

The Saudi Kingdom in Transition: Women Appointed to the *Majlis*

Brandon Friedman

On January 11, 2013, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia issued a royal decree declaring that 30 women would be appointed to the country's Consultative Council (*majlis al-shura*). Two of them were members of the royal family: Princess Sara bint Faisal bin Abdulaziz (a daughter of King Faisal, r. 1964-1975) and Princess Moudi bint Khalid bin Abdulaziz (a daughter of King Khalid, r. 1975-1982). The other 28 women chosen are highly accomplished professionals, and include a leading pediatrician from the Eastern Province (Dr. Nuhad M. al-Jishi), a doctor in experimental physics (Ferdous S. al-Saleh), and a former undersecretary general of the United Nations (Thoraya A. Obaid).

Established in 1992, the Consultative Council's primary function is to serve as a policy debate forum. Its 150 members, all of whom are appointed by the king, review and comment on proposed government legislation, treaties, and programs. Perhaps the Council's most important function is to draft the kingdom's five-year development plans, which are the basis for the government's annual budgets. The Council can also summon government officials for questioning, and, since 2005, has the authority to propose new laws and amend existing statutes. The Council's importance has grown under Abdullah, and it does have a not entirely insignificant role in the Saudi decision-making process. To be sure, some Western analysts have characterized it as a toothless entity far removed from what a "real" parliament

should be. Nevertheless, King Abdullah appears to take its recommendations seriously. In 2009, two former members of the Council, Dr. Abdalaziz Al-Nu'aym and Muhammad Al-Sharif, proposed allocating 20 percent of the Council's seats to women.¹ Two years later, Abdullah announced that women would soon be included in the Council.

Mshari al-Zaydi, a Saudi journalist, argued in *Asharq Al-Awsat* that the royal decree was “to be expected from a leader that knows the nature and culture of those he rules, and deals with them with all respect, appreciation and faith, however at the same time avoids anything that is not based on approved Islamic doctrine or the correct reading of history.”² Apparently a “correct reading of history” means that male and female members of the Council should be separated during the course of carrying out their duties, even using separate entrances when entering and leaving the *majlis* meeting hall. And while the women will be sitting in the same hall with the men, they will be sitting in separate areas. It is unclear how the arrangement will work, but *Asharq Al-Awsat* speculated on three options: (1) moveable screens, often used for families in Saudi restaurants; (2) a glass partition that is a one-way mirror, common at Saudi universities in areas where female students wait for their drivers; or (3) a fence made of wood with Islamic patterns, as is common in the windows of some buildings in the old part of Jidda.³

Despite al-Zaydi's claim that the king's decision is based on “approved Islamic doctrine,” the royal decree has been met with resistance from certain elements of the Saudi religious class. On January 15, “dozens” of Saudi religious officials took to the streets and silently gathered in front of the Royal Diwan in a demonstration against the new edict.⁴ The group of clerics who participated in the demonstration drafted a petition outlining their grievances. The two most significant points were their objections to (1) allowing women to participate in sports, referring in particular to two female Saudis who participated for the first time in the 2012 Summer Olympics in London; and (2) “Normalization of gender mixing in society’ through encouraging

1 Joseph A. Kechichian, *Legal and Political Reforms in Saudi Arabia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 214; and, Wikileaks Cable, U.S. Embassy Riyadh, “Saudi Consultative Council Dominated by U.S. Educated Experts,” 22 April 2009, 09RIYADH482 [published 1 September 2011].

2 Mshari al-Zaydi, “An Exceptional Royal Decree,” *Asharq Al-Awsat* (English), 13 January 2013.

3 *Asharq Al-Awsat* (Arabic), 17 January 2013,

<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=43&issueno=12469&article=713385&feature=>

4 *Reuters*, 15 January 2013.

women's employment in different fields [such as] retail, manufacturing, restaurants, law firms and other businesses, as well as allowing women to join the Shura Council and boards of public organizations and delegations.”⁵ These religious leaders have called for another round of street demonstrations outside of the Royal Diwan on January 29.

A number of prominent conservative Saudi women have also spoken out against the group of women appointed to the Council. Nawal al-Eid, a preacher and academic at Princess Norah University, wrote in *al-Hayat* that the government is promoting the “demands of the minority that are rejected by the majority of Saudi women” and “many have wished that those specialized in *shari'a* law would be included in the council as they represent the majority of Saudi women.”⁶ Nevertheless, conservative Saudi women do not oppose the inclusion of women in the Council. Rather, they believe that the specific women who were selected for the Council are not representative of the majority of Saudi women.

It will be interesting to see what impact the newly appointed women will make in the Council, and how their presence will be felt on outstanding issues in the kingdom such as granting women the right to drive and women's suffrage, which the king has promised will happen in the 2015 municipal elections. Frank Vogel, founder of Harvard University's Islamic Legal Studies Program, recently claimed that “however regressive and traditionalist Saudi Arabia appears from the outside, viewed internally the country seems to be on a path of rapid change and evolution.”⁷ Vogel argues that since 2005, King Abdullah has “made striking efforts, unanticipated in scope, to reform Saudi society and government...” These efforts include taking steps to create more dialogue and religious tolerance in the kingdom for Sufis in the Hijaz, Twelver Shi'a in the Eastern Province, and Ismaili Shi'a in Jizan and Najran. Abdullah has also initiated education reform as embodied by the establishment of the coeducational King Abdullah University for Science and Technology in 2009,

5 Ahmad al-Omran, *Riyadh Bureau*, 20 January 2013; for more on the debate on gender mixing, see: Roel Meijer, “Reform in Saudi Arabia: The Gender Segregation Debate,” *Middle East Policy* 17(4) (Winter 2010): 80-100.

6 As reported by Ahmad al-Omran, “Saudi Conservative Women Feel Marginalized by Shura Council Snub,” *Al Monitor*, 23 January 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/saudi-arabia-women-shura-council.html#ixzz2ItxdePnT>

7 Frank E. Vogel, “Shari'a in the Politics of Saudi Arabia,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 10(4) (Winter 2012), p. 26.

which the king hopes will be a Saudi MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology). Third, Abdullah's 2007 plan to reform the Saudi judiciary is perhaps the most ambitious component of his agenda. The reforms have restructured the Saudi legal system and seek to redefine the nature of *siyasa shar'iyya*, the doctrine of governance that underlies the politics of the kingdom.⁸ Indeed, as Vogel observed, "these three initiatives represent not a shot but a barrage across the bow of his [Abdullah's] ruling partners, the religious establishment."⁹

Nevertheless, Shi'i unrest in the Eastern Province has continued¹⁰, education reform has met institutional resistance from the religious establishment and forced the government to use *Tatweer*¹¹ – a public-private partnership – to make an end run around the religious establishment to carry out reform.¹² And as Riyadh lawyer Ziad A. Al-Sudairy has noted, legal reform, which seeks to redefine *shari'a*'s place in Saudi law, has yet to be put into force.¹³

Al Saud (the House of Saud) is also dealing with the impact of the "Arab Spring." Khalid al-Dhakil, a Saudi sociologist based at the Gulf Research Centre, says that in the wake of the Arab uprisings, "...political culture in the region is rapidly changing in an apparent way," and "the Saudi state cannot afford to be separated from it because it is part of the Arab political and cultural fabric itself and is influenced by it and should affect it."¹⁴ Political culture, namely, "the system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values which define the situation in which political action takes place,"¹⁵ appears to be changing. Al-Dakhil argues that the "Arab Spring" has altered the popular perception of the relationship between the Arab state and its

⁸ For a thoughtful analysis of this doctrine and its relationship to Saudi politics, see: Muhammad Al-Atawneh, "Is Saudi Arabia a Theocracy? Religion and Governance in Contemporary Saudi Arabia," *Middle Eastern Studies* 45(5) (2010): 721-737.

⁹ Vogel, p. 22.

¹⁰ For a thorough analysis of the Shi'i protests in the Eastern Province, see: Toby Matthieson, "A Saudi Spring? The Shi'a Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011-2012," *The Middle East Journal* 66(4) (2012): 628-659.

¹¹ For more on the structure of this public-private partnership, see: www.tatweer.sa/EN/index.html.

¹² Abeer Allam, "Saudi education reforms face resistance," *Financial Times*, 25 April 2011.

¹³ Ziad A. Al-Sudairy, "The Constitutional Appeal of Shari'a in a Modernizing Saudi State," *Middle East Law and Governance* 2 (2010), pp. 1-16.

¹⁴ Khalid al-Dakhil, "Saudi Arabia: What comes after the Arab Spring?" *Arab News*, 17 December 2012.

¹⁵ Sidney Verba, "Comparative Political Culture" in Lucian W. Pye and Verba, eds. *Political Culture and Political Development* (Princeton, 1966), p. 513, as quoted in Gabriel Ben-Dor, "Political Culture Approach to Middle East Politics," *The International Journal of Middle East Studies* 8(1) (January 1977), p. 45.

people, one which places the rights of the people before the demands of the state's foreign relations. Here al-Dakhil may be discreetly suggesting that the Saudi government should put the Saudi Shi'is' demands for rights ahead of the Saudi fear of Iranian interference.

For al-Dakhil, Saudi Arabia was founded on the principle that the relationship between the ruler and ruled flowed in one-direction: from the leader to his people. There is no longer any argument about whether this relationship should change: according to al-Dakhil, the argument now is about how the change should happen. He adds that "if fixing the system before the 'Spring' became a demand ... it became an unavoidable regional reality after the 'Spring.'"¹⁶

This urgency to fix the system comes during what appears to be a period of transition for the Al Saud dynasty. Crown Prince Sultan passed away in 2011, and Crown Prince Nayef was laid to rest in June 2012. Sultan had been Defense Minister since 1962 and Nayef Interior Minister since 1975. The Allegiance Council (*hay'at al-bay'a*),¹⁷ intended to provide the royal family an institutional forum for selecting and approving a successor to the Saudi throne, was not activated after Nayef's death; instead, King Abdullah immediately appointed Defense Minister Salman bin Abdulaziz Crown Prince. This raised questions about whether the Allegiance Council can be a successful institutional mechanism to facilitate a smooth royal succession. This is a particular concern given that King Abdullah suffers from physical ailments and Crown Prince Salman is rumored to be in poor mental health.¹⁸

King Abdullah appears to recognize the need for the emergence of a new generation of Al Saud leadership. In November 2012, Abdullah appointed Mohammad bin Nayef to his father's long-time post of Interior Minister, abruptly replacing Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, who had assumed the position following Nayef's death. Saud bin Nayef, former ambassador to Spain and Mohammed's older brother, was appointed governor of the embattled Eastern Province on January 14, 2013, replacing longtime governor Mohammed bin Fahd, whose standing was apparently damaged by his

16 Khalid al-Dhakil, "What awaits the Kingdom After the 'Arab Spring'?" *Arab News*, 24 December 2012.

¹⁷ King Abdullah established the Allegiance Council in October 2007. It originally consisted of 35 members: the 16 surviving sons of Abdulaziz and 19 grandsons. Prince Talal bin Abdulaziz resigned his membership in November 2011, and two other members have died. See: Kechichian, pp. 137-158.

¹⁸ Simon Henderson, "To Stop Iran, Get a New Saudi King," *The Atlantic*, 10 January 2013.

clumsy handling of the Shi'i unrest during the past two years. At the same time, 42 year-old Prince Faisal bin Salman, an Oxford University Ph.D. and former political science professor, was named governor of Medina.¹⁹

These changes in royal family politics should be viewed in terms of their likely impact on the process of decision-making among the Al Saud. Seniority and tradition still matter a great deal, but consensus also plays an important role in how the family moves toward change. The transition to a new generation of Al Saud leadership is an opportunity to observe how this new generation views issues related to political participation in the kingdom, Saudi social solidarity and national identity (who is “included” and who is “excluded”), and how the government should distribute power and resources. The fact that Saudi women now have an institutional voice with which to express their views on government policy appears to be a proclamation of the new Al Saud consensus regarding the nature of women’s roles in the kingdom. Nevertheless, given Saudi history, it is reasonable to be circumspect regarding King Abdullah’s reforms.²⁰ Royal decrees are an important first step toward change, yet how these reforms are ultimately put into practice will be the true measure of whether there is real change taking place in the political culture of the Kingdom.

[Brandon Friedman](#) is a Research Fellow at the Alliance Center for Iranian Studies and a Junior Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University.

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¹⁹ Prince Faisal is the author of serious scholarly study of Saudi-Iranian relations during the period of British withdrawal from the Gulf region between 1968 and 1971: *Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

²⁰ For a history of stalled Saudi political reform, see: Sarah Yizraeli, *Politics and Society in Saudi Arabia: The Crucial Years of Development 1960-1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 104-117.

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