say a few words on the two official human rights organizations in Saudi Arabia: the National Society of Human Rights (NSHR), which was created in March 2004; and the Human Rights Commission (HRC), which was established on 12 September 2005.

These two official organizations are directly related to the government. The HRC is actually a government human rights agency. Its policy of defending human rights is directly linked to the state's political agenda. It has direct access to the king and has the authority to pay unexpected visits to prisons and to monitor prison conditions. The HRC sees its role as that of ombudsman and receives, on average, 4,000 complaints per year. It has branches throughout Saudi Arabia, with two established specifically for women. The HRC has published many brochures on the topic of human rights.[74]

The NSHR also has good relations with the government, although in general it is more critical than the HRC. Like the HRC, the NSHR receives citizens' complaints, intervenes on their behalf with the relevant authorities, and visits prisons.[75] The NSHR monitored municipal elections in 2005 and visited over 30 prisons in coordination with international and regional human rights groups. Dr Saleh al-Khathlan, the Deputy Chairman of the NSHR, describes the situation of human rights in Saudi Arabia as follows: 'The situation of human rights is changing for the better but at a very low tempo'.[76] He distinguishes two main obstacles for human rights in Saudi Arabia: first, the lack of a legal charter that defines the borders of human rights, as such a framework would make it possible to identify possible violations of those rights more easily; and second, not only is the culture of human rights in Saudi Arabia very weak, but there are also groups that label human rights a Western invention and therefore against Islam. This negative approach to human rights provides excuses for state institutions not to take the project of human rights seriously and to label human rights as 'Westernization'.[77]

As already mentioned, there is another type of human rights organization in Saudi Arabia: the unregistered and unlicensed organizations. These non-official organizations can indeed be characterized as political organizations. This has to do with their political demands, their demand to be fully independent and the manner in which they think about the future form of rule in Saudi Arabia. Some of these organizations call for a constitutional monarchy. It is difficult to know the exact number of these independent, explicitly political, human rights organizations in Saudi Arabia, but there must be more than a few.[78] Most of them have official websites and they are also present on Facebook and Twitter; in this sense they are part of Saudi digital civil society. The following organizations belong to this category:

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74   Interview by the author with some members in HRC's headquarter in Riyadh, June 2010.
75   Interview by the author with a member of the NSHR, Riyadh, June 2010.
76   Interview with Dr Saleh al-Khathlan in the Saudi daily newspaper *Al-Hayat*, 25 June 2010.
77   Interview with Dr Saleh al-Khathlan in the Saudi daily newspaper *Al-Hayat*, 25 June 2010.
78   Interview by the author with a human rights activist, Riyadh, January 2011.

1. Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA)

This organization was founded in December 2009 by a group of human rights activists in Riyadh and submitted a registration request to the king. According to the founders of ACPRA, the organization was created 'in response to what was seen as a worsening human rights situation in Saudi Arabia'.[79] ACPRA issued many provocative statements on different issues, including the Jeddah flood disaster, political prisoners, the judicial system and bringing officials to trial. Its members are also present on a regular basis in media outlets. ACPRA is an independent liberal-minded organization. Its aim is to establish the rule of law, freedom of expression, freedom of association and political participation in Saudi Arabia. In its founding declaration, the group announced that 'the most important reasons for the establishment of the Assembly are that the human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly the political rights in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, are seriously violated'.[80] Its members are openly pessimistic about the government's reform programme:

> In spite of the fact that the era of King Abdullah began as a promising start to reform, with the release of a number of political prisoners, and people were enthusiastic and encouraged by some steps, such as the establishment of the Human Rights Commission, these reforms soon stagnated because of the increasing domination of the Ministry of Internal Affairs upon the lives of people, and the human rights situation returned to where it was before.[81]

2. Human Rights Monitor–Saudi Arabia

Human Rights Monitor–Saudi Arabia was founded by Waleed Abulkhair, a lawyer based in Jeddah who has been interrogated many times by the authorities. Abulkhair took many cases to court and volunteered to defend victims of human rights violations. The group has a Facebook page monitoring violations and cases of human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia and a collection of articles on human rights issues.[82]

3. Human Rights First Society (HRFS)

HRFS was established in 2002 and led by Ibrahim al-Mugaiteeb. It is the Saudi branch of the international organization Human Rights First. It seems to have other members from different parts of Saudi Arabia.[83] The organization issues statements on different cases and distributes other organizations' published statements to its mailing list. Since its establishment, it has applied for official recognition, but to date it remains unrecognized.[84]

4. Rights Activists Network (RAN)

Founded by a group of human rights activists from the Eastern Province and joined by around 350 members from different regions in Saudi Arabia, Rights Activists Network aims to mobilize activists in Saudi Arabia and to educate and train human rights practitioners. The organization coordinates training workshops inside and outside Saudi Arabia in cooperation with regional

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79   See the Facebook page of ACPRA, available online at http://www.facebook.com/pages/Saudi-Civil-and-Political-Rights-Association/206754282676539, accessed in November 2011.
80   For the Arabic version of this declaration, see online at www.acpra6.org/news_view_1.html, accessed in June 2010.
81   Interview by the author with a member of ACPRA, Riyadh, January 2011.
82   See the website of Human Rights Monitor at http://www.facebook.com/groups/40258229626/.
83   See the website of Human Rights First Society at http://hrfssaudiarabia.org/.
84   See the website of Human Rights First Society at http://hrfssaudiarabia.org/, accessed in November 2011.

human rights organizations, and has achieved the training of a very high number of individuals.[85]

>   *5. The Association for the Protection and Defence of Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia*

The founder, Wajeha al-Huwaider, is a women's activist and writer from the Eastern Province, who was stopped from writing in local Saudi papers and faced many problems in her work at Aramco Company. She is very vocal in raising women's issues to the public and gained support from other activists, such as Fawzia Al-Oyouni. She took the initiative to drive her car and walk across the causeway to Bahrain to protest against male-guardian permits for women. The organization itself is not well known as a women's organization, as there are no publications, websites or activities under its name.[86]

2.7   Conclusion

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an authoritarian state and Saudi civil society is an example of a civil society that is functioning within the boundaries of that type of state. The dividing lines between the state and civil society are not always clear.[87] The Saudi government does not believe in participatory governance, and civil society has only a very limited autonomous capacity to influence policies. Furthermore, civil society in Saudi Arabia mostly has a top–down nature; it is mainly administrated and controlled from above. There are strict restrictions on the opportunities to establish an association; doing so without the support of a member of the royal family is almost impossible. In this way, the royal family exists within the state and civil society simultaneously.[88] Many Saudi civil society activists are aware of their need to cooperate with the state, as a woman from the Chamber of Commerce in Jeddah aptly remarked: 'Change in my country does not work through protest but through dialogue with the state and the officials. We cannot force change; we can only reach change through working with the government and not against it. We have to lobby on a daily basis to achieve a change'.[89]

In spite of all the restrictions and difficulties confronting Saudi civil society, there are still some openings, albeit small, with regard to the political and intellectual context, the socio-cultural environment, state–civil society relations, as well as the attitudes and behaviour of some segments of the religious establishment. Above all, there is a strong presence of the language of rights. For example, there is a lot of talk about human rights, respect for diversity, the importance of national unity, freedom of speech, aversion against violence, gender equality, criticism of fanaticism, promoting tolerance, criticizing fundamentalism, and ideas about fighting poverty. There are also some weak sounds on the importance of transparency.

After saying this, it should be clear that civil society in Saudi Arabia is too weak to be the natural agent of democratization that anyone might presume it to be. Indeed, civil society survives only in so far as it does not make any immediate democratic claims and prohibits itself from having a

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85 See Rights Activists Network's website, see online at http://www.ractivists.net/?act=home, accessed in November 2011.

86 For an interview with Wajeha al-Huwaider, see online at http://www.thenation.com/article/161224/conversation-saudi-womens-rights-campaigner-wajeha-al-huwaider. See also on YouTube: 'Wajeha Al-Huwaider is Driving a Car and Sending a Message to All Saudi Women about Driving on Women's Day', available online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8GiTnb33wE.

87 See Aarts, 'Maintaining Authoritarianism', pp. 37–39.

88 Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), p. 35.

89 Interview by the author with a female member of the Chamber of Commerce, Jeddah, January 2011.

direct influence on Saudi Arabia's political life. Civil society still, however, has an impact on people's lives, adopting a broad notion of impact that refers 'not only to the end result, or how much influence civil society has had in a particular area, but also to the processes, or how actively civil society was engaged in a particular area'.[90]

In an authoritarian fashion, the Saudi state tries to use civil society as an instrument of control, but this does not mean that the state always succeeds in doing so. As mentioned earlier, developments in Saudi society during the last two decades forced the Saudi state to be relatively more open to some demands from below and to reform some aspects of its relationship with it. In this regard it is important to mention five developments:

1) The Saudi state and its institutions are developed enough to control society directly and are no longer in need of direct mediation by the religious establishment. The Al Sa'ud no longer wants to run the state alone and to let the conservative *'ulama'* run society.

2) Saudi society is more complex and structurally diversified than ever before. Penetrating and controlling this complex society by the state needs a more developed and organized associational life. It is easier for the state to control an organized than a disorganized society.

3) Globalization and the introduction of new communication technologies opened Saudi Arabia to a wide variety of alternative cultures that compete with established Wahhabi views and make people aware of other forms of rule than the prevalent authoritarian one.

4) The post-9/11 international pressure on the Saudi state, and the jihadist attacks on Saudi governmental institutes and persons between 2003 and 2005, forced the regime to re-examine the nature of the Wahhabi movement, its relation to it, and the influence that this movement has on Saudi society.

5) The emergency of the language of rights and discourses on human rights, tolerance, economic reform, and cultural and religious pluralism in Saudi Arabia create a new intellectual environment in the country. Some segments of the Saudi state itself and the religious elite, different civil society actors, some parts of the Saudi press, and intellectuals are agents of these new discourses. This new form of political power appears in arenas and spaces that, from a conventional perspective, are deemed non-political. Yet they *are* political and they aim at changing the status quo. There are also conscious efforts by individuals, organizations and other social actors to transform this language into a public discourse. This is not a linear process, of course, and it will witness moments of backlash, but it is still a noticeable shift.

These new changes bring Saudi civil society into a new social, political and intellectual environment and will create relatively more space for civil society. This does not mean that a spectacular political change in Saudi Arabia is under way and that civil society is its agent. On the other hand, this also does not mean that Saudi Arabia's authoritarian regime is experiencing only 'upgrading' mechanisms. While the state dreams of an organized administrated society, society itself has its own dream of being freer and been treated in a more just way. Rapid modernization, the massive presence of new communication technologies, the emergence of a new balance of power in the country, and the formation of the language of change and rights create new expectations, spread knowledge of pluralism and individual rights, defend respect

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90   Heinrich, *CIVICUS*, p. 6.

for differences, acknowledge the importance of the rule of law, and emphasize the notion of citizenship.

3. Whither the Saudi Woman? Gender Mixing, Empowerment and Modernity

Annemarie van Geel

> *Research in this chapter shows how the development of women-only public spaces is tied to the historical development of the third Saudi state, as well as state discourses about 'progress' and 'reform'. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the concepts of segregation and ikhtilat (gender 'mixing') are ambiguous concepts that are contested by various players, including Saudi women themselves. The study also explores women's attitudes and strategies regarding their public participation, whether this is through women-only public spaces or ikhtilat. Moreover, it examines how Saudi women's ideas about 'empowerment' and 'the rise of women' are related to the concepts of women-only public spaces and ikhtilat, and how these notions are part of the construction of a local, enchanted Saudi modernity.*

In March 2010, Dr Yousef al-Ahmad, a professor of Islamic jurisprudence at Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, called for demolishing part of the Grand Mosque in Mecca and subsequently constructing separate floors for women in the mosque, so that men and women would be prevented from *ikhtilat* (gender mixing) during *tawwaf*[1] and prayer. Dr al-Ahmad's proposal was met with both consent (by those endorsing the practice of gender segregation) and criticism (by those favouring *ikhtilat*). Al-Ahmad's statement illustrates the deafening debate about genders mingling that is taking place in Saudi Arabia at the moment, with some people as strongly in favour of segregation as others are in favour of *ikhtilat*.[2]

Gender segregation has become a cornerstone of the Saudis' interpretation of Islam.[3] The present form of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia should not be confused with a distinction between private and public spheres. Gender segregation does not necessarily relegate women's

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1   Circumambulation of the *ka'aba* during *haj*.
2   Sean Foley, *The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2010).
3   Eleanor Abdella Doumato, 'Obstacles to Equality for Saudi Women', *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 1979–2009: Evolution of a Pivotal State. A Special Edition of Viewpoints* (Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute, 2009), p. 25.

participation to the realm of domesticity, but rather separates the two sexes in the public sphere. As such, it is a development that has led to the coming about of extensive separate public spheres.[4] From the perspective of the Saudi government, the development of women-only public spaces is not conservative. Rather, it is seen as 'progress' and modernity for both women and the nation. The notions of Islam, gender segregation and progress/modernity converge in the state's policy towards the institutionalization of women-only public spaces. This policy is contested and has led to a heavy debate, as the example of Dr al-Ahmad's proposal in the first paragraph illustrates. The debate about segregation and *ikhtilat* centres on the question of how women should participate in the public sphere, and as such is related to issues such as the 'rise of women', 'empowerment' and 'modernity'. This debate, of course, extends to and involves women. As such, it is interesting to disentangle the thoughts and ideas of women themselves on these complex issues of women-only public spaces, empowerment and modernity.

In that light, we must realize that while the state and the *'ulama'* (religious scholars) seem to have been the primary driving forces behind the institutionalization of women-only public spaces, some women also seem to have appropriated the state's and *'ulama's* (reform) policies and discourses, demanding and enforcing segregation on their own terms. They develop activities that are by women and for women in increasingly widened and diversified social spaces. At the same time, however, other women oppose the practice of gender segregation.

This chapter explores the arguments and strategies of different groups of women about women's participation in public life. The overarching question is formulated as follows: To what extent do Saudi women perceive and experience the creation of parallel female spaces to be a viable strategy for furthering the 'rise of women'? Related questions are: What do segregation and *ikhtilat* mean in practice? Which strategies do women use to deal with segregation and *ikhtilat?* What forms or level of segregation or desegregation do women aspire to in public spaces? Which new developments enforced by the state or initiated by women are taking place with regard to segregation? How do women themselves define the 'empowerment' of women and strive for 'the rise of women' in Saudi Arabia? How do these concepts relate to women's ideas about the modern Saudi woman?

For this study, 48 women were interviewed. Urban women were the focus of the research, and most women were well educated and well travelled, but not all women had a command of the English language. It could very well be that different views on *ikhtilat*, empowerment and modernity could have been found among, for example, rural women or non-educated urban women. However, the original project proposal indicated that the categories of women to be interviewed would be female students (during the first phase), and businesswomen, *da'iyas* (female Islamic preachers) and activists (during the second phase). Had those categories included rural women, it would have been problematic because of the short fieldwork periods and the amount of time that it probably would have taken to get into contact with rural women.

As indicated in the project proposal, during the first phase of the research project the focus was on young women (students), while during the second phase, this focus shifted to women who had reached a more settled position in society. While, for example, it would also have been interesting to have interviewed domestic workers, a clear choice had been made in the project proposal to focus on Saudi women, and on the aforementioned specific categories.

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4   See, for example, Amani Hamdan, 'Women and Education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Achievements', in *International Educational Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2005), pp. 42–64; Amélie Le Renard, '"Only for Women": Women, the State, and Reform in Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (2008), pp. 610–629; and Doumato, 'Obstacles to Equality for Saudi Women', pp. 23–26.

The research was divided into two stages. During the first stage of nine months, the research focused on evaluating the historical development of women-only public spaces and preparing a short inventory of those spaces, by studying recent secondary literature, policy documents and debates on women's issues in newspapers. During two weeks in June 2010, fieldwork was carried out in Saudi Arabia, and 30 female students were interviewed about their views and experiences with regard to the possibilities and constraints of women-only public spaces. Three women were interviewed in Riyadh and 27 in Jeddah. Both formal (sit-down, one-on-one or group interviews) and informal (for example, in a theme park) interviews were carried out. The majority of interviews were carried out in Arabic and none of the interviews were voice-recorded. The aim of this first round of interviews was to explore the views of the young generation and to gain a general sense of the research field. In the final stages of phase one, consultation with Saudi scholars refined the research questions and research design. Results from the consultation session with Saudi scholars and the interviews with young women were used as a guideline for the follow-up study.

During the second phase, in-depth interviews were conducted, mainly with women who have reached a settled position in society. The focus groups included businesswomen, women who work on women's issues ('activists'), and female *da'iyyas* (Islamic preachers) and Islamic teachers. These groups were chosen because of the expected diversity of their perspectives: businesswomen have to deal with gender segregation in their businesses on a daily basis; and while it was expected that *da'iyyas* would propagate segregation, it was presumed that activists would condemn the practice. However, because of the short fieldwork periods (see below), the number of women who were interviewed remained limited. As such, it is difficult to generalize about the research results per category.

Several gatekeepers (especially the two Saudi counterparts, but also one of the Saudi experts who had been involved in phase one of the project) provided the initial access to the research field. From then on, the researcher relied on referrals (the so-called 'snowball effect'), while bearing in mind not to 'linger' with one specific social group and ensuring an even spread over the three categories of women that were chosen as the project's focus. Observing participants in meetings and daily life was part of the second research phase.

In January 2011, two weeks of fieldwork were carried out in Riyadh and nine women were interviewed: three activists/women who work on women's issues; three *da'iyyat*/Islamic teachers; and three businesswomen. All of the interviews were formal, sit-down interviews. In September 2011, four days of fieldwork were carried out in Jeddah and the Eastern Province and nine women were interviewed: three activists/women who work on women's issues; three *da'iyyat*/Islamic teachers; and three businesswomen. Again, all of the interviews were formal, sit-down, voice-recorded interviews, and the majority of interviews were carried out in Arabic. The total number of interviews for phases one and two is 48.

Young Saudi researchers assisted the fieldwork in both phases one and two. The counterpart for phase one was located in Jeddah and her assistance mainly consisted of making contacts and helping one find one's bearings in Jeddah. Her support was minimal. The counterpart for phase 2 was located in Riyadh and her assistance mainly consisted of searching for, reading and summarizing books and articles from a Riyadh library, making contacts, and helping one find one's bearings in Riyadh. The Saudi counterpart was mainly helpful with regard to supportive work. As was expected, material about Saudi women—especially recent books—was scarce and the books were of poor academic quality and have therefore not been used in the study. The researcher proved invaluable in providing background information about the development of the position of women in Saudi society, as well as the current situation. The counterpart also helped to set up several interviews.

3.1   The History of Women-only Public Spaces and *Ikhtilat*

As some scholars have argued, the position of women must be analysed in the context of the political projects of contemporary states and their historical transformations.[5] In Saudi Arabia, important factors influencing the position of women and supporting stricter and new forms of public segregation were the discovery and exploitation of oil, the process of urbanization, and the rise of the revivalist *sahwa* (awakening) movement[6] and its discourse on segregation. These developments in recent history will be examined, taking the proclamation of the (third) Saudi state in 1932 as a starting point.

Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 by the unification of the kingdoms of the Najd and the Hejaz. Not long thereafter, in 1938 oil was discovered. The full-swing exploitation of oil from the early 1950s onwards led to explosive economic and material development in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as rapid social change.[7]

When King Faisal (r. 1964–1975) wished to introduce girls' education in the 1960s, some *'ulama'* were the main opponents of girls' education, claiming that education would corrupt girls' morals and destroy the foundations of the Saudi Muslim family. King Faisal decided to work together with the *'ulama'*, quoting the Qur'an and *hadiths* (narrated stories on the life of the Prophet Muhammad) to convince conservative elements that Islam does not oppose women's education and that education would also contribute to girls' Islamic education, making them better Muslim mothers.[8] It was not until the *'ulama'* confirmed that girls' education was in accordance with Islam that conservative families started sending their daughters to girls' schools.[9] Education was the first field in which 'progress' and 'enhancement of women' was realized by creating separate spaces for them. One consequence of girls' education—segregated from boys' education—was the need for women teachers to teach female pupils.

The developing oil industry led to an increased demand for labour in the cities in both the industrial and governmental sectors, leading to urbanization. Urbanization and employment in the cities resulted in a significant increase in men's salaries. As female salaries were no longer needed to sustain the family, there was no longer the need for the previously rural women to work, and this became a symbol of both wealth and moral distinction.[10] It also contrasted Saudi women with foreign women, who did have to work.[11] At the same time, however, there was the almost contradictory development of educated urban women who started to demand employment opportunities. Oil revenues paid for the development of women-only spaces, enabling female labour participation while upholding article 160 of the Labour and Workmen

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5   See, for example, Deniz Kandiyoti, Women, Islam and the State (London: Macmillan, 1991); Mai Yamani, Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives (New York: Ithaca Press, 1996); Leila Abu Lughod (ed.), Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Le Renard, '"Only for Women"', pp. 610–629.

6   The sahwa islamiyya (Islamic awakening or sahwa) in Saudi Arabia first emerged in the 1960s and gripped Saudi universities in the 1970s and 1980s, while it rose to prominence in the 1980s. Saudis who were part of the sahwa movement combined their traditional Salafi theology with the modern ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood about political matters. See International Crisis Group, 'Saudi Arabia Backgrounder: Who Are the Islamists?', Middle East Report No. 31 (2004), pp. 10–11.

7   Yamani, Feminism and Islam, p. 265.

8   Yamani, Feminism and Islam, p. 63.

9   Yamani, Feminism and Islam, p. 64.

10   Le Renard, '"Only for Women"'.

11   Le Renard, '"Only for Women"', p. 613.

Law, which states that 'In no case may men and women mix in places of work or in accessory facilities, or in any other place'.[12]

The growth in the number of working women, as well as developments such as cinema (where men and women would 'mix'), television and sports angered a group of rebels led by Juhayman al-'Utaybi. They claimed that Saudi society had become immoral because of what they saw as Western influences and that King Khalid (r. 1975–1982) had not countered these developments. In 1979 they laid siege to the Grand Mosque of Mecca. The siege posed a direct challenge to the kingdom and the legitimacy of the Al Sa'ud, as a consequence of which 'the Saudis tried to seal the connection between themselves as rulers and adherence to a "one true Islam"'.[13] This conservatism often targeted women as 'culture bearers' of the family, community and nation, preserving and passing on cultural and religious practices to the next generation. As a consequence, women's access to public spaces was curtailed.[14] Women started to dress more conservatively, donning *'abayas* and the *niqab* (all Saudi women now wear at least the *'abaya* and headscarf when in Saudi Arabia), female presenters disappeared from Saudi television screens, and women were barred access to swimming pools.[15]

In 1982, King Fahd (r. 1982–2005) ascended to the Saudi throne. 'Separation of the sexes and control of women by their guardians blossomed over the next several years into tangible indicators of what it meant to be Muslim, and the Saudi political leadership got behind the task of enforcement.'[16] Since 1969, government authorities—as well as the religious police—had started to ensure implementation of article 160, and this became increasingly the case in the 1980s.[17] King Fahd underlined this with his circular that women were not allowed to work in any place where they would encounter men.[18] This led to a need for female employees in several fields, and the development of women-only labour spaces took place mainly with regard to teaching and health care—'fields deemed "suitable" to their [women's] "nature"'.[19]

In the run-up to the Gulf War, Saudi troops arrived in Saudi Arabia, and American female soldiers drove cars and army trucks. In November 1990, 47 Saudi women drove cars to protest for their right to drive. The religious police[20] demanded punishment and the government took their passports and fired those who were teachers. King Fahd made the social ban on driving official (although not law) and women were prevented from travelling without a *mahram* (male guardian). This system means that a woman cannot gain an education, work, travel or have medical surgery without the permission of her male guardian, who is her father, brother, grandfather, father's brother, husband or son.

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12 Government of Saudi Arabia, Labour and Workmen Law (1969), article 160.
13 Doumato, 'Obstacles to Equality for Saudi Women', p. 24.
14 Natana DeLong-Bas, 'The Freedoms Saudi Women Really Want', in *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 1979–2009: Evolution of a Pivotal State. A Special Edition of Viewpoints* (Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute, 2009), p. 19.
15 Doumato, 'Obstacles to Equality for Saudi Women', p. 23–24.
16 Doumato, 'Obstacles to Equality for Saudi Women', p. 24.
17 Hatoon Al-Fassi, 'Saudi Women: Modernity and Change', in Jean François Seznec and Mimi Kirk (eds), *Industrialization in the Gulf: A Socio-Economic Revolution* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), p. 160.
18 Doumato, 'Obstacles to Equality for Saudi Women', p. 24.
19 Eleanor Abdella Doumato, 'Saudi Arabia', in Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin (eds), *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Freedom House; and Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), p. 15.
20 The religious police is the *hay'at al-amr bil ma'aruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar* or 'Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice'. The formal short term is *hay'a*, which is Arabic for 'commission'.

The presence of US troops on Saudi soil during the Gulf War triggered strong opposition from prominent *sheikhs* such as Salman al-'Awda and Safar al-Hawali. At the same time, the Saudi regime had to deal with liberal-minded dissidents, who called for the implementation of a reform programme that would open up the political and social realms to increased diversity. The Saudi monarchy now had a continuing need to maintain legitimacy as an Islamic government in order to sustain itself at the centre of contemporary politics in the kingdom. In this struggle, women's issues were pushed to centre stage:

> One of the main characteristics of the contemporary political situation is that the issue of women's rights and behaviour has been placed at the centre of a potential power struggle between the *'ulama'* and the state. The state uses the role of women within society to make symbolic gestures to confirm its commitment to Islam, for example by enforcing the wearing of the veil [...] and by limiting the choice young women have in education and career choices, thus preserving the strict gender segregation in all public spaces.[21]

The events of 9/11 sparked a new demand—from the outside as well as from inside the Saudi kingdom—for reforms, also with regard to the position of women. King Abdullah initiated the National Dialogues,[22] the third of which (in 2004) focused on women. However, *sahwa* members have reacted by rejecting suggestions that the status of women in society should be revised, and a group of Islamist women have emerged who are close to the *sahwa* movement, advocating the veil as well as sex segregation.[23] Yet, at the same time, the widespread use of social media such as Facebook enables young Saudis to mix out of sight of the religious police—in cyberspace.

In the Saudi press, more liberal Saudis take on the religious establishment on women's issues, and sometimes more liberal members of the religious establishment take on their more conservative counterparts. The director of the office of the religious police in Mecca, Ahmad b. Qasim al-Ghamdi, gave an interview in autumn 2009 saying that 'there was nothing in Islam that prevents women and men from mixing in public places like offices and schools'.[24] However, some other religious scholars promote the principle of *sadd al-dhara'i'* (blocking of the means), which means blocking anything that may lead to 'evil'. Segregating women from men in the public sphere is, in their opinion, one way to achieve that.

In short, gender segregation was at first a development that was initiated by the state in order to enable women's participation in education. Subsequently, and in response to developments such as working women, cinemas and sports that led to the Juhayman crisis, years of increasing conservatism ensued. But developments such as 9/11 sparked a new demand from women and 'liberals' for reform and a new 'compromise'.

The fields in which women-only public spaces exist now include, among others, education, the labour market, and leisure and consumption. University places now exist for women, usually in

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21 Mai Yamani, *Changed Identities: The Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2000).

22 The National Dialogues serve as a platform for continuing and expanding the scope of dialogue in the Saudi kingdom. For more information about the National Dialogue initiative, please refer to the King Abdelaziz Center for National Dialogue at http://www.kacnd.org. For more information about the 2004 National Dialogue on Women, please refer to http://www.kacnd.org/eng/Third_meeting.asp.

23 International Crisis Group, 'Saudi Arabia Backgrounder', pp. 10–11.

24 Gregory Gause, 'Saudi Arabia: The Second Sex and the Third Rail', *Foreign Policy*, 19 April 2010, available online at http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/04/19/saudi_arabia_the_second_sex_and_the_third_rail, accessed on 13 June 2010.

separate campuses such as the women's campus of the King 'Abd al-'Aziz University. Modern media and communication devices such as video and e-learning are widely used to extend educational fields for women,[25] enabling women to follow a male professor's lecture without being in the same space as him. The opening of religious faculties for women is important, so that they can become teachers of Islamic studies or *da'iyyas*.[26] This enables them to use and challenge the legitimatizing religious language of the state and religious actors to further their rights. *Da'iyyas* are frequently asked to come and speak at universities, religious and charitable foundations or mosques that are reserved for women for that occasion.[27]

Some Saudi government ministries have segregated divisions, such as the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Health.[28] In 2010, the Ministry of Education identified several occupations that should provide special opportunities for women, such as receptionists, photographers and nutritionists.[29] The women-only shrimp factory in Jizan brought women into an industry—food processing—that was new to them in Saudi Arabia. The Chambers of Commerce have opened their doors for women,[30] and the number of Saudi businesswomen is estimated to range between 20,000 and 40,000.[31]

A 2004 ministerial decree called for the construction of women-only sports and cultural centres. Nevertheless, access to sports in schools for girls is still limited. A women-only gym, *Curves*, can be found in Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam, and a businesswoman from Jeddah has opened a basketball club, Jeddah United, which at first was women-only but now also—separate from the girls—trains boys.[32]

Since 2008, Riyadh has hosted the Middle East's only women-only hotel in which only female attendants work and only female guests are welcomed.[33] Other leisure facilities are segregated by time of access. Parks and museums[34] have singles, women-only, and family hours of access. For the Jeddah Zoo, morning visits on Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays are limited to female students; other days are for male students. Atallah Happyland, an amusement park in Jeddah, also has separate time slots for families and singles. While most cafes will have a singles and a family section, some cafes, especially in Jeddah, provide a space where unrelated men and women can mix, drink coffee and smoke *nargila* (the *hookah*, or water pipe).[35]

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25 Girija Vidyasagar and David M. Rea, 'Saudi Women Doctors: Gender and Careers within Wahhabic Islam and a "Westernized" Work Culture', in *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 27 (2004), pp. 261–280.

26 Mounira Jamjoom, 'Female Islamic Studies Teachers in Saudi Arabia: A Phenomenological Study', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Vol. 26 (2009), pp. 547–558.

27 Le Renard, '"Only for Women"', p. 623.

28 Mona Al-Munajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), p. 87.

29 Saudi Gazette, 'Women's Employment in Saudi Arabia: A Major Challenge', *Saudi Gazette*, 30 March 2010, available online at
http://saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2010033067859, accessed 12 April 2010.

30 Ana Echagüe and Edward Burke, Strong Foundations? The Imperative for Reform in Saudi Arabia (Madrid: Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE), 2009), p. 12.

31 UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), *Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World* (New York: United Nations Publications, 2005).

32 For more information about this initiative, please refer online to http://www.jeddahunited.com/, accessed 19 October 2011.

33 For more information, please refer online to http://www.luthanhotel-spa.com/, accessed 3 November 2011.

34 Such as the National Museum in Riyadh.

35 For example, Bridges in Jeddah.

While the segregation of men and women is often perceived to be a consequence of tradition and the conservatism of Saudi society, in the Saudi state the discourse on female segregation and its extension towards a widening arena of public spaces, creating women-only spaces, is claimed to be 'reform', 'progress' and 'national development',[36] and a way of letting women participate in society in a 'Saudi way'. At the same time, some women argue along a similar line, claiming that women-only spaces allow them to participate in public life. These women seem to have appropriated the state's discourse and (reform) policies, enforcing segregation on their own terms by creating—or by demanding that the state should create—women-only institutions in many social fields. However, there are simultaneously also women who challenge these discourses and developments and who argue for the development of more 'mixed' spaces in society.

3.2   Women's Public Participation: From Segregation to 'Mixing' to '*Khilwa*'

The previous section showed that the position of women seems to be one of the core issues in the debate on the right direction in which the Saudi nation should develop itself. This is not entirely surprising, for women's issues have often become a pawn in the struggle between tradition and modernization. Women's issues have become a symbol of reform, progress and modernization, as well as a 'gate to Westernization',[37] especially as women are often considered to be the 'culture bearers'. As seen in the previous section, these debates *about* women often take place between government and religious actors—both 'liberal' and 'conservative'—and in this debate visions on segregation and 'mixing' play an important role. In this light, it is interesting to explore the ideas and visions of women *themselves* on issues pertaining to gender segregation, *ikhtilat*, and *khilwa*, a concept that also comes into this debate. Furthermore, the visions of women towards issues such as empowerment, the rise of women, and how these relate to, and are perhaps part of, the 'modern Saudi women' will be examined.

This section will explore women's views on segregation, *ikhtilat*, and *khilwa*. First, these concepts will be discussed. Second, we will take a close look at the attitudes and visions of women themselves in relation to segregation and *ikhtilat*. Third, light will be shed on the strategies that women employ in dealing with segregation and *ikhtilat* in their daily lives.

3.2.1   Ambiguous Concepts: Segregation, *Ikhtilat*, and *Khilwa*

When discussing the concepts of segregation, *ikhtilat*, and *khilwa*, it is important to bear in mind that they are contested and far from clear concepts and practices. For example, what some might label as *ikhtilat* would not qualify as such for others. This section will attempt to explicate the notions of segregation, *ikhtilat* and *khilwa*.

First, let us take a closer look at *segregation.* From an outsider's perspective, we would look at the situation in Saudi Arabia regarding the public relations between men and women as gender segregation. However, in Saudi Arabia itself, the public discussion focuses on the concept and practice of *ikhtilat*: gender *mixing*. This is reflected in terminology. Just as there is no one word in the English language to describe the situation of *ikhtilat*, the spoken Arabic language does not have a word for segregation. When asked for a word in Arabic that denotes 'segregation', most interviewees had to think for a while, then came up with words such as *infisal, fasl, iqsam, hajiz, hijab* and *hashim*, all denoting variations of the English word 'separation', while immediately

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36   Le Renard, '"Only for Women"'.
37   Hamdan, 'Women and Education in Saudi Arabia', p. 58.

adding 'but we don't really use this word', indicating that these are artificial descriptions. Because segregation is the norm, there is no term for it in spoken Arabic, just as there is no term for 'mixing' in the Western world.

Also conceptually, 'segregation' is not necessarily a clear, straightforward notion. For example, while for some women a screen between men and women in a conference room amounts to segregation, for others this is *ikhtilat*. Or, whereas some women argue in line with segregation to open exclusively female shops, others use the argument of segregation to want to forbid these shops as they are in mixed shopping centres and thus are perceived as the beginning of a mixed public space.[38]

The origin of segregation is also a source of disagreement. Some women say that segregation comes from Islam and should be practised today because that was how it was done in Prophet Muhammad's time. To illustrate their point, several of these women recount how, in the Prophet's mosque, men would pray in front and the women at the back. Others say that it is a societal phenomenon that was invented in the 1980s.

Just as segregation and its origins are contested, so is *ikhtilat* (the mixing of the genders). A prominent woman from Jeddah who has worked on women's issues all of her life recounted her experience at the Fifth Jeddah Economic Forum of 2005, where she asked, among other things, for the definition of *ikhtilat*. She went on to explain how she put the same demand forward once more during the 2007 Economic Forum.[39] In 2008 the issue was finally taken up in the Seventh National Dialogue on Work and Employment.[40] Nevertheless, the term has still not been officially defined. In a similar vein, a businesswoman from Khobar recounted the story of her husband having to visit the office of the religious police, as their business was accused of employing 'a female waiter' and allowing 'a lot of mixing'. She said that her husband entered the office, found five men from the religious police sitting at a round table, and asked:

> 'What would you like us to do so you don't shut our store down?' They had no answer. Everybody had a different opinion [on what *ikhtilat* is], and that is the major problem when it comes to *ikhtilat* in a public place. It's subjective because there's no consensus and there's nothing written, and they won't write it down for you [what *ikhtilat* is or isn't]. They will not put it in writing because each and every one has a different opinion.[41]

In the Arabic language there is an understanding of the word *ikhtilat* as literally meaning 'mixing', such as mixing several ingredients to bake a cake. A young female Islamic teacher from Jeddah explained it as follows:

> In the language, it is you and me right now. I can sit with you, laugh with you, eat with you. That is ikhtilat in the language. It doesn't have anything to do with Islam. Any ikhtilat. Also between women. Even with—excuse me—animals. I mix with them. I am in one place, and a cat sits next to me. That's ikhtilat.[42]

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38   Le Renard, '"Only for Women"'.

39   Interview by the author with Mai, a woman who works on women's issues, Jeddah, 27 October 2011.

40   For more information about the 2008 National Dialogue on Work and Employment, please refer online to http://www.kacnd.org/eng/siventh_meeting_conclusion.asp, accessed 13 November 2011.

41   Interview by the author with Suad, businesswoman, Dammam, 3 November 2011.

42   Interview by the author with Khadija, Islamic Studies teacher, Jeddah, 22 October 2011.

Most women indicate that the basic definition of *ikhtilat* is the mixing of more than one man and one woman, or more than two women or two men, in a public place such as a mall, the street, or in the hospital. However, their opinions on under which circumstances *ikhtilat* is acceptable vary quite widely.

Just as with segregation, the origin of *ikhtilat* is a source of disagreement. Some women say that *ikhtilat* is allowed in Islam and should be practised today. Interestingly, they refer to the same aforementioned mosque example to support their standpoint as those women who are against *ikhtilat*, only arguing that the situation in the mosque during Muhammad's time constitutes *ikhtilat* and not segregation.

While the concept of *ikhtilat* is contested, so is the concept of *khilwa*—albeit far less heavily. The woman who called for a clear definition of *ikhtilat* at the Jeddah Economic Forum of 2005 called for a clear definition of *khilwa* during the same conference:

> In a car, is this *khilwa*? So it's *haram* (forbidden)? So is it better to drive my car myself or to be *haram* with the driver? Or you mean *khilwa* being in the office with the door closed? And no one is there and this is *haram* and we agree that this should not be, closed doors for men and women alone together? Or is it already *khilwa* when there is a glass around us and people can see us? If this is not *khilwa* how come you say that driving with a driver is *khilwa* and there is a glass and people around see you?[43]

The common denominator of the definition of *khilwa* is the meeting of one man and one woman in a space where there is no third person present. The vast majority of women were against *khilwa.* Opinions vary as to whether the door should be locked or not, and whether or not there should be the possibility of someone walking in on the man and the woman in order for the situation to be *khilwa* or not. A minority says that *khilwa* is not only a situation of one man and one woman, but also of two women or two men alone in a space together.

To the question of whether, as a woman, being on an elevator with a non-related man constitutes *khilwa*, all of the women had a strong reaction: either of consent or of rejection. In one interview with two female Islamic teachers at a primary school in Jeddah, one of the women said that she would get on the elevator with a strange man, while the other said that she would wait:

> Nadia: 'When there is a man alone in the elevator, I wait, I don't go with him. When there is a group on the elevator, I do go'.
> Amal: 'I do go, with a man alone, it's not *khilwa*'.
> Me: 'Why is it not *khilwa*?'
> Amal: 'There is no possibility for it'.
> Nadia: 'Yes there is. Maybe the elevator stops. And then there would be *khilwa*'.
> Amal: 'It can happen'.[44]

When discussing the concept of *khilwa elektroniyya*,[45] a young *da'iyya* (female Islamic preacher) in Riyadh said:

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43   Interview with Suad, businesswoman, Dammam, 3 November 2011.
44   Interview with Amal and Nadia, Islamic Studies teachers, Jeddah, 19 October 2011.
45   The meeting in cyberspace of one man and one woman in a 'closed virtual space' without a third person present.

> Some female preachers were suggesting keeping the internet computer in the dining room. So that there is no I'm secretly in my room chatting with this guy that's lying to me and saying I'm in love and dadada and doing wrong things.[46]

I asked her whether that would be *khilwa*, to which she answered:

> I don't know. It might lead to *khilwa*. Obviously if they're going to meet they would do it in *khilwa* because they don't want to get into trouble. So one of the things that might lead to that... to *khilwa*... you might as well cut that off.[47]

At the same time, others immediately defined this situation as *khilwa* in and of itself. The measurement seems to be whether or not contact between the man and the woman can—through the situation of *khilwa*—lead to relations (*'alaqat*) or adultery (*zina*). For that reason, some women do not invite or accept male friends on Facebook.[48]

Since the issue of *khilwa* is far less contested than segregation and *ikhtilat*, and since the discussion in Saudi Arabia itself revolves around this concept of *ikhtilat* and not so much around *khilwa*, the following section will not deal with *khilwa*.

3.2.2 Ideas and Attitudes of Saudi Women towards *Ikhtilat*

This section will explore the diversity of interpretations of *ikhtilat* by women themselves.[49] Their views can be illustrated by the ways in which they look at the practice and under what circumstances (if any) they find 'mixing' to be an acceptable practice. Three categories of attitudes towards 'mixing' can be discerned: a large minority believes that *ikhtilat* is unacceptable; while the second (majority) group thinks that *ikhtilat* is acceptable but only under certain conditions. A (small) third group accepts and seems to promote *ikhtilat*.

A large minority, especially in Riyadh, were of the opinion that *ikhtilat* is an unacceptable practice. The main reasons for this belief seem to be linked to ideas about the nature of men and women; *'adat wa-taqalid* (customs and traditions); and Islamic history.

The idea exists that the nature of men means that they may not be able to control themselves when working with women: 'I wouldn't want to work with men in the same room. [...] Men make stupid moves'.[50] Men are not used to working with women, and this may lead to problems such as (sexual) harassment. Other women indicate that *outside* Saudi Arabia, *ikhtilat* would not be a problem for them, because people are used to it—which is not the case in Saudi Arabia, where *'adat wa taqalid* discourage *ikhtilat*, and that should be respected. Some of the women who are against *ikhtilat* refer to Islamic history to support their standpoint, and particularly to the aforementioned example of the situation in Prophet Muhammad's mosque.

The majority of women interviewed were of the opinion that *ikhtilat* is acceptable under certain conditions and/or circumstances. Arguments related to the conditions and circumstances under

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46 Interview with Sara, a *da'iyya*, Riyadh, 25 January 2011.
47 Interview with Sara, a *da'iyya*, Riyadh, 25 January 2011.
48 Interview with Hanan, a woman who works on women's issues, Jeddah, 26 October 2011.
49 This section mainly draws from the 30 interviews conducted with young women from Jeddah during phase one of the project. As the interviews, of course, mainly gave the researcher qualitative results, the analysis will have a qualitative rather than quantitative approach.
50 Interview by the author with Nur, project officer, 'Effat College, Jeddah, 22 June 2010.

which *ikhtilat* should be allowed seem to have a spatial dimension; a dimension of necessity; and/or a dimension of behaviour and dress.

First, regarding the spatial dimension, some women were of the opinion that *ikhtilat* is acceptable but only in certain places: 'In a professional environment *ikhtilat* is okay. But as a customer in a bank there is no *ikhtilat*, so that as a customer I can feel relaxed'.[51] This student finds *ikhtilat* acceptable for herself and for others in a professional environment, but is nonetheless supportive of women-only bank branches: her approval of *ikhtilat* depends on where it is practised. Second, Omnia, a 34-year old university lecturer, said that she was against *ikhtilat* in general but when it came to necessities such as medical treatment in hospitals and 'if there is no choice, then a male doctor is fine in Islam because it is something necessary'.[52] Third, with respect to dress and behaviour, most young women who agree with *ikhtilat* in certain circumstances indicate that they are fine with the practice as long as the girl guards her behaviour and dress. Some refer to this as the *dawabit al-shara'iyya* (Islamic regulations):

> It [*ikhtilat*] is not bad when I adhere to the *dawabit as-shara'iyya* that our Lord has sent to us. I have rules and laws. And I have to walk with those so that I don't end up in *ikthilat muharram* (forbidden *ikhtilat*). Because there is also *ikthilat masmuh* (permitted *ikhtilat*).[53]

Here, permitted *ikhtilat* is *ikhtilat* within the Islamic regulations. For this Islamic teacher, these regulations are proper dress—wearing the *'abaya* (long black cloak) and the *niqab* (face veil) when going outside the house—and displaying proper behaviour: no laughing and joking, but only a formal way of dealing with men. She explains forbidden *ikhtilat* as the type of *ikhtilat* that does not meet those two regulations. The underlying idea of this dimension is that *ikhtilat* is acceptable as long as there is no possibility of relations (*'alaqat*) forming or of the contact leading to adultery (*zina*).

While the attitude that *ikhtilat* should be allowed under certain conditions is the attitude of the majority, especially in Jeddah, the active promotion of *ikhtilat*, on the other hand, seems to be quite rare. Only very few interviewees mention that they have stimulated *ikhtilat*, either through education or in an 'undercover' manner.

One of the interviewees encouraged *ikhtilat* through education. She said that she used to discuss *ikhtilat* in her lectures at university, and it is not unlikely that she influenced her students with her attitude and examples. Another interviewee, who runs her own business and employs both men and women, seems to stimulate *ikhtilat* in an 'undercover' manner:

> In my business we are mixed in my office. The women are in a separate room. Because this is what they want, the government, and if they come and check in the office, I am in the legal area, not doing anything wrong. But the meetings are mixed; the girls sit with the men finishing their reports. They sit together at the computers finishing their accounting. This is how it should be.[54]

Legally, this should be specified in the business licence: only women-only businesses can be run directly by women themselves and without a male director (*mudir*). By dodging the regulations—and thus risking being shut down—this woman indirectly promotes *ikhtilat* by

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51 Interview by the author with Nahla, student, Dar al-Hikma, Jeddah, 20 June 2010.
52 Interview by the author with Omnia, university lecturer, Riyadh, 15 June 2010.
53 Interview by the author with Khadija, Islamic Studies teacher, Jeddah, 22 October 2011.
54 Interview by the author with Alia, businesswoman, Jeddah, 24 October 2011.

allowing it to take place on her work floor without having the necessary documents and legal status to back up the practice.

3.2.3   Women's Strategies regarding *Ikhtilat* and Segregation

Attitudes towards the actual use of women-only public spaces vary quite widely. Four types of strategies can be discerned. Most women prefer to maintain the status quo *vis-à-vis* segregation. Some wish to strengthen segregation in and of itself, while a third, minority group wants to strengthen it as an intermediary phase towards more *ikhtilat*. Finally, a fourth, small group of women seems to undermine segregation.

First, most interviewees believe that the status quo is desirable, and that they have neither a desire for more *ikhtilat* nor a desire for more women-only spaces. When asked whether she would like to see more or fewer women-only public spaces in society, Muna answered no. She indicated that she wants to work in a women-only environment and that she made a conscious choice for such an organization, but added that if it is a good position, she would work with men, because it is about achieving her dreams. At the same time, Muna does not see a need for an expansion of women-only workplaces. While her choice to work in a women-only office was conscious, her central argument is not a desire not to work with men, but a desire to develop her potential.

Second, some women put forward that segregation is their preferred way of interaction, and that they would like to see more women-only spaces. For example, they would like to have more women-only malls, arguing that it would make them feel more relaxed and at ease being able to shop and work without wearing their *'abayas*. Yet some women stress the need for choice and opportunities, so that if a woman wants to work in an *ikhtilat* environment, she has the opportunity to do so, and if she wants to work in a women-only environment, she has that opportunity too.[55]

It is not only women who call for more women-only public spaces. In January 2011, a group of Saudi *sheikhs* and doctors launched an initiative calling for the building of segregated hospitals, so that women would have the opportunity to avoid men when needing medical attention, and so that female doctors would be prevented from mixing with men. Female doctors also signed the two petitions, which were submitted to the Ministry of Health and the *majlis al-shura* (consultative council).[56] Most female interviewees rejected the idea of women-only hospitals, stating that mixing in hospitals is something natural. Most of the women who were in favour of this idea added that the project would be unfeasible because of a lack of qualified, specialized female doctors.[57]

Third, a minority of interviewees believe that segregation should be strengthened in order subsequently to be able to weaken it. From this point of view, more women-only spaces will

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55 From this perspective, the development of more women-only public spaces would further the participation of Saudi women in public life rather than hamper it. This issue will be explored more in-depth in the section about empowerment (*tamkin al-mar'a*).

56 '*Shuyukh wa atba' Sa'udiyyun yutalibun bi mustashfayat nisa'iyya yamna'a fiha al-ikhtilat bi al-rijal* [Saudi Sheikhs and Doctors Demand Women-only Hospitals in which Mixing with Men is Forbidden]', *Al-Arabiyya*, 17 January 2011, available online at http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/01/17/133902.html, accessed 18 January 2011.

57 Interview by the author with Sara, a *da'iyya* and medical doctor, Riyadh, 15 January 2011.

make society used to women's presence in areas where women are currently not visible and/or active. One interviewee illustrated this standpoint as follows:

> A separate transportation system has to be made, separate roads for men and women, or separate the hours. Until people get used to it, then they can make roads or hours together.[58]

It is thus reasoned that increased visibility would increase society's comfort with women's presence in those areas, at which point society can and should move towards *ikhtilat* rather than segregation of the sexes. From this point of view, segregation is seen as instrumental and as a practice that will eventually be dismantled.

Finally, a small number of interviewees believe that segregation should be undermined immediately without any other phases, and they put this attitude into practice by their behaviour. Daliya, a young businesswoman from Jeddah, said about going to the Chamber of Commerce to arrange formalities for her business: 'I don't like to go to the women's section. So I go to the men's section and they let me in'.[59] By displaying this type of behaviour, and by getting away with it in this environment, Daliya not only makes a clear statement with regard to her own opinion on *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces, but also tries to reshape the boundaries of the permissible and acceptable.

Whether women are for or against *ikhtilat*, or want more or less women-only public spaces, it is important to bear in mind that we are still dealing with the ideas, attitudes and strategies of women themselves about the women's *public participation.* Whether it is through segregation or *ikhtilat*, it is about *the way in which* women wish to participate in public life.

3.3   Liberation, Empowerment and the Rise of Women

The previous section showed us that some women regard women-only public spaces as a way to enhance the participation of women in, for example, the labour market. This leads to the questions of what other ways women identify to achieve this, and how they look at issues such as 'empowerment' and 'women's liberation'. When looking at these terms, we see that the concepts of 'women in development',[60] 'autonomy' and also 'empowerment' have been debated for their (un)suitability for Arab women. Whereas the first *Arab Human Development Report* (2002) used the terminology 'women's empowerment',[61] in the 2005 report—entirely devoted to the position of women in the Arab World—the descriptive term 'the rise of women' is preferred.[62] In interviews with Saudi women, the terms 'empowerment' (*tamkin al-mar'a*) and 'the rise of women' (*nuhud al-mar'a*) were presented to the women, as was 'liberation of women' (*tahrir al-mar'a*), in order to find out to what extent these terms resonate, what they mean and how they are used in the Saudi context.

Women's actions that are religiously inspired are often, in Western notions, regarded as constituting a lack of agency. However, if we think of agency 'not as a synonym for resistance to

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58   Interview by the author with Nur, young working woman, 'Effat College, Jeddah, 22 June 2011.
59   Interview by the author with Daliya, young businesswoman, Jeddah, 17 June 2010.
60   Anna Würth, 'Stalled Reform: Family Law in Post-Unification Yemen', *Islamic Law and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2003), pp. 12–33.
61   UNDP, Arab Human Development Report, 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations (New York: United Nations Publications, 2002).
62   UNDP, 'Towards the Rise of Women'.

relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create',[63] we can examine how this moral or religious agency is related to concepts such as 'empowerment'. This gives rise to the question of whether there is a relationship between religion and 'empowerment' for Saudi women. Do Saudi women see themselves as 'modern women', and to what extent are *tamkin al-mar'a*, *nuhud al-mar'a* and *tahrir al-mar'a* part of that modernity?

First, the concepts of 'women's liberation', 'empowerment' and 'the rise of women' will be explored. Second, several trajectories (such as the development of women-only spaces and *ikhtilat*) towards achieving 'the rise of women' will be discussed. This leads, finally, to the last questions of this section: how do women define 'modernity' in Saudi Arabia and 'a modern Saudi woman', and do they view themselves as such?[64]

3.3.1   The Concepts of Tahrir al-mar'a, Tamkin al-mar'a and Nuhud al-mar'a

Tahrir al-mar'a (liberation of women) has a negative connotation for most women. The term seems to denote the moral decline of women as people and of society as a whole. There was only one woman, an activist, who said that she found the ideas in Amin's book *Tahrir al-mar'a* and Abu Shuqqah's book *Tahrir al-mar'a fi asr al-risala* (The Liberation of Women in the Age of the Prophet's Mission) useful for reclaiming Islamic history and the role of women therein. Both books, however, are forbidden in Saudi Arabia, and this interviewee had bought them in Cairo.

The concept of empowerment has literally been translated into the Arabic language as *tamkin al-mar'a* and is a term that several women say comes from the United Nations. Almost all activists and women who work on women's issues, as well as most businesswomen, immediately recognized the term and were able to articulate what it means to them without further prompting. The term did not resonate immediately with all *da'iyyas* and Islamic teachers, but after a little prompting they too were able to describe what they understand *tamkin* to be. *Tamkin al-mar'a* seems to consist of participation in public life, education and economic empowerment.

A central feature of *tamkin al mar'a* is participation in public life: for example that a woman can become a minister, a doctor, or a judge.[65] Working, and for some holding public office, is a sign of *tamkin*—not only of women themselves but also of society as a whole. Some women frame *tamkin* not only as beneficial for themselves or other women, but also for the rest of society.

Many women define access to education to be part of *tamkin* or even at its basis. There is a strong argument that it is only by education that women can ascend the ladder of public life and public office, and only through education that they can become decision-makers:

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63   Saba Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Revival', *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2001), pp. 202–236; and Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

64   For this section, insights were mainly drawn from the eighteen interviews of phase two with businesswomen, activists/women who work on women's issues, and *da'iyyas*. While defining *ikhtilat* was one of the topics of the conversations, the main issues of these interviews were *nuhud al mar'a* and *tamkin al mar'a*. Among this group of (mainly well-established) women, there was a preference towards *ikhtilat*. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that most of the interviewees have a well-established position in society and as such are likely to have experienced the drawbacks of a lack of *ikhtilat*.

65   At present, while women can study Islamic law and practise as lawyers, they cannot become judges.

> I believe that it [empowerment] means allowing women to be educated, to lead a *haya' karima* [a dignified life]. It is that they would never have to be under the rule of a tyrant guardian. That's what *tamkin al-mar'a* does. It empowers her not to be under the mercy of this type of guardian who is selfish or abusive.[66]

What this quote also illustrates is that while many ascribe the start of *tamkin* to education, some stress that *tamkin* cannot fully be achieved as long as the *mahram* or guardianship system is in place. The majority of women interviewed in January 2011 indicated that the *mahram* system was the greatest challenge to women in Saudi Arabia today.

Only one activist said that she had made a conscious decision to focus on economic rather than social or political empowerment of women. She stated that she had chosen to focus on economic empowerment because *tamkin al-mar'a* starts with financial awareness and ability.[67]

Some women made a distinction between 'empowerment' and 'being empowered': '*Tamkin al-mar'a* is empowering every woman [...]. *Tamkin al-mar'a*, you will do it for me, and for other woman who cannot do it. So empowering, it can be for everyone, but *al-mar'a al-qadira* is only the one who can do it'.[68] The process of *tamkin* thus leads to women becoming a *mar'a qadira* or a *mar'a mutamakkina*. Both terms mean 'empowered woman' and are used interchangeably.

So who is this empowered woman? A *mar'a mutamakkina* is 'a woman who has the capacity of becoming a leader in the field, in education, on the city council, in the *majlis al-shura* [Consultative Council], in sports, or in medicine. That she can [...] participate in the decision-making process for her country, her community, her kids'.[69] So here, as with empowerment as a general concept, participation and visibility in public life are seen as a sign of a *mar'a mutamakkina*. She is also a well-educated woman who, with this education, can generate her own income.

Finally, the term *nuhud al-mar'a*, or the rise of women—the term that was used in the 2005 *Arab Human Development Report* on Arab women as a suggested alternative to the term 'empowerment'—was discussed with the interviewees. *Nuhud al-mar'a* was not a term that was immediately recognized by most women. However, it *was* a term that resonated immediately. When presented with the term *nuhud al-mar'a*, some women reformulated it to *nahdat al-mar'a* (the renaissance/rebirth of women) and immediately gave a definition of it. Awareness (*wa'i*), and especially awareness of the world around oneself and the awareness of rights, seems to be an important component of *nuhud al-mar'a.* One woman actually reformulated *nuhud al-mar'a* to mean *wa'i* (awareness):

> I prefer the term *wa'i al-mar'a* (women's awareness). When I say *nuhud al-mar'a*, it's like she's asleep and she becomes awake, or dead and she becomes alive again. *Wa'i al mar'a* is awareness of rights and how to ask them. Because some women know that they have rights but they will not claim their rights. [...]. *Nuhud al-mar'a* is not about *nuhud* but about *wa'i*. And claiming. Not just knowing but claiming.[70]

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66   Interview by the author with Samira, businesswoman, Jeddah, 20 October 2011.
67   Interview by the author with Sana, activist, Jeddah, 17 October 2011.
68   Interview by the author with Du'a, businesswoman, Jeddah, 16 October 2011.
69   Interview by the author with Samira, businesswoman, Jeddah, 20 October 2011.
70   Interview by the author with Du'a, businesswoman, Jeddah, 16 October 2011.

So 'awareness' is not a passive process, but also and especially about claiming rights. As we will see, some women argue that women need to be aware of the rights that they have been given in Islam in order consequently to be able to claim them. This also draws the judicial system into the equation, something that is recognized by the women themselves, as we shall see in the following section on strategies towards achieving *tamkin* and the *mar'a mutamakkina*.

Women also refer to *nuhud al-mar'a* as 'the period in which we are now', of *musharikat al-mar'a* (the participation of women), namely that women are increasingly participating in public life. The king's 2011 decision to allow women to participate in the next round of the *majlis al-shura* and the next municipal elections is often mentioned in this context. This increased *musharikat al-mar'a* is also the increased visibility of women in public life, for example in the media. As one interviewee said, 'I am very pleased to see more women appear in the media. It tells you that many social barriers have been broken. It makes me more at ease; more satisfied that things are moving forward'.[71] This woman recounted the story of how, a few days prior to our interview, she saw a young woman in the newspaper with her neck bare and her headscarf tied tightly around her head. She explained that this was a very important development, not because more flesh was exposed but because this girl was happy to appear in the newspaper in that form. In her opinion, it was a sign of change in society and a prelude to more change to come.

The term *tamkin* finds fertile ground mainly with the activists, and is defined mainly as participation in public life, education and economic independence. The concept of *nuhud al-mar'a* is less known but resonates immediately with the majority of women, and is more broadly viewed as 'awareness of rights' and 'participation in society'. The following section will focus on strategies towards achieving *tamkin al-mar'a* and *al-mar'a al-mutamakkina*.

3.3.3 Strategies towards Tamkin al-mar'a and al-mar'a al-mutamakkina

Two types of trajectories can be distinguished with regard to achieving 'empowered women': top–down and bottom–up. *Tamkin al mar'a* is generally defined as a top–down process: *tamkin* leads to a woman becoming a *mar'a qadira* or a *mar'a mutamakkina*. However, some women stressed that *tamkin al-mar'a* can also be achieved through bottom–up initiatives: initiatives that come from society itself and that aim to empower women.

Regarding top–down *tamkin* initiatives, three strategies that came up during interviews were *islah* (reform); raising awareness; and segregated public spaces. *Islah* is understood to be political reform, coming from the government. Women mainly mention political participation and refer to the king's decision. In his speech announcing his decision, King Abdullah made a clear reference to the important role that women had in Islamic history and stated that he had consulted with religious scholars before coming to his decision.

Raising consciousness and awareness in society of the rights of women is a second way of empowering women from the top–down. Interviewees said that it means informing women of the rights that they already have—particularly within Islam, they say—so that they can then claim these rights: in their families, society or the courtroom. Raising awareness can include the activities of, for example, the Khadija bint Khuwailid Center (the women's section at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce).[72] One of the centre's activities is 'reviewing laws and regulations', and

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71 Interview by the author with Sana, activist, Jeddah, 17 October 2011.
72 The centre aims to 'be the motivating force to eliminate all obstacles the woman faces and support her economic and social journey to effectively participate in the national development' (as per the

the centre's lobbying activities are said to have played a role in the king's *majlis al-shura* (Consultative Council) decision. At the same time, the centre aims to raise awareness by organizing workshops and conferences for female entrepreneurs and female entrepreneurs-to-be.[73]

The majority of interviewees said that true *tamkin* can only be reached through *ikhtilat*, therewith learning how to deal with men. A small minority believes that *tamkin* can and should be reached through women-only spaces. A minority maintains that empowerment of women can be reached through both *ikhtilat and* women-only spaces. The main argument of this minority is that women-only labour spaces allow women who do not want, or whose guardians do not allow them, to work in an *ikhtilat* environment to participate in the labour market. However, as one activist noted, women-only spaces are only empowering to a certain extent. The (mixed) main office, where the decision-making is and where the upper management is situated, is the place where one would find the opportunities for promotion. Women working in a women-only branch thus hit the glass ceiling very early, limiting *tamkin* to certain jobs in certain fields of work.

Several bottom–up initiatives, coming from individual women or groups of women themselves, came up during the interviews. The main strategies were 'reclaiming women', education, and political empowerment.

The idea of 'reclaiming women'—or, in other words, of going back to Islam and claiming women's rights from that perspective—was a common thread that ran through the majority of the interviews:

> For a Muslim woman, she should know Prophet Muhammad's story and the basics of the five pillars of Islam. If she doesn't know this, she's not empowering herself with the proper knowledge to be able to live as a Muslim woman in this modern world. If someone comes and tells her: 'What you're doing is *haram*', she should know how to answer back by her knowledge. [That she can say] 'tell me where is *haram*, that Prophet Muhammad did this and this and this'. The minute you start saying 'these are the proofs', they keep quiet. The minute you start saying 'oh why [is this] *haram*, tell me, is what I am doing *haram*?', she puts herself in a weaker position. And that [happened] because of her ignorance of Prophet Muhammad's life and the five basic pillars of Islam and their details. The belief is not complete if I don't know the pillars well.[74]

In her book *Prominent Women from Central Arabia*, the Saudi historian and writer Dalal Mukhlid al-Harbi highlights the contribution of Muslim women throughout Islamic history, aiming to give 'women who are ignored their rightful place in history'.[75] Some men, too, use this strategy. Dr Fahad al-Humudi, Assistant Professor at Imam Muhammad bin Sa'ud Islamic University in Riyadh, shows in his article '*Mashura al-nisa fil sunna*' (The Consultation of Women in the Prophetic Tradition) that the Qur'an encourages people to consult women on culture, family,

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centre's website). For more information about the Khadija bint Khuwailid Center at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce, please refer online to http://www.jcci.org.sa/JCCI/EN/Specialized+Centers/Khadija+Bint+Khuwailid+Center/About+The+Center/, accessed 17 November 2011.

73 The centre, for example, hosted the US–Saudi Women's Forum on Social Entrepreneurship in October 2011. See online at http://www.facebook.com/pages/US-Saudi-Womens-Forum-on-Social-Entrepreneurship-II/164720376941505?sk=wall, accessed 19 October 2011.

74 Interview by the author with Mai, a woman who works on women's issues, Jeddah, 27 October 2011.

75 Dalal Mukhlid al-Harbi, *Prominent Women from Central Arabia* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2008), p. xiv.

war and public issues, and that this was the practice of Muhammad and his companions. Almost all of the interviewees also used this strategy, stating for example that Khadija used to drive a camel, and that women today should therefore be allowed to drive a car. Additionally, women from all three categories may refer to women from Islamic history as their role models. Women from the (Shi'a) Eastern Province would refer to Fatima and Zeinab, two women who have an important role in Shi'a history, and women from (Sunni) Riyadh and Jeddah would refer to Aisha and Khadija.

Ensuring that your daughters gain a good education is a second bottom–up initiative that can be identified. For example, sending girls to study law, behind which lies the reasoning that 'if the judge is a woman, it will be better for the woman. She will understand her better'.[76] Training girls in *shari'a*, Farah said, prepares for the time when there is a top–down decision that women can become judges, so that there will actually be women who have been trained in *shari'a* and who have the experience to become judges.

Education and economic empowerment are, perhaps unsurprisingly, seen as interrelated. One businesswoman said that empowerment can be reached through education, so that women can then be 'trained in the workforce where she can get a job and earn for herself'.[77]

Political empowerment, meanwhile, is not something that is seen as only a top–down project. During a (women-only) meeting of *Hamlat Baladi*[78] (a campaign for women's participation in the municipal elections), one of the topics under discussion was how to raise women's awareness of the need for participation in political decision-making. One suggestion was creating a *majlis al-dhill* (shadow council) and organizing workshops to practise skills and knowledge that are needed for the real *majlis al-shura*.[79]

3.4   Towards a 'Modern Saudi Woman'

The discussion above has made it clear that both segregation (that is, women-only public spaces) and *ikhtilat* are related to the discussion about *tamkin al-mar'a* and *nuhud al-mar'a*. We have also discerned top–down and bottom–up initiatives and strategies that aim to strengthen the *tamkin* of Saudi women. Questions, however, remain unanswered: What, according to Saudi women, is a modern Saudi woman? What is modernity in Saudi Arabia? What role does religion play in women's ideas about the modern Saudi woman? How do women speak about the role of women in modern Saudi Arabia?

Attempts by Saudi women to articulate their ideas about a Saudi 'local modernity'[80] seem to lead to an 'enchanted' interpretation of modernity,[81] an enchanted modernity being one that is not

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76   Interview by the author with Farah, Islamic Studies teacher, Jeddah, 23 October 2011.
77   Interview by the author with Samira, businesswoman, Jeddah, 20 October 2011.
78   For more information about *Hamlat Baladi*, please refer online to
      http://www.facebook.com/groups/baladi2011/, accessed 17 October 2011.
79   Meeting of *Hamlat Baladi*, Jeddah, 18 October 2011.
80   Calling them 'alternative modernities', it was Taylor who first introduced the concept of local modernities into the modernity debate. He argued that Europe should no longer be the point of reference and that Europe should be 'provincialized'. While the European 'brand' of modernity may still influence other modernities, modernity is no longer seen as a universal process and end state that other parts of the world must achieve should they want to become modern. See also Charles Taylor, 'Nationalism and Modernity', in John Hall (ed.), *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gelher and the Theory of Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

necessarily secular, dislodging the idea that Islam and modernity are incompatible. Lara Deeb argues that the core of the 'enchanted modernity' that she found among pious Shiʻa Muslims in al-Dahiyya, a southern suburb of Beirut, Lebanon, 'is a dual emphasis on both material and spiritual progress as necessary to modern-ness'.[82] As stated earlier, the Saudi state described 'progress' and 'modernity' in its own way, legitimizing women-only public spaces by using an Islamic discourse, but how do women themselves view this? Do they view women-only public spaces as 'modern', or is *ikhtilat*—in their perspective—part of this modernity? And what about *tamkin al- marʻa* and *nuhud al- marʻa*?

When asked whether Saudi Arabia is a modern country, and to define that modernity, Saudi women put forward several characteristics. While technological inventions such as the internet, cars and aeroplanes, but also scientific progress and certain research methodologies, were identified as central to Saudi modernity, so is religion. One young woman stated that 'the idea that religion would not be part of modernity is a *fikr jahil* [an ignorant, pre-Islamic idea]'.[83] Islam, then, sets the *hudud* (limits) of modernity:

> The internet, the Blackberry or the computer, they're not *haram* in the religion. You use them, but *bi hudud*. For example, I use my mobile for relations with my family, with my children. But not for *'alaqat muharrima* [forbidden relations], for the opposite of family relations. That is from the religion.[84]

Material progress then takes place within the limits and framework of Islam and its interpretations. Saudi modernity, then, appears to have both a material and a spiritual dimension.

The majority of women make a distinction between modernization and *taghreeb* (Westernization). Westernization is most often defined as *copy-pasting* whatever comes from the United States: food; clothes; speech; and morals. Most women reject the (perceived) secularity of the state and society, and only very few women agree with a separation of *din wa dawla*, or religion and the state. *Tahrir al-marʻa* (liberation of women), either mentioned literally or described as such, is associated with *taghrib* (Westernization). Most women who include women's issues in their description of Westernization reject the idea of women being able to have relations outside of the framework of marriage. Modernization, on the other hand, is taking 'the positive, good things[85] from them [the West] and leave the bad things that the religion doesn't agree with'.[86] The majority of women indicate that they consider Saudi Arabia to be a modern Islamic country.

When asked whether *ikhtilat*, or segregation, or both are part of that modernity, varying responses came. One young woman, who works on women's issues for a charity, was adamant that '*Fasl* [segregation] is part of *hadatha* [modernity] *wa tatawwur* [development]. For

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81 For an elaboration on 'enchanted modernity', please refer to Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958); Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963); and Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shiʻi Lebanon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

82 Deeb, An Enchanted Modern, p. 5.

83 Interview by the author with Hanan, woman who works on women's issues, Jeddah, 26 October 2011.

84 Interview by the author with Amal and Nadia, Islamic Studies teachers, Jeddah, 19 October 2011 (the quotation is by Nadia).

85 Earlier on in the interview, she had mentioned what those 'good things' are: 'Look, I can use a mobile phone. It is modern. Facebook, it is modern. Internet, cars, planes, cameras, air conditioning… So I can take things from modernity that go with the *dawabit* (regulations).'

86 Interview by the author with Khadija, Islamic Studies teacher, Jeddah, 22 October 2011.

example, this meeting [a women-only meeting of the charity for which she volunteers], isn't that development? But if there were men here it wouldn't be *tatawwur* at all',[87] thus implying that men and women would be preoccupied with each other rather than the content of the meeting. But another woman, a middle-aged *da'iyya*, stated that not segregation but *ikhtilat* is part of modernity—but only if the woman wears her *hijab* and if both the man and the woman respect themselves.[88]

Most women view *tamkin al-mar'a* and *nuhud al-mar'a* as part of, and sometimes even conditional to, modernity: '*Al-hadatha*… if there isn't *tamkin*, then there isn't *hadatha*. How can there be *hadatha* if there isn't *tamkin*? Then it would be like the times of *jahilliyya*, like before Islam'.[89] This *da'iyya* went as far as to say that a lack of *tamkin* for women means that society is like pre-Islamic times. This links in with women who make the distinction between the material modernity of Saudi Arabia and the lack of modernity in other areas. They argue that Saudi Arabia is modern in a material sense, but that it is not in an intellectual sense or in relation to women's rights. These women see Saudi Arabia as a mixed society, with some modern parts and some backward (*takhalluf*) or under-developed (*muta'akhir*) parts.

When women are asked what it means to be a modern Saudi woman, most women give a detailed description of what a modern Saudi woman's personality is like. The two central characteristics are that she is *muthaqqifa* (cultured and well-informed) and *muta'allima* (well educated). Being *muthaqqifa* means that she knows about the world around her and that she is able to live with others, while being *muta'allima* means that she is well educated. She need not have received this education through the formal education system: experience and exposure are also ways in which she can become *muta'allima*. The essential idea is that she has gained knowledge. Furthermore, the modern woman 'has her own interests, she knows what she wants in life, she can serve in her society. She goes by herself, she is independent in taking actions, not waiting for support; she is an initiator, confident, and she knows well what is her belief'.[90] This last point is given much weight by most women: a modern Saudi woman, while developing herself and participating in her society, bears in mind her religion. An exchange between two Islamic Studies teachers from Jeddah about the role of religion in the life of a modern Saudi woman illustrates this:

> Nadia: 'She holds on to her religion, and at the same time, she develops herself [*mutawwira nafsaha*]. But there are the *hudud* of her religion. She doesn't leave that aside'.
> Amal: 'She studies, she goes outside, she goes to conferences. In Europe, in America, she doesn't have a problem with that. She has her *mahram* with her. That is *al-mar'a al-haditha* that we have. She is *mutatawwira* [developed], *'asriyya* [contemporary], and she holds on to her religion at the same time. She is open *bas bi hudud* [but with limits]'.
> Nadia: '*Fi ta'alim wa fi din* [there is education and religion]. We are *mutahaffizin* [conservative]'.[91]

Islam is a fundamental part of being a modern Saudi woman, and most women maintain that a woman who wears *niqab* can very well be a modern woman. Most women who spoke about the relationship between dress and modernity brought up the issue of clothing, stressing that

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87   Interview by the author with Hanan, woman who works on women's issues, Jeddah, 26 October 2011.
88   Interview by the author with Fatima, a *da'iyya*, Seyhat, 2 November 2011.
89   Interview by the author with Fatima, a *da'iyya*, Seyhat, 2 November 2011.
90   Interview by the author with Mai, woman who works on women's issues, Jeddah, 27 October 2011.
91   Interview by the author with Amal and Nadia, Islamic Studies teachers, Jeddah, 19 October 2011.

modernity is not really about appearance but what and how you think, and what you say. Also, women who do not cover themselves when outside Saudi Arabia maintain that women who cover fully in and/or outside of the Kingdom can be—but are not necessarily—modern women.

Most of the women interviewed said that in their own definition of what it means to be a modern woman, they are modern; only some of them positioned themselves within modernity without making that qualification.

3.5   Conclusion

This chapter has, first, attempted to show how the development of women-only public spaces is tied to the historical development of the third Saudi state. It has also demonstrated that the concepts of segregation and *ikhtilat* are ambiguous notions that are contested by various players, including women themselves. Saudi women, it was shown, negotiate their daily realities with regard to segregation and *ikhtilat* while (re)producing or contesting women-only public spaces. Their strategies when dealing with segregation and *ikhtilat* vary from wanting to keep the status quo, wishing to strengthen segregation, strengthening segregation as an intermediary phase towards more *ikhtilat*, or attempting to undermine segregation.

Tamkin al-mar'a consists of participation in public life, education, and economic empowerment. This can be achieved through either *ikhtilat* or women-only public spaces. The concept of *nuhud al-mar'a* centres around the idea of *wa'i*, or raising consciousness, as well as being the period in which Saudi women perceive themselves at the moment, a period of increasing participation by women in the public sphere—either through *ikhtilat* or through women-only public spaces.

Women are often considered to be 'culture bearers', and as such the women's issue is an area in which notions of progress and modernity are negotiated. Women themselves, too, are actively engaged in giving meaning to modernity. Their perceptions of modernity do not consist only of material progress (the internet, television, mobile phones and infrastructure) but also have a spiritual side. Most of the women interviewed identify Saudi Arabia as a modern country, and only a few made the distinction between material and cultural/intellectual modernity.

Almost all of the interviewees were able to articulate what it means to be a modern Saudi woman: a woman whose fundamental characteristics are that she is educated, cultured and religious. Religiosity seems to be a fundamental part of, and for some women is even conditional to, what it means to be a modern Saudi woman. It is the duality of material progress and religiousness that seems to constitute 'the Saudi modern', of which *tamkin al-mar'a* and *nuhud al-mar'a* are—according to many Saudi women—essential components.

4. Conclusion

All three of the research chapters overlap and seem to confirm each other's view that change is taking place in Saudi Arabia and that some sections of its population, mostly the well-educated, are formulating, claiming and appropriating certain rights, either within the parameters of state policy by creating greater space for themselves, or acting independently from the state and, more rarely, acting in opposition to the state.

4.1 Intellectual Debates

The clash between more rigid conservative Wahhabism and liberal ideas is analysed by Wagemakers in his extensive report on intellectual debates. Wagemakers has tried and succeeded in analysing some of Saudi Arabia's major recent debates. He has concentrated on three debates: the gender segregation debate; the Shiite citizenship debate; and the debate on reform. He defines three main participants in these debates: conservative Wahhabi thinkers; pragmatic reformist conservative thinkers; and anti-Wahhabi thinkers, who consist of both Shiite and liberal reformers. It is also worthwhile here to find out who is dependent and independent from the state, and the matrix that Kanie developed in his report can be applied here as well. It is not necessarily true that the most conservative *'ulama'* are the most dependent on the state. The most conservative are mostly not supported by the state and act independently and even in opposition to it. It seems that more reform-minded Wahhabi *'ulama'* are in dialogue with the state, and, as a general rule, all intellectuals, even the Shiites, depend upon the state or sections of the royal family for protection against the hardline conservatives. Perhaps, this applies even more for the cultural liberals who are caught up in the double bind. While they depend on the state to create greater space for expression of ideas and freedom of organization, without support from liberal princes they would not be able to write in their newspapers and criticize the conservative religious establishment.

In his exposé on *ikhtilat*, Wagemakers provides an insight into the reasoning of the conservative Wahhabi sheikhs. He shows how they base their arguments on *hadith*s. They argue that gender mixing will lead to depravity, adultery and other sins, which is especially prominent in countries where genders mingle freely, such as Europe. He illustrates the sensitivity of the issue of the *ikhtilat* debate as it has evolved since 2009, when Sheikh Hamid al-Ghamidi, an example of a

Wahhabi reformist, opined that it was quite legal and that Islam did not forbid it. He also shows that Saudi liberals disregard the Wahhabi argument and base their arguments on a quite different Western basis of equal rights and freedom. The arguments, however, are not directly political in the sense that they call for political reform. Most liberals who promote *ikhtilat* are in favour of individual rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of organization and women's emancipation, but they usually do not demand political rights. Frequent visitors to the semi-political civil society organizations such as the *diwaniyyat* (informal gatherings), they are dependent on the goodwill of the reformist trend within the monarchy. Although political issues are discussed in these *diwaniyyat*, only a few activists demand political reforms, such as the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. On the issue of *ikhtilat*, these cultural liberals are in dialogue with the state; they are not against the state. In fact, many liberals who demand political reforms believe that *ikhtilat* is a non-issue that has been cooked up by the Saudi state to keep everybody busy so that they disregard the real issues.

The debate on the position of the Shiites in Saudi Arabia is the second topic dealt with by Wagemakers. Unlike the *ikhtilat* debate, the position of the Shiites is a political issue that touches upon crucial topics that involve the income, legitimacy and security of the Saudi state. Besides oil production and relations with Iran, the Shiite problem challenges the very basis of the Saudi state and its religious legitimacy in Wahhabism, which is inherently discriminatory of Shiites, who are regarded as heretics. The liberal discourse of rights that is promoted by the Shiites is therefore nothing less than a direct challenge to the basic principles of the Saudi state. Wagemakers gives an extensive account of the arguments that the Shiites use to try to gain equal rights. As a civil rights movement, they advocate equality and acceptance of the Shiites as citizens. As a religious minority, they demand acceptance of the right to differ, tolerance and pluralism. At the same time they emphasize their loyalty to the Saudi nation and advocate a nation based on 'diversity in unity'. Many of the Shiite intellectuals go even further and state their belief that this is not possible within the existing political structure and demand reform of the political system. Some Shiite intellectuals, such as Tawfiq al-Sayf, believe that equal rights and citizenship are the only solutions to the challenge that the 'Arab Spring' poses for the Saudi state.

The Saudi state, however, seems to respond by what Wagemakers calls 'containing pressure' and 'creating sources of relief'. The first corresponds to what Kanie would call responding to the pressure of the semi-political, partly independent sections of civil society that are in a critical but supportive dialogue with the state. These mostly represent the cultural liberals, who demand individual rights such as freedom of speech, organizations and mobility. They demand the modernization of society in the fields of education, mentality and intellectual horizons. That the Saudi state responds in this piecemeal and ambiguous, often contradictory, manner is partly the result of the fact that it is not a unified state, but is based on a compromise between different sections of the royal family who have relations with different and often opposing interest groups in society. Political decisions are often a compromise: the two principles that Joas Wagemakers mentions are based on the notion that politics cannot alienate the conservative religious establishment but must allow for greater space for the Western educated elite to live the life that they want within certain boundaries that do not offend conservative sensibilities and interests. The result, as Wagemakers shows, for example, is the curtailment of the religious police, whose powers and scope are increasingly limited. However, as the state is divided and its policy ambivalent, this has led to several incidents, such as the contestation of the religious police and highly visible challenges to their authority at the annual book fair in Riyadh.

This political struggle is reflected in the third debate analysed by Wagemakers—that between cultural liberals and the conservative *'ulama'*, who in this regard seem to be fighting a rearguard battle. In its policy to balance social pressure, the Saudi state cannot compromise on other issues. The best example is the famous case of forbidding women to drive. This issue, like

ikhtilat, has such a symbolic value for the conservative religious establishment that the state cannot make concessions without disavowing this important sector of the state that still controls educational and social life.

4.2   Civil Society

Mariwan Kanie has answered the question of what civil society means in Saudi Arabia. His report gives an extensive overview of the history of civil society and how its power and scope have increased over the past twenty years. In particular, 9/11 gave civil society a boost in Saudi Arabia, as the Saudi state became aware of the danger of leaning completely on the conservative *'ulama'* and realized that it needs to open towards other sections of society in order to create a balance between different societal forces. In accordance with its task as the modernizer of society, the Saudi state has allowed greater leeway for discourses that promote tolerance, flexibility, openness, and acceptance of pluralism. The question, therefore, is not whether this process is taking place, but how far it will go and to what extent it affects sectors of society other than just elite organizations.

Mariwan Kanie has tried to answer this question by developing a matrix with, on the one side, six indicators of civil society: 1) *apart/separate* from the state; 2) *against* the state; 3) *in support* of the state; 4) *in dialogue* with the state; 5) *in partnership* with the state; and 6) *beyond* the state. He matches these six categories with the three different forms of civil society that he discerns: non-political; semi-political; and political organizations. His report elaborates on the different combinations that he has found. He demonstrates how non-political and semi-political civil society organizations usually combine with categories three to five, while political ones usually tend towards the first and second categories.

The question of to which category they belong is determined by the discourse that they adopt. Examples of the first are the more traditional charitable organizations, which form the largest section of civil society. The vast majority are non-political, religious organizations that fall under the religious establishment and naturally support the state. They are traditional in the sense that they do not lead to greater self-awareness but alleviate poverty. Kanie does not deal with these organizations. He does mention the ones that are sponsored by the royal family, however. Ironically, these can be considered as political in the sense that they boost the legitimacy of the monarchy and demonstrate its role as Saudi Arabia's main patron and benefactor. Other charitable organizations, however, are perhaps even more political, in the sense that they challenge the state's authority, but only in a roundabout manner. For example, Shiite charity organizations are obviously established to defend and enhance the identity of the Shiite community against the dominance and discrimination of the Saudi state and especially the Wahhabi *'ulama'*. Other forms of charity organizations are more focused on promoting skills and capacity-building. Kanie mentions several that are sponsored by businessmen. Even more active are the Chambers of Commerce, which should be regarded as real advocacy organizations that lobby for the interests of their clients. These civil society organizations are obviously not opposed to the state, but as critical self-aware organizations they are in dialogue with it, and they do try to influence its policies. They have gained considerable clout over recent years, since the state accepted them and King Abdullah ordered all government agencies to confer with the Chambers of Commerce when developing their economic policies. The Chambers of Commerce are especially attractive to women, who have used them to advance their interests. Other civil society organizations that are independent of the state are the neighbourhood centres, which try to raise awareness among youth by allowing them to read other than religious texts. Their major achievement is that they operate independently of the religious authorities and provide an opening to the outside world and make their members aware of their rights as citizens.

The semi-political organizations, such as literary clubs, have taken a further step in the direction of playing a political role. Most are separate from the state, but they are still dependent on the state, which regulates their by-laws. Their autonomy was recently enhanced when they were allowed to hold elections for their own councils. Although there must be conservative clubs, which Kanie has not included in his study, the literary clubs seem to be dominated by liberals, who increasingly play an important role in forming public opinion in society, especially in the newspapers, all of which are in the hands of liberal princes—and the modern media. They also form part of the virtual civil society of websites, Twitter and Facebook, which at least partially escape the control of the state. The interviews that Kanie conducted gave him the impression that virtual society is expanding and raising the awareness of the youth, which is increasingly better educated and aware of what is happening in the rest of the world.

Finally, Kanie mentions the *diwaniyyat*, the social meetings places, mostly at people's houses. These discuss political issues and public affairs even more openly. Within this category, the Shiite civil organizations in the Eastern Province are perhaps the most overtly active politically. These civil society organizations have become increasingly important as spaces where issues are openly discussed that deal with public affairs. The most prominent uphold a liberal discourse of rights (freedom of speech and tolerance) and political reform. How far their influence reaches, however, is unclear. This also applies to human rights organizations, which have emerged over the past ten years and promote the same liberal political discourse, and which should be regarded as the most political of the civil rights organizations.

Although Kanie points out the slow pace of political reform and the overpowering presence of the Saudi state, he is optimistic about the future. In spite of the fact that the Saudi state is in league with the conservative religious establishment and exerts tremendous control over society, it increasingly allows greater space for civil society to develop. This is the result of a higher level of education and greater intellectual and political awareness among the Saudi population through modern media and travel. But not only is civil society expanding; Kanie shows that its independence is growing too. Some civil society organizations have been allowed to elect their own board and presidents. This is partly the result of the introduction of a critical discourse that has seen the rise of semi-political and political civil society organizations. Kanie argues that it is especially the change in awareness of the rights of citizens and the spread of liberal ideas that will promote social and political change in the long run. He seems to suggest that more non-political civil society organizations could transform themselves in the future into semi-political ones, whereas semi-political ones could become fully political ones. The matrix that Kanie has developed makes it possible to define and map the different types of civil society organizations and to trace their transformation in the future.

Kanie's report shows that Saudi society is changing rapidly, but it is unclear whether the liberal spirit will have a future. Because of lack of time, he has not been able to visit the more conservative civil society organizations and see how they operate and change. The idea that they are stagnant is not a priori true. It would, for instance, be interesting to see whether these have been affected by recent events in other countries in the Middle East. Have the conservative or reformative Wahhabi sheikhs been affected by debates on the 'Arab Spring'? For instance, what is the influence of the conservative Salafi Nour Party in Egypt on these trends in Saudi Arabia? Whereas usually apolitical Salafism (Wahhabism) is promoted by the Saudi state, in the 1990s the more politicized Sahwa movement (which is combination between the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafism) became a force to be reckoned with. It is quite possible that the emergence of the political Salafi movement in Egypt might have a much greater impact on changes in Saudi Arabia than liberal thought. The Nour Party, which upholds a discourse of citizen's rights, democracy, elections and governmental accountability (although not, of course, liberal individual rights) and presents them within an Islamic framework (the *shari'a* must be applied), could have a far

greater appeal to the conservative Saudi population than liberalism, with its emphasis on individual rights, which only Westernized intellectuals deem to be important.

4.3   The Position of Women

This brings us to the final research theme: the practice of *ikhtilat*. The prohibition of gender mixing is an excellent topic to answer many of the questions that were asked in the project's original tender regarding the position of women in the labour force, in society, leisure and education, etc. *Ikhtilat* is such a determining factor in the life of Saudi women that it cannot be ignored if one is to understand all those other issues that are related to the position of women in Saudi Arabia. Annemarie van Geel has thus chosen to study this topic in depth by extensive interviews with women (especially upper-class, educated women) on how they cope with this phenomenon, which in the eyes of the West greatly hampers freedom of mobility and possibilities for women's development. The form that this struggle takes is, however, typical of Saudi Arabia, where the political has crept into the non-political, with the position of women in itself being, of course, the central object—as 'culture bearers'—on which this struggle is being fought. The major male contenders in this struggle are those groups that Wagemakers has defined in his report: conservatives; the reform-minded Wahhabi *'ulama'*; and the cultural liberals.

Van Geel's focus was to analyse this topic within the framework of the 'rise of women' and to let women themselves present their own views on *ikhtilat*, without directly presenting them within the political struggle for cultural hegemony in Saudi Arabia. The different groups of women that she analyses correspond with the different categories that Kanie has drawn up in his report. Most women interviewed fall within categories three to five (in *support*, in *dialogue* of the state, or in *partnership* with the state). Most are also either non-political or semi-political. Political reform (*islah*) was considered a non-female exercise that was less relevant for their position, although many were enthusiastic about the right to vote for the *Majlis al-Shura* (Consultative Council) that King Abdullah had recently bestowed upon them.

Van Geel extensively analyses the different groups. It appeared that most of her interviewees were in favour of maintaining the status quo; the second group was in favour of strengthening gender separation (having, for instance, all-female hospitals); while only a small minority was in favour of promoting *ikhtilat* (gender mixing) and bringing down the walls of gender segregation. Whatever their focus, the most important conclusion is that most women accept the Saudi state's limitations on women's mobility and restrictions in her appearance in mixed public spaces, accept these rules as part of the Saudi cultural heritage, but in dialogue with the state try to widen the space allotted to women. However, in contrast to what is generally believed, all women in one form or another try to change their position within the existing context. The distinctions in their language in defining their position and their ambitions are the terms 'empowerment' (*tamkin*) and 'rise' (*nuhud*). Whereas the more activist women used the more forceful, modern term of *tamkin*, the majority used the more traditional and historically acceptable term of *nuhud*. All of the women also considered themselves to be modern. They argued that forbidding gender-mixing has nothing to do with backwardness and that the development of women can also take place alongside gender segregation.

In conclusion, one can state that women's emancipation takes place by non-political means (promoting education and creating greater opportunities for jobs, etc), semi-political means and organizations (raising awareness), and more sporadically by political means (such as supporting the call for political reform and the participation of women). The common means of engagement with the Saudi state for women and women's organizations are dialogue, support and partnership. This is not at all surprising, as the Saudi state at the moment is the greatest

promoter of women's emancipation by providing more room for the cultural liberals (by establishing a non-segregated university near Jeddah such as KAUST, and expanding the room to discuss topics such as *ikhtilat*) and by the reformist Wahhabi *'ulama'* loosening *ikhtilat* (by creating more public spaces for women to mingle with men, and separate public spaces for women). The majority of women whom van Geel interviewed seem to accept the hegemonic discourse of the Saudi state on *ikhtilat*, but provide it with their own interpretation. The discourse on civil rights that the men seem to have adopted seems to be limited to activist liberal women. In this they do not differ much from their male counterparts, the majority being perhaps more conservative than the state in cultural matters, and otherwise belong to the non-political and semi-political sectors. Despite the spread of the discourse of rights, cultural liberals are by far in the minority. Political liberals form an even smaller group, but this does not preclude that the conservatives can become a political force again in the future. Demands for accountability, oversight, separation of powers and democracy can also be promoted by conservatives.

Saudis need not accept the patronage on which the monarchy bases its legitimacy. It is therefore with great trepidation that Saudi Arabia watches all the forms of political activism that have emerged during the 'Arab Spring', whether inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafism or liberalism. It is even quite probable that cultural liberals are quite happy with the Saudi monarchy, given the turn that events have taken in Egypt and Tunisia.