

RIGHT TO DRIVE

A Woman's Struggle

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"I believe if women want to change their reality, it will change. If women are silent, I don't think anything will change. Rights are never given. Rights are taken."

Manal al-Sharif

Manal al-Sharif, a divorcée and mother of two, has become a symbol of inspiration for some and an emblem of secular Westernization for others after a video of her "illegally" driving in the conservative kingdom of Saudi Arabia was found on YouTube, which led al-Sharif to create the "Women2Drive" campaign in 2011.¹ The issue of women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia has been both a hot topic and a taboo for decades, but today women are speaking up and taking the wheel. Not all

Saudi women have the desire to drive, however, and the country remains relatively divided on the topic. Manal al-Sharif's protest is also not the first of its kind in Saudi Arabia. Dozens of courageous and outspoken Saudi women laid the road for al-Sharif and Women2Drive 22 years ago. The protest was born on November 6, 1990, in the midst of the Gulf Crisis, when dozens of women gathered at a Tamimi Safeway supermarket, took their driver's seats, and drove on the Riyadh highway until they were stopped by police.² This unusual show of a well-organized public protest by women in Saudi Arabia shocked not only Saudis, but the international community as well. Headlines sprawled across international newspapers and media outlets immediately after they caught wind of the protest. However, there was no "official" mention or response to the protest in the Saudi Arabian media until days after the incident.³ This event shook the Saudi Arabian monarchy and the religious institutions that governed the country, leaving immediate and future consequences for Saudi women in its wake.

This protest was the first of its kind. It was not the result of Western influence, as many have suggested, but of the openings and opportunities for women generated by the oil wealth that engulfed the kingdom in the decades preceding 1990. This article argues that the driving protest in 1990 was the direct result of opportunities and progress made in employment and education for Saudi women. I will discuss the reasons for the protests as well as their lasting impact, and then examine the consequences of the 1990 protest for the women who participated and women throughout Saudi Arabia.

Since the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia, literature regarding this kingdom has increased exponentially as the future of the West and the East become more and more intertwined. Despite several resources discussing women in Saudi Arabia, including *Women in Saudi Arabia Today* by Mona al-Munajjed, an analytical look into the 1990 protest is still missing. The only mention found in al-Munajjed's book pertaining to women's right to drive is a brief section focusing on the lack of public transportation in the country for women.⁴ The newest literature focuses solely on recent protests or tends to ignore the significance of the 1990 protest. An eloquent personal essay

2. James LeMoyne, "Ban on Driving by Women Reaffirmed by Saudis," *New York Times* (15 Nov 1990), A19.

3. Youssef M. Ibrahim, "Saudi Women Take Driver's Seat in Rare Protest," *New York Times* (7 Nov 1990), A18.

4. Mona al-Munajjed, *Women In Saudi Arabia Today*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 99.

1. Alpert, "Q & A: The Saudi woman who dared to drive."



written by Saudi activist Manal al-Sharif, entitled “Driving My Own Destiny,” also fails to examine the historical implications and factors of the first driving protest. She does, however, provide insight into the social and economic changes that influenced her decision to protest.⁵

Several scholarly sources examine and analyze the impact oil wealth had on a majority of Saudi women and their society. “The Oil Boom and its Impact on Women and Families in Saudi Arabia” by Salwa Al-Khateeb and *State, Society and Economics in Saudi Arabia* edited by Tim Niblock emphasize the relationship the oil boom had with the kingdom and the social and economic changes wealth brought. Al-Khateeb’s article offers a reliable analysis of the impact oil had on the Saudi family, and in particular women. She examines the development plans implemented by the government during the oil boom and the social changes that occurred during this time, including education and employment for women.⁶ Yet neither this article nor Niblock’s book examines these factors in relation to the driving protest and the significance of such protests.

There are also fictional and biographical books written either by Saudi women or authors with experience in the kingdom. Two well-known examples published in recent years offer different insights on women’s lives in Saudi Arabia. *The Girls of Riyadh* by Rajaa Alsanee, a Saudi, stirred up controversy when first published in Arabia in 2005. Alsanee’s book is unique in its style and topical manner, taking the form of a collection of email entries written by the narrator about her university friends. This book discussed and challenged Saudi culture and offered an insightful look into the younger “velvet class” generation who have emerged from the elite and middle class in the city of Jeddah.⁷

The second book, *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* (1992) by Jean Sasson, examines the ups and downs of a Saudi Arabian princess’s life. Presented as a true story, it is a tale of the tribulations of an elite class of women and issues that also trickle down to other classes of Saudi society.⁸ This book

created controversy in the country and abroad. Opponents regarded it as fictional and unreliable, while advocates argued for its raw honesty.

Accounts that report on the recent protests arising in Saudi Arabia today generally mention the 1990 protest as an afterthought. An opinion piece written for *Al Jazeera* by Hala al-Dosari, a Saudi activist, focused on the Women2Drive protest in 2011 and briefly discussed the 1990 protest.⁹ She offered a brief examination of the reasons the protest failed, stating, “it was easy to discredit their initiative; all it took back then was to proliferate conspiracy theories—alleging these women were pushing a foreign agenda.”¹⁰ While it addressed the argument that the protest’s timing was not right, this article does not offer insight into the dynamic reasons for the protest and what historical and cultural events led to it. Articles that discuss the protest briefly, especially those written recently, tend also to misinterpret its purpose and the factors that influenced the women’s decision to participate. One article published by NBC News claimed that the women stated they decided to protest during the first Gulf War because they “saw images of female U.S. soldiers driving around in the desert” and due to “the presence of the international media.”¹¹ Both of these claims were misinterpreted and directly contradict what many of the women stated at the time of the protest; many of the participants emphasized that it did not relate to the presence of the international media or US army women.¹² Whether these were merely conflicting opinions among the women or misinterpretation by the media, examining which claims are true and accurate is important in understanding this historical event and its implications.

The aim of this paper is to examine the 1990 protest historically, comprehensively, and analytically in order to create a resource for those interested in the topic to understand the origins of the event, the event itself, and its effects. This topic has returned to international attention over recent years and has sparked a renewed interest in Saudi women’s rights. Often the media, their audience, and even the

5. Manal al-Sharif, “Driving My Own Destiny,” *Virginia Quarterly Review*, (1 Oct 2012), 100.

6. Salwa al-Khateeb, “The Oil Boom and its Impact on Women and Families in Saudi Arabia,” in *The Gulf Family: Kinship Policies and Modernity*, ed. Alanoud Alsharekh (London: Saqi and London Middle East Institute, 2007), 3.

7. Renee Warner Syed, review of *Girls of Riyadh* (Banat al-Riyadh), by Rajaa Alsanee, *Azizah* 5 (Apr 2000): 25.

8. Betty Mahmood, review of *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*, by Jean Sasson, *The Toronto Star* (23 Jan 1993).

9. Hala Al-Dosari, “Saudi women drivers take the wheel on June 17,” *Al Jazeera* (16 June 2011): <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/06/2011061694746333674.html> (accessed 25 Oct 2012).

10. Al-Dosari, “Saudi women drivers take the wheel.”

11. “Saudi women celebrate huge protest car ride,” *NBC News*, (14 Nov 2008), <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/27713062/ns/world-news-mideast-n.africa/t/saudi-women-celebrate-huge-protest-car-ride/#.UMQ2ZkLH8t>.

12. Youssef M. Ibrahim, “Saudi Women Take the Driver’s Seat in a Rare Protest for the Right to Travel,” *The New York Times*, (7 Nov 1990), A18.

activists themselves disregard the importance of history in these events. In the case of drive campaigns in Saudi Arabia, the 1990 campaign led by pioneering Saudi women activists was a significant moment in the kingdom's history, and it offers lessons to the women, such as Manal al-Sharif, who are challenging the status quo today.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS, TRADITION, RELIGION, AND MALE GUARDIANSHIP IN SAUDI ARABIA

The protest's dynamics are intricate and form a part of the larger conflict in Saudi Arabia regarding women's rights. Many who argue for women's right to drive also argue for other freedoms for women, such as mobility, employment, and political rights. They fight for freedom from the "male guardian" legal structure of their country, in which they cannot choose to leave Saudi Arabia or get an education without permission.¹³ However, it is important and significant to note that for every petition written arguing for these rights, there is another written against them. Some, such as Rawda al-Youssef, who started the "My Guardian Knows What's Best For Me" campaign, argue that the ban is appropriate and the male guardianship system and the importance of *namus* or "honor" benefits Saudi women. Al-Youssef also argued that, "Saudi women—specifically those who are talking about women's rights—these come from a social class that is well-off and pampered," and, therefore, they do not represent a mass of the Saudi population.¹⁴ Cleric Sheikh Adnan Bahareth stated in the same 2012 interview that driving would actually place more of a "burden" on women, as she, and not her husband or driver, "will have to go to the souk on her own, she will have to get the food, she will have to drive the kids to and from school." In fact, he argues, women, in this way, control men, as they must complete these tasks that women cannot.¹⁵ These along with other arguments by conservative religious authorities have been reiterated and refined for several decades. They claim that women driving would result in an increase of "prostitution, pornography, homosexuality and divorce" and result in the

"moral decline" of the country.¹⁶ They often cite Western countries, such as the United States, as prime examples of this "moral decline."

The strict religious and patriarchal society of Saudi Arabia derives historically from its tribal culture and its conservative form of Islam, Wahhabism.¹⁷ These two aspects of Saudi culture have a profound effect on women's rights. The ulama (religious scholars), the religious establishment, and the royal family have a uniquely close relationship. The royal family owes much of its legitimacy and the loyalty of its citizens to the religious establishment. This began with Ibn Abdul-Wahhab's alliance with Mohammed Sa'ud, the ruler of Dir'iyya, in a pledge to wage jihad in 1746. Together they spread across Arabia with military force, Sa'ud's control expanding and bringing the Wahhabi movement with it.¹⁸ It was not until the twentieth century, however, that the Saudi state permanently occupied the Hijaz region. The state was able to implement Wahhabi teachings in the region and become a powerful symbol as the protectors of the two holy cities Mecca and Medina. During the first period of occupation, 1924 to 1939 and after World War II, the Wahhabi ulama proved essential in bringing the Arabian tribes together under Saudi influence and control. They quickly implemented religious policies and provided the Sa'ud family with religious legitimacy in their right to rule the region.¹⁹ The Wahhabi establishment also gained power after the oil boom in the 1970s. Due to money contributed from the state, it established

16. Report written by religious scholars from the Majlis al-Ifita' al-A'ala council. Taken from Jon Jensen, "Saudi female driving ban prevents prostitution, say scholars," *Global Post: The Casbah* (2 Dec 2011): <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/the-casbah/saudi-scholars-say-female-driving-ban-prevents-prostitution>.

17. The Wahhabi movement was formed by Mohammed bin Abdul-Wahhab as a reformation movement in Islam, reverting back to what he viewed as the basics of Islam found in the writings and teachings of the Koran and the Sunna, which had since been corrupted among all Muslims alike. He saw the need for reform after witnessing the rituals and the adoption of other beliefs, such as praying to saints, commonly performed in the Shi'i sect of Islam. This in his view was *shirk* and a deterioration of the Islamic community. He believed that *tawhid*, or the absolute monotheism of God, was in danger. This is one of the most prominent sections of his teachings. Taken from Natana J. Delong-Bas, "The Origins of Wahhabism," in *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8.

18. Hamad Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay* (Oneonta: Islamic Publications International, 2002), 20-21.

19. Mohammed Ayoub and Hasan Kosebalaban, "Wahhabism and the Question of Religious Tolerance," in *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Natana J. Delong-Bas (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009), 76-77.

13. "World Report 2011: Saudi Arabia," *Human Rights Watch* (January 2011): http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/saudi.pdf.

14. Rima Maktabi and Schams Elwazer, "Saudi Women: Pampered or oppressed?" *CNN: Inside the Middle East* (14 March 2012): <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/03/14/world/meast/saudi-women-disagree-rights/index.html>.

15. Maktabi and Elwazer, "Saudi Women: Pampered or oppressed?"

schools across the world and maintained its status with the Saudi government. The existence of the Saudi state and the existence of Wahhabism as a relevant religious movement are ultimately dependent on one another. Their relationship allowed for the union of the desert kingdom and the rise of the Sa'ud family.²⁰

The ulama today still hold profound influence over the decisions made by the monarchy, including women's rights. The relationship between church and state in Saudi Arabia has faced multiple ups and downs. Questions are continuously raised regarding who is wholly in charge of the country during periods of crisis. In relation to women's issues, it appears the religious establishment possesses strong sway in the minds of not only the monarchy, but also Saudi citizens.²¹

The ban on women driving originally emerged from cultural and religious concerns, despite the fact that women in other largely Wahhab Islamic countries, such as Kuwait, drive freely. Bedouin women were also known to drive in their villages. The ban could be enforced in Saudi Arabia because every driver must have a valid driver's license; to prevent women from driving the Ministry of Transportation refused to issue licenses to women. However, after the protest in 2011, the deputy Minister of the Interior "confirmed" that there was in fact a written law dating back to the 1990 protest. This took many activists by surprise because this was not public knowledge.²² It is still contested whether there was or is a written ban on women driving under Saudi law. Many activists argue that the issue of women driving is not religious at all, but merely a social issue. A prominent radio journalist and writer in Saudi Arabia reiterated this view, stating: "It is not un-Islamic to drive, it is not un-Islamic to work, it is not un-Islamic to demand for your rights."²³ Instead, she argued, the religious establishment had transformed the issue into both a social and religious one.

King Abdullah has shown interest in freeing the restraints on Saudi women, even allowing women the right to vote in the Shura Council in 2015. In 2009, he opened a "mixed-

sex science university," a major change in a segregated society. Religious fervor rose immediately, however, and Abdullah's moves were quickly criticized. Prominent Saudi clerics issued religious decrees, or *fatwas*. Sheikh Abdul Rahman al-Barrak proclaimed, "whoever allows this mixing allows forbidden things, and whoever allows them is an infidel and this means defection from Islam."²⁴ The Shura Council, the kingdom's leading religious body, has produced several studies that claim to prove that women driving would result in drug abuse, prostitution, and skyrocketing divorce rates.²⁵

The King has remained a small beacon of hope for many activists. In a speech delivered to the Shura Council in 2010, King Abdullah brought women into the political picture, albeit sparingly. He stated, "Saudi women have participated positively in all programs of development by standing with their male brothers, whether as students, employees, teachers and businesswoman."²⁶ He symbolically showed that women's role in the economic, political, and social sphere of the kingdom was and is growing.

Despite this show of opposition to the strict rules on women's rights in his kingdom, Abdullah was and is forced to balance delicately the demands of liberals who are becoming more vocal and traditionalists who still hold significant influence. Groups such as the Ministry of Interior, the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, and the *mutawwa* (religious police) are heavily influenced by the religious establishment and serve as a powerful conservative force. Religious "control squads" (*al-hisbah*) roam most Saudi streets and shopping centers, looking for anyone breaking the "moral codes" of the country.²⁷ Often, these

24. Elizabeth Flock, "Saudi Arabian women banned from driving because of fatwa against gender 'mixing,'" *Washington Post: World Views* (June 6, 2011): <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/fatwa-against-gender-mixing-prevents-saudi-women-from-driving-according-to-wikileaks-cable/2011/06/06/AGVVTDKH.blog.html>.

25. Tracy McVeigh, "Saudi Arabian women risk arrest as they defy ban on driving," *The Observer* (June 16, 2012): <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/17/saudi-arabian-women-risk-arrest-ban-driving>.

26. King Abdullah's speech in 2009 to the Shura Council, translated by Majlis Ash-Shura, "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful," *Majlis Ash-Shura*, 5th term 2nd year, 1431-1432 A.H (2009): <http://www.shura.gov.sa/wps/wcm/connect/ShuraEn/internet/Royal+Speeches/>.

27. Joshua Craze and Mark Huband, ed., "Saudis tire of 'Control squads' as rigid moral guardians fall out of step with the people," *The Kingdom: Saudi Arabia and the Challenge of the 21st Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 230.

20. Fouad Al-Farsy, "The Polity and Organization of the Kingdom," *Saudi Arabia: A Case Study in Development* (Kegan Paul International: Boston, 1982), 66.

21. Eleanor A. Doumato, "Gender, Monarchy and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies* 19 (1992), 38.

22. Al-Dosari, "Saudi women drivers take the wheel."

23. Rima Maktabi and Schams Elwazer, "Saudi Women: Pampered or Oppressed?" *CNN: Inside the Middle East* (March 14, 2012): <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/03/14/world/meast/saudi-women-disagree-rights/index.html>.

control squads and the religious establishments cite the ability of women to be mobile in cars and mingle with men as the primary reason against allowing women to drive. Reportedly, these religious police will even arrest young men driving near a car known to be full of women because of recent trends in “car chasing.”²⁸

King Abdullah must deal not only with conservative ministers and religious scholars, but also with Saudi citizens, opines Saudi writer Lubna Hussein. Discussing the latest driving campaign, she explains:

*A lot of westerners don't realise that the king and the government are a lot more progressive than the people...They have to walk a tightrope because the people may want to be modern but they don't want to be western. This year's [2012] driving campaign is much more subdued than last year's because of apathy.*²⁹

Hussein concludes that a majority of Saudis view these issues with relative indifference. A general complacency regarding the state of the Kingdom leads to the continued ban. Although support has increased slowly from both men and women, it has not yet reached a point for comprehensive change. Fear is a large component of apathy and indifference. These women and men are scared of the changes that women driving could possibly bring.³⁰ The influence the religious fundamentalists and conservatives have on Saudi society, along with historical customs and traditions, have proved to be obstacles for these driving campaigns.

The second sphere of Saudi society that is important to understand is the patriarchal infrastructure and cultural traditions. Women's legal and ethical rights in Saudi society are essentially defined by the ulama's understanding and interpretation of Islam and the male-dominated, traditional society in which these women live.³¹ Women's rights in Saudi Arabia are considered some of the most restrictive in the world by Western standards. The country's ranking in the 2012 Global Gender Gap Report published by the World Economic Forum signaled this: Saudi Arabia fell 131st out of 135 countries.³²

The royal family is not oblivious to this issue and has addressed it publicly. In a speech to the Shura Council in 2000, the late King Fahd directly addressed the human rights violations of which his country was accused. The King implied that the world claimed violations against them “without knowing actually what is going on in our country, and without any objective knowledge of guidelines or our legislation in this field. Our principles are right because they are derived from our Islamic creed.” He concluded, “we assure the whole world, that we have nothing to be ashamed of or to hide.”³³ These statements signify a general attitude in the kingdom and take issue with these kinds of rankings. Yet they offer no cultural or religious context.

For many Westerners, Saudi Arabia is often associated with the term “segregation.” Indeed, Saudi society is segregated in both the private and public sphere. Nonetheless, it is important to restate that this is also a diverse society, with different family dynamics and degrees of conservatism. Several factors shape a family dynamic, including class, education, religious adherence, geography, and wealth.

The idea of *aql*, or “reason,” historically dominated the family household and, to an extent, still does today. Essentially this ideology deems men as mentally and physically superior to women. Women's *aql* is only reliable in tasks such as taking care of the children, the household, their husband, and themselves.³⁴ This ideology shapes many aspects of a woman's familial life. Usually women are expected to uphold their husband's or other male relative's honor and never bring *ayb* (shame) to the family by upholding the moral codes of their society. She is expected to follow instructions and act in a certain way outside of the home.³⁵ This ideology contributes to the “male guardianship” structure and paternalistic nature of Saudi Arabia. Certainly, the degree that this ideology exists depends on each family and their particular situation, but it is apparent that this ideology permeates Saudi Arabia's public sphere.

While the private sphere is considered the woman's, the public sphere is distinctly male-dominated. It is essentially men's duty to guard this sphere.³⁶ Therefore, men are in charge

28. Craze and Huband, ed., “Saudis tire of ‘Control squads,’” 231.

29. McVeigh, “Saudi Arabian women risk arrest as they defy ban on driving.”

30. McVeigh, “Saudi Arabian women risk arrest as they defy ban on driving.”

31. Soraya Altoriki, *Women in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 51-52.

32. Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson, and Saadia Zahidi, “The Global Gender Gap Report, 2012,” *World*

Economic Forum (2012), 11.

33. King Fahd, “Royal Speech of the King of Saudi Arabia,” *Majlis Ash-Shura*, 2nd term 4th year, 1421-1422 A.H., <http://www.shura.gov.sa/wps/wcm/connect/shuraen/internet/Royal+Speeches/2nd+Term+4th+Year%2C+1421+-+1422+A.H./> (2012).

34. Altoriki, *Women in Saudi Arabia*, 51-52.

35. Altoriki, *Women in Saudi Arabia*, 54.

36. Al-Munajjed, *Women In Saudi Arabia Today*, 33.

of their female relatives, creating a system of guardianship (*wilaya*). In this system, women need permission not only to leave the country, but to obtain a job, get married, run a business, study, or even access certain health care. This paternalistic structure was evident during the 1990 protest when the 47 women who participated were released from jail only after their male guardians signed statements promising the women would not drive again.³⁷ The Permanent Council for Scientific Research and Legal Opinions issued a *fatwa* in the 1990's regarding female employment, stating that women must "remain in their homes. Their presence in the public is the main contributing factor to the spread of fitna [strife]."³⁸ Since it is impossible to keep women inside their homes at all times, strict segregation laws govern the country, which also contributes to the ban on women driving.

Segregation in this society is essentially a mechanism to control women's behavior and their mobility, and therefore to diminish the risk of ruining the family's honor.³⁹ Gender segregation begins in school and lasts throughout a Saudi citizen's life. Most shopping malls, restaurants, and even banks are segregated, divided ideally between "family" sections and "single" sections (solely for men). Where mingling does occur, a male relative is always present. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, an increase in the number of banks for women accompanied the oil boom. Many women welcomed the banks. One bank director stated in 1982, "God gave us the right to use our own money freely, we used to feel out of place in banks."⁴⁰ These institutions offered employment to women and a "home away from home" that was finely decorated, accommodating, and comfortable for women in a women-only environment.⁴¹ Most Saudi women do not desire the eradication of segregation wholly, but instead wish to have equal rights and abilities as men. Traditions and customs associated with segregation have proven difficult to break. A Saudi woman reiterated this idea in 1982, referring to education in particular: "If we were accustomed to attending classes

with men since our childhood, then things would have been very different by now."⁴²

The mingling and mixing of sexes is a novel and threatening concept for many conservative and traditional Saudi citizens. The male guardianship structure and social customs of the country, along with the relationship between the conservative Islamic minorities and the Saudi government, create major challenges in the realm of women's rights. Despite the traditions of this society and the obstacles, oil wealth has indeed created opportunities for women that enabled the 1990 protest. It effectively opened the door for campaigns such as Women2Drive, although it took another two decades to begin again.

PRELUDE TO PROTEST: 1970 TO 1990

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia owes its modern influence, wealth, and structure to the discovery of "black gold" and the oil boom of the mid-1970s. Before oil was discovered in 1938, Saudi Arabia, a newly established nation-state, had an economy based on herding, small-scale agriculture, and revenue gained from pilgrimages to Mecca.⁴³ Even as late as 1950, there were no substantial government and public structures other than what the oil companies had built and what the royal family had deemed necessary.⁴⁴ However, as the mass extraction of oil began, a flow of wealth spread throughout the kingdom and brought immense changes. Those who gained from the influx of oil wealth the most were women. Advances in employment and education reverberated among most Saudi families, and it was the opportunities and social issues that arose from these changes that contributed to the 1990 protest.

To assess the impact oil wealth had on women, it is imperative to explore the development plans made by the Saudi Government. George T. Trial wrote in 1950, "Saudi Arabia today stands at the doorway of world importance as well as Arab leadership due to the economic potential of its oil resources."⁴⁵ Saudi Arabia's potential significance was recognized even then, but it was not until the oil boom of the 1970s

37. Faiza Saleh Ambah, "Saudi women recall a day of driving," *The Christian Science Monitor* (7 Dec 2005): <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1207/p06s02-wome.html>.

38. "Perpetual Minors: Human Rights Abuses Stemming from Male Guardianship and Sex Segregation in Saudi Arabia," *Human Rights Watch* (20 April 2008), 5.

39. Al-Munajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*, 34.

40. Douglas Martin, "Saudi Banks for Women Thriving: Saudi Women's Banks Thrive," *New York Times* (27 Jan 1982), D1.

41. Martin, "Saudi Banks for Women Thriving," D2.

42. Al-Munajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*, 37.

43. Tim Niblock, ed., *State Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia* (London: Croom Helm and Centre for Arab Gulf Studies, Exeter, 1982), 199.

44. Michel G. Nehme, "Saudi Arabia 1950-1980: Between Nationalism and Religion," *Middle Eastern Studies* 30, no. 6 (Oct. 1994), 930-931.

45. George T. Trial and R. Bayly Winder, "Modern Education in Saudi Arabia," *History of Education Journal* 1 (Spring 1950), 124.

that change really swept into Saudi Arabia.

In 1960, oil brought the kingdom \$333.7 million. By 1973 that number had jumped to \$1.2 billion. By the time of the Arab-Israeli War in 1973, Saudi Arabia was secure economically, so it could act along with the other OPEC members politically.⁴⁶ At the end of 1973, Saudi Arabia cut oil production and prices skyrocketed, resulting in \$22.5 billion in revenue gained in the kingdom by 1974. This move put the West, including the United States, in a crippling position, moving policymakers to negotiate with the kingdom.⁴⁷ For many Saudis, foreign investors, businessmen, and workers, this period saw an extremely close and lucrative relationship between the West and Saudi Arabia develop. Business in the West wanted to come to the wealthy desert kingdom, while many Saudis turned to the West for development and educational opportunities.⁴⁸

As a result of increasing revenue, foreign investment, and the need for technological modernization, the Central Planning Organization was created in 1965.⁴⁹ They designed the first Five Year Plan in 1970.⁵⁰ The government implemented three development plans between 1970 and 1985 (the most dramatic period of the oil boom). Each expanded infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and utilized its oil wealth. The First Development Plan (1970-1975) addressed developing human resources and reducing the country's economic dependence on oil. The Second Plan (1975-1980) focused on infrastructure development, such as roads, communications, and housing. Finally, the Third Development Plan (1980-1985) directed wealth away from infrastructure development to resource development, spending only 35.5% of government income on infrastructure projects instead of the previous 49.6%. The Saudi government also focused on vocational and technical training programs to improve their own national labor force. It promoted

an even distribution of wealth, agricultural development, and social services; the overall objective was to create a "better quality of life" for Saudis.⁵¹ By looking at the increased amount of total government revenues (TGR) between 1970 and 1972, it is clear that these plans relied on the massive increase in oil wealth the country experienced. In 1970 the TGR was 5,966 million riyals. This number increased significantly in 1972 to 10,782 million. The number again increased significantly between 1972 and 1974, growing from 13,200 to 22,810 million.⁵² The relationship between these government-run economic development plans and the influx of oil wealth allowed for public and private growth within the country that did not exist on a massive scale before the 1970s.

Segregation laws were not legally implemented until the 1960s. With this came the creation of a "female space."⁵³ The female space allowed women to interact with each other outside of the normal family atmosphere. It was within these confines that women, such as those in the 1990 protest, gathered together and developed new ideas of what their society could be.⁵⁴ Changes in education were the first to help create this female space because more girls were educated in a similar way to boys. Before the 1950s, education was primarily in mosques or homes and focused on religion.⁵⁵ In 1956, Princess Iffat created the first school for girls in Jeddah, and by 1980 more than a half million female students were enrolled in some level of education.⁵⁶ The Saudis knew that in order to obtain control of their economy and develop their nation they needed to focus on mass modern education for their entire population.⁵⁷

In 1975, the government realized it was suffering from a shortage of manpower and its reliance on a largely foreign workforce. The country suffered from a 50% illiteracy rate; only 18,000 students attended higher education, and only a small percentage of those were women. As a result, the Saudi

46. Sandra Mackey, *The Saudis: Inside the Desert Kingdom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 6-7.

47. Richard Reston and Paul E. Steiger, "Arab Refusal to Cut Oil Prices Has U.S. in Bind," *Los Angeles Times* (1 Sep 1974), 1.

48. Mackey, *The Saudis*, 8.

49. It was also in this year that the conservative kingdom started its first state-owned television station in an effort to modernize, though with substantial censorship. Women, for example, were "permitted to appear only in minor or secondary parts." This, however, is one example of the modernization efforts within the economic shifts that began to crack open the door for social changes. "TV Comes to Saudi, but Nothing's Bawdy," *Los Angeles Times* (19 June 1965), B3.

50. A.M. Sharshar, "Oil, Religion and Mercantilism: A Study of Saudi Arabia's Economic System," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 12 (Fall 1977), 54.

51. Middle East Research Institute: University of Pennsylvania, *Meri Report: Saudi Arabia* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 61-62.

52. Niblock, *State Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia*, 19.

53. Amelie Le Renard, "Only for Women: Women the State and Reform in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Journal* 62, no. 4 (September 2008), 612.

54. Middle East Research Institute: University of Pennsylvania, *Meri Report: Saudi Arabia*, 26.

55. Trial and Winder, "Modern Education in Saudi Arabia," 124.

56. Middle East Research Institute: University of Pennsylvania, *Meri Report: Saudi Arabia*, 25-26.

57. Niblock, *State Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia*, 19.

economy was essentially missing out on a great deal of human capital.⁵⁸ Sheik Nasir Mohammed Ashemimry stated in 1980, "Saudi Arabia's third five year plan...will emphasize the development of women. We realized that 50% of our power was not being utilized."⁵⁹

During the 1980s, a boom in women's higher education and their emergence in the labor force erupted. This boom was created by an estimated \$7.8 billion spent on education by 1985. Yet, once again, contradictions arose between religious and governmental institutions.⁶⁰ In 1983, women were formally banned from enrolling in international universities and encouraged to enroll in the ten women-only institutions in Saudi Arabia.⁶¹ The government paid every expense for their education, arguing that women had no need to go abroad for education when the necessary services already existed within the kingdom.⁶² The number of women studying abroad was not officially reported, but for the most part, Saudis who could afford to send their daughters abroad for higher education certainly did so and continued to even after the ban. By 1989, an estimated one million girls attended school, and 100,000 were enrolled in higher education. Many of these women graduated with a variety of important degrees, including doctoral, engineering, computer operating, and social work degrees.⁶³

Due to the conflicts between ideas of modern education and conservative Wahhabi practices, the government spent millions in order to create parallel institutions for women who were itching for participation in their society.⁶⁴ However, there were issues that plagued women as they became educated. The most prominent was the restriction of job availability. The first section of the Labor and Workmen Law adopted in 1969 prohibited women from being employed in "hazardous operations or harmful industries" or "during the night time," but it did not deny women the right to work.⁶⁵

Although the law was open to interpretation, the real restriction for employment came from traditional cultural attitudes toward women working outside the home.

The desire to keep sexes segregated significantly reduced women's job availabilities in hospitals and teaching positions.⁶⁶ Throughout the 1980s, more women began working in diversifying markets and for large companies such as Aramco (Arabian-American Oil Company). Naila al-Mosly, a petroleum engineer, was a manager at Aramco who supervised 186 people, including 50 men. She claimed in an interview in 1989, "When I first came to Aramco there were only three Saudi women working here. Now we have 80."⁶⁷ Many women fought to work and argued it was in accordance with Islam. Some high-ranking religious scholars also supported this claim. Sheik Mohammed al-Ghazali, an Egyptian religious scholar, wrote in a Saudi daily newspaper, "I say if there are 100,000 people who are doctors and 100,000 people who are teachers, there is nothing wrong with half of those being women as long as our Islamic principles are preserved and intact."⁶⁸ Al-Ghazali received the King Faisal Award for Islamic Studies issued by the Saudi government in 1989. This proved to many activists that the King Fahd government was giving credence to progressive ideas of women's education and employment, an important step in the fight for women's rights.⁶⁹

The educational and employment system in Saudi Arabia for women did, despite its progress, lack several components to make it more successful. An extremely conservative primary curriculum, in which math, sciences, technology, and physical education were overlooked and replaced by religious and Arabic studies slowed educational attainment.⁷⁰ Likewise, segregation in employment led to a lack of diverse jobs for women, and the lack of transportation for most women still serves as a barrier to the effective utilization of women in the labor market.⁷¹ Despite this, the changes

58. Patt Morrison, "Arabian Visit: Saudi's Need for Education Told by Cain," *Los Angeles Times* (22 Jan 1975), CS1.

59. "Saudis plan new role for women," *Chicago Tribune* (20 Apr 1980), W7.

60. Rick Snedeker, "Saudi Oil Income Boosts Education," *Los Angeles Times* (30 Oct 1983), 31.

61. "Saudi Arabia's Superwoman," *Chicago Tribune* (31 Aug 1983), 14.

62. Snedeker, "Saudi Oil Income Boosts Education."

63. Youssef M. Ibrahim, "Saudi Women Quietly Win Some Battles," *New York Times* (26 Apr 1989), A6.

64. Le Renard, "Only for Women," 612.

65. "Labor and Workmen Law (1969) continued: Chapters Seven Through Thirteen," Information Office of the

Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia (2011): <http://www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/laws/Labor.and.Workmen.Law-3of4.aspx> (accessed April 1, 2011).

66. Middle East Research Institute: University of Pennsylvania, *Meri Report: Saudi Arabia*, 96.

67. Ibrahim, "Saudi Women Quietly Win Some Battles."

68. Ibrahim, "Saudi Women Quietly Win Some Battles."

69. Ibrahim, "Saudi Women Quietly Win Some Battles."

70. Mona al-Munajjed, "Women's Education in Saudi Arabia," *Ideation Center* (Riyadh: Booz and Co., 2008), 10.

71. Mona al-Munajjed, "Women's Employment in Saudi Arabia: A Major Challenge," *Ideation Center* (Riyadh: Booz and Co., 2009), 10.

of the 1970s through the 1990s allowed for the expansion of women's "private" and "public" spheres in Saudi Arabia more than ever before. The opportunities brought by wealth and modernization were real, especially for the elite and middle class, or the "velvet class." This is where the 1990 protest movement took root.

THE PROTEST, 1990

The 47 women who took the wheel on November 6, 1990, outside of a Riyadh Al-Tamimi Safeway did so in their family cars: luxury models such as Lincoln Continentals, Mercedes Benzes, and Buicks. Driven to the supermarket by their chauffeurs, the women, in a convoy of about 15 cars, sat in their lavish driver's seats and drove on the highway until stopped 30 minutes later. One chauffeur recalled in a 1990 interview, "I couldn't believe my ears when madame asked me for the car keys and told me to get out and then drove away with the others."⁷²

The cars the women drove and the fact that they had private chauffeurs reveals their economic status. It suggests that the activists involved were those benefiting from the changes wrought by oil wealth in the kingdom. These women did not particularly fear protesting the government because of their affluence, family position, and the freedom they had experienced abroad and within their own families.⁷³ One woman even declared to reporters after their arrest that they "wanted to be heard by the authorities, loudly and clearly."⁷⁴

Who these women were is important in understanding the relationship between progress and opportunities in education and employment. A majority of the women were reportedly from wealthy backgrounds. Protest organizers stated that all the women had foreign driving licenses they had obtained abroad, primarily while studying. Many were teachers and highly educated. Aisha al-Maneh, a sociology professor who had studied at the University of Colorado, was a prominent figure in the protest.⁷⁵ She is just one example of a highly educated Saudi female leading the charge for women's rights.

Oil wealth generated opportunities for women in education and also allowed certain affluent families to send their daughters

abroad to the West or to boarding schools in Lebanon. Wealth has allowed Saudis in recent generations to travel and fund private education. It was these wealthier families who led the charge in education in the kingdom in the mid-1940s and sent their daughters to school in Jeddah after temporarily living abroad.⁷⁶ Education and tutoring for women before the 1960s and 1970s was regarded as a luxury for this elite class, until the government began to initiate programs to fund education.⁷⁷

Although family prestige still tends to rest on the achievements of male children, women have not been deterred from studying and working as hard as men, determined to use education to fuel their own individual success. Many women wanted to work after gaining their degrees, as a 25-year-old MA graduate explained during a 1997 interview: "I want to use the knowledge gained through my education and feel that I did not waste all these years spent at the university."⁷⁸ Education has long been regarded as an empowerment tool important for getting citizens involved in civic development. Educated women tend to educate their children, join the workforce, understand their personal rights, and have fewer children, leading to different economic and social consequences, such as the 1990 protest.⁷⁹ Education was and still is regarded by Saudi women as a means of recognizing their own intelligence, their worth, and their ability to alter their society. Many women during 1997 interviews by Dr. Mona Al-Munajjed, a prominent sociologist and women's rights activist in Saudi Arabia, described education as "[giving] the Saudi woman more value...[and] courage to defend herself and to face her family... also she can better understand her religion."⁸⁰ Education empowered the 1990 activists. Without the expansion of opportunities from oil wealth in education, these benefits would not have been possible. A majority of the protestors were employed in the teaching profession. At least six of them worked in the Social Sciences Department of the King Saudi University in Riyadh and were effectively suspended from their jobs as a result of their short drive.⁸¹

During the 1980s, the government initiated a process of "saudization" in order to lessen

72. Youssef M. Ibrahim, "Saudi Women Take Driver's Seat in Rare Protest for the Right to Travel," *New York Times* (7 Nov 1990), A18.

73. Al-Khateeb, "The Oil Boom and its Impact on Women and Families in Saudi Arabia," 11.

74. Ibrahim, "Saudi Women Take Driver's Seat in Rare Protest for the Right to Travel."

75. Ibrahim, "Saudi Women Take Driver's Seat in Rare Protest for the Right to Travel."

76. Altorki, *Women in Saudi Arabia*, 19.

77. Altorki, *Women in Saudi Arabia*, 152.

78. Al Munajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*, 95.

79. "Promoting Gender Equality: Empowering Women Through Education," *UNFPA* (Oct 2004); <http://www.unfpa.org/gender/empowerment3.htm>.

80. Al Munajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*, 76.

81. "Saudi Women Disciplined," *New York Times* (13 Nov 1990), A14.

their reliance on foreign workers.⁸² In 1983, King Fahd stated that women should be encouraged to work, but only in “suitable” fields.⁸³ Women jumped at new opportunities and put their degrees to use wherever they could. Most ended up working in the health and teaching sectors. The General Administration for the Education of Girls employed 50,000 women. 5,000 were employed as doctors and nurses. Many women, however, wanted to move away from those fields, and they slowly did.⁸⁴ Elham Mansour al-Dekheil, a director of an interdisciplinary program at a government institute, indicated in 1989 that women must obtain jobs in observance with the conservative practices of the country in order to have progressive change. Her strategy for female employment was to “[go] after jobs filled by foreign men” like those “manning computers in banks and offices or doing nursing in our hospitals.”⁸⁵ Opportunities like these encouraged educated women. Many wanted to be financially responsible and individually successful. Since women are allowed to own property in Islam, the female banks bustled with activity as women invested and managed their own money.⁸⁶ These banks also hired women, who were commonly described by managers as wealthy individuals who wanted to work so they could “wake up in the morning with some purpose in life.”⁸⁷

Employment and the empowerment of the “liberal” Saudi women of the 1990 protest led them to the realization that their conservative society needed to change. If they were gaining rights in the workplace and being educated at higher and higher levels, then why should they not have other rights, such as driving? The 47 women who participated in the shocking protest belonged to an affluent professionalized class that made up a liberal minority in the kingdom.⁸⁸

The organizers and participants of the 1990 protest gave several reasons as to why they chose to protest and why they chose this particular time. Most of the women’s reasons for the seeking the right to drive were not as controversial as they are regarded today. They did not want complete

eradication of the religiously conservative society or the veils that covered their faces. Their reasoning was practical, based on their religious understanding and focused on equal rights.⁸⁹

Many women and liberals hoped the protest would forcibly place the issue on the government’s agenda during a time when other issues were at the forefront. They were careful, however, to state that they were not doing it in the name of democracy, nor were they protesting against the royal family.⁹⁰ A political science professor stated that, “You cannot say you are doing this in the name of democracy...not 70 but 700 women will come out to say they are against driving because religious authorities have not sanctioned it and because it threatens the protective cocoon that envelops their lives.”⁹¹ The women were careful to articulate their reasons for the protest, never demanding democratic rights or even more “feminine rights,” but simply the ability to drive. Despite this, their actions and reasoning were demonized by the religious and government institutions they were trying to counter, and many of the women suffered immense consequences.

In reports at the time of the incident, the women claimed economic, social, and religious reasons for seeking the right to drive. The women reportedly had planned the event a week in advance. They even sent telegrams to Saudi officials explaining that they were trying to act in the “greater good of Saudi Arabia.”⁹² Because most of these women had jobs, they claimed that the cost of keeping a private driver strained their household income and that it was unnecessary and inconvenient to rely on someone else to drive when they had the ability.⁹³ Aisha al-Mana, the main organizer of the 1990 protest, stated in an interview with the American journalist Robert Lacey that driving was “a basic necessity for ladies who work and are supporting families.” She explained that drivers could cost \$180 to \$250 a month.⁹⁴ Poorer women at the time, and even today, also cited economic reasons. Since they

82. Diana Abdallah, “Saudization a national goal,” *Calgary Herald* (26 June 1996), D2.

83. “Saudi Women Encouraged to Work,” *Los Angeles Times* (3 June 1983), 17.

84. Youssef M. Ibrahim, “Saudi Women Quietly Win Some Battles,” *New York Times* (26 Apr 1989), A6.

85. Youssef M. Ibrahim, “Saudi Women Quietly Win Some Battles.”

86. Al Munajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*, 81.

87. Douglas Martin, “Saudi Banks for Women Thriving,” *New York Times* (17 Jan 1982), D1.

88. Ibrahim, “Saudi Women Take Driver’s Seat in Rare Protest for the Right to Travel.”

89. Caryle Murphy, “Saudi Women Reunite to Remember Driving Protest,” *National Public Radio* (16 Dec 2008): <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97541372>.

90. Youssef M. Ibrahim, “An Outcry From The Saudi’s Liberal Minority,” *New York Times* (8 Nov 1990), A15.

91. Youssef M. Ibrahim, “An Outcry From The Saudi’s Liberal Minority.”

92. Youssef Ibrahim, “Saudi Women Take Driver’s Seat in a Rare Protest for the Right to Travel.”

93. Youssef Ibrahim, “Saudi Women Take Driver’s Seat in a Rare Protest for the Right to Travel.”

94. Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 137.

could not afford a driver, they could not get a job, further exacerbating their financial situations.⁹⁵

Other reasons for the protest were religious and contradicted the religious establishment's stance against women driving. However, the women's arguments were meant to satisfy the conservative Islamic culture of the country as well. The religious establishment argued that women driving would result in the "moral decline" of the country.⁹⁶ Several of the protestors and prominent activists countered this argument. A 36-year-old woman who participated in the event explained in 1990: "Islam says that a woman should not be left alone in the company of a man who is not her relative and that is exactly what happens every time I am driven in my car by a Pakistani, Sudanese or other person who is a driver."⁹⁷ The women argued that the traditional ban against them driving put them in un-Islamic positions and possibly compromising situations. Instead of acting against Islam, the women stated they were supporting Islam and the values taught in the Koran. By remaining veiled, safely driving, and not remaining alone with a male that was not a relative, they were upholding religious teachings.⁹⁸

Finally, the women and other Saudi women cited several social reasons for protesting the ban and fighting for the right to drive, including the issue of male dominance and self-humiliation. A professional woman, after the ban on driving was reaffirmed in 1990, stated, "it is men telling us what to do, controlling our lives."⁹⁹ For numerous women, the inability to drive was just another way in which male dominance and the guardianship system controlled their mobility and their lives. One female driver declared at the time, "it is important for the authorities to understand that as educated women who have driven themselves abroad while we pursued graduate studies, we cannot be reduced to being dependent on strangers to drive us."¹⁰⁰ For

educated women, especially those who obtained higher education abroad, the fact that they were not allowed to drive to and from work, to the store, or even to the hospital was humiliating.

None of the women at the time claimed they decided to protest because they wanted to be Westernized or because they were inspired by US Army women driving during the First Gulf War. On the contrary, the protestors insisted to reporters that it had nothing to do with the presence of Americans.¹⁰¹ Most Saudi women were actually shocked and even appalled at the women who had come to war with their male counterparts. The fact that these American women were living and working with men was distressing in this conservative society, even among more liberal Saudis.¹⁰²

For Aisha al-Mana, however, the timing of the war did force her and many of the other women to face their vulnerability and helplessness. In another interview with Robert Lacy, the activist explained that many of the women wanted to assist in the war effort when it became necessary, but how could they do so if they could not drive?¹⁰³ The women were also concerned with their security during the war. As Kuwaiti women drove around the streets of Saudi Arabia, Saudi women felt vulnerable to an emergency if Iraq did indeed invade their kingdom.¹⁰⁴ With immense changes occurring within the country due to the war and the open dialogue that resulted among Saudi citizens, women saw this time as a chance to push their concerns to the forefront.

In retrospect, the timing—protesting during the Gulf War—was not the best idea. Despite the argument that no time was right, several liberal activists agreed that acting during the war did not help the cause. An official stated that although the women's actions were valiant, they made a mistake protesting in public and "in turn [created] a power struggle between the conservatives and liberals and [challenged] the King forthright."¹⁰⁵

Due to the war, any event appearing to question the government and the religious establishment's legitimacy was sure to inspire

95. Caryle Murphy, "Saudi Women Reunite to Remember Driving Protest."

96. Stated in a report written by religious scholars from the Majlis al-Ifṭā' al-A'ala council. Taken from Jon Jensen, "Saudi female driving ban prevents prostitution, say scholars," *Global Post: The Casbah* (2 Dec 2011): <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/the-casbah/saudi-scholars-say-female-driving-ban-prevents-prostitution>.

97. Ibrahim, "Saudi Women Take Driver's Seat in a Rare Protest for the Right to Travel."

98. Ibrahim, "An Outcry from the Saudi's Liberal Minority."

99. James LeMoyné, "Saudi Interior Minister Prohibits All Protests For Change by Women," *New York Times* (18 Nov 1990), 16.

100. Ibrahim, "Saudi Women Take Driver's Seat in Rare

Protest for Right to Travel."

101. Ibrahim, "An Outcry from the Saudi Liberal Minority," A15.

102. James LeMoyné, "Army Women and the Saudis: The Encounter Shocks Both," *The New York Times* (25 Sept 1990), A1.

103. Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 136.

104. Ibrahim, "An Outcry from the Saudi's Liberal Minority," A15.

105. LeMoyné, "Ban on Driving by Women Reaffirmed By Saudis," A19.

strong opposition. The religious establishment was already upset with the presence of foreign troops and used this controversy, paralleled with the threat of invasion by Iraq, to make the women drivers appear immoral and anti-Islamic. Some were even accused of being foreign spies trying to overthrow the royal family.¹⁰⁶

The government followed suit with the religious establishment's reaction. After the *fatwa* issued by Sheik Abdul al-Aziz bin Abdallah bin Baz against the act, the Ministry of Interior formally banned women from both driving and protesting. They cited women driving as contradictory to Islamic and Saudi traditions.¹⁰⁷ Several prominent Saudi liberals, after the government reaffirmed the ban, responded vehemently. A professional woman stated, "it's 1990, we're on the brink of World War III and Saudi Arabia has just formally banned driving by women."¹⁰⁸ A male publisher also cried out, "They are making a joke of our country. Is this what American boys are coming over here to defend, the right of religious mullahs to perpetuate their rule?"¹⁰⁹

The women themselves suffered personal consequences from their actions. After their arrest and quick release (following the signature of statements by male guardians), the women faced not only religious backlash, but also public backlash. Not all women in Saudi Arabia agreed with the protestors. It was a shock to the system of a society that had not experienced sudden protests and public challenges to the status quo before. Many more conservative and traditional Saudis did not appreciate the cause, feeling it was evidence that the country was undergoing threatening secular modernization. One Saudi woman living in Riyadh reiterated this idea, suggesting, "I want to drive, but the truth is that most Saudis don't agree with me."¹¹⁰

The 47 women who participated in the protest suffered enduring personal losses. They were accused of distracting from other women's issues, participating in a foreign conspiracy, and threatening the royal family. The women, their husbands, and even their drivers were not allowed to leave the country for a year. They were harassed and mocked, fired from

their government jobs, and suspended from their teaching jobs. Many of their husbands were also placed on suspension or regarded with suspicion at work.¹¹¹ Directly following the event, many of the women and those who knew them were afraid to speak to the press. When they did, they refused to give their names for fear of retribution.¹¹² The women's names were soon distributed in zealous pamphlets that called them "communist whores." The pamphlets accused them of being "secularist Americans" sent to undermine the King. Citizens were urged to "take whatever action they see fit."¹¹³ In mosques, the women protestors were cast down as symptoms of the problem with society. Cassettes circulated by Abdul Aziz bin Baz reportedly claimed that, "the situation of women is the reason for all these woes that are falling on the nation."¹¹⁴ Many of the women who were teachers found disdain among some of their students as well, being constantly referred to as "the drivers" and treated as criminals. One of the drivers found that twenty years after the protest she is still referred to as a "driver:" "Wherever you work, you are labeled as a 'driver' and you will never be promoted, no matter how good you are."¹¹⁵

Yet the women do not regret their decision to protest. Despite the consequences and controversial timing, the women gather every year to celebrate what they perceive as a victory. They saw the act as a step towards making every Saudi citizen aware of the issue.¹¹⁶ Fawzia al-Bakr, an education professor and 1990 protest driver, stated during a reunion in 2008:

In every society, you have different opinions. I think these women have the freedom not to drive, but then we should have the freedom to drive if we want to. If you drive, it means that you have access to the public; you have access to the institutions. But if you are totally unable to move unless you have a male to actually drive you, then you're completely paralyzed. And that's the essence of it.¹¹⁷

111. Caryle Murphy, "Saudi Women Reunite To Remember Driving Protest."

112. LeMoyné, "Ban on Driving Reaffirmed by Saudis."

113. Video found on a blog posted by KHC, "English TV news report on the 1990 Saudi women's driving demonstration," *Saudi Women Driving: News and Thoughts about Saudi Women Driving* (15 May 2011): <http://saudiwomendiving.blogspot.com/2011/05/english-tv-news-report-on-1990-saudi.html>.

114. Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 140.

115. Caryle Murphy, "Saudi Women Reunite to Remember Driving Protest."

116. Caryle Murphy, "Saudi Women Reunite to Remember Driving Protest."

117. Caryle Murphy, "Saudi Women Reunite to Remember

106. James LeMoyné, "Saudi Interior Minister Prohibits All Protests For Change By Women."

107. LeMoyné, "Ban on Driving by Women Reaffirmed by Saudis," A19.

108. LeMoyné, "Saudi Interior Minister Prohibits All Protests For Change By Women."

109. LeMoyné, "Saudi Interior Minister Prohibits All Protests For Change By Women."

110. LeMoyné, "Ban on Driving By Women Reaffirmed by Saudis."

1990 AND TODAY

The women of the 1990 protest were heroes of their time to some, though the Gulf War overshadowed their heroic act. Although the tides of history have washed over their protest, the effects of their actions are still present. By daring to drive they sparked a debate in Saudi Arabia and brought the issue to the attention of the Saudi government and its citizenry.

Clips of the protest can be seen today in a short video secretly filmed by a British news crew in 1990. In an interview shortly after the event, a Saudi female psychologist expressed her support for the protest but disagreement with the timing. She stated, "I admire the courageous move, we disagree on the timing but I share with them the same principle." She went on to suggest that the women should have protested after the crisis because during the war it was important "not to provoke super religious sentiment... my fear is the fanatics and the zealots."¹¹⁸

Although the law did not change and the protest brought harsh reactions from religious zealots, these women gained the desired attention. What does this mean today? The video mentioned above was found on a blog website dedicated to the Saudi women's push to drive and entitled "Saudi Women Driving." The existence of such a blog shows that the women's actions were not in vain, and although it has taken many years, the ban is once again under threat.

Today, the movement is alive and booming. In a recent story reported by the Associated Press, a study recommending granting women the right to drive has been introduced and is supported by 3,000 Saudi nationals. The study now rests in the hands of the Shura Council and will be debated by the members and King Abdullah.¹¹⁹ This study is the outcome of several different driving campaigns held since 2005. Manal al-Sharif, the creator of Women2Drive, recalled hearing the news of the 1990 protest as a girl and being told, "those women were really bad." She explained, "for the next twenty-two years, we were not even supposed to talk about women driving."¹²⁰ However, it was al-Sharif who began the movement once again and bravely leads the protests occurring today.

There have been several isolated incidents of women driving since 2005, with one ending in the arrest and quick release of multiple women in 2008. As recently as 2012, a petition bearing 600 signatures fell into the King's lap, asking him to "encourage women...to begin driving whenever necessary."¹²¹ The King boldly pardoned a woman sentenced to ten lashes after she was arrested for driving in 2011.¹²² Another mass protest occurred only recently. On June 17, 2011, women who had previously been encouraged by Women2Drive on websites, blogs, and social media to defy the ban decided to do so. Several men supported their wives. One columnist tweeted, "ready to go to prison without fear;" another tweeted, "my wife decided to start the day by driving to the store and back."¹²³ One hundred women drove that Friday. Although none were imprisoned, al-Sharif was arrested the next day. Many liberal Saudi women and men rose in protest at her arrest, while the fundamentalists and traditionalists condemned her actions. After nine days she was released.

It could be argued that history is repeating itself as the movement begun 22 years ago has begun once again. The outcome may be different this time—at least that is what the women now hope. The reasons for the protests today are also different from that of 22 years ago. These women are asking for the right to drive, but also for the right to be free from male guardianship, oppression, and restriction. In a speech at the Oslo Freedom Forum in 2012, al-Sharif expressed: "This is not about driving a car. It is about being in the driver's seat of our destiny. I now say that I can measure the impact we made by how harsh the attacks were. It's this simple: we've started a movement in Saudi Arabia. We call it the Saudi Woman's Spring."¹²⁴

To understand the protests today and the climate that exists within the kingdom, it is important to examine the efforts of the past and that of the 1990 driving protest. The oil boom is as much a contributor to the protests today as it was in 1990. The benefits of the oil wealth—progress in education, employment, and social status—have created the opportunity for Saudi women to stand up and voice their ideas

Driving Protest."

118. KHC, "English TV news report on the 1990 Saudi women's driving demonstration."

119. Associated Press, "More than 3,000 Saudis endorse study recommending women be allowed to drive," *Fox News* (18 Dec 2012): <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2012/12/18/more-than-3000-saudis-endorse-study-recommending-women-be-allowed-to-drive/>.

120. Manal al-Sharif, "Driving My Own Destiny," *Oslo Freedom Forum* (Norway 2012), 96.

121. "Hundreds petition Saudi King over women's right to drive," *The Arab American News* (16 June 2012), 6.

122. Sam Jones, "Saudi woman driver saved from lashing by King Abdullah," *The Guardian* (September 29, 2011): <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/29/saudi-woman-lashing-king-abdullah>.

123. "Saudi women defy ban to take driver's seat," *Al-Jazeera: Middle East* (17 Jun 2011): <http://www.aljazeera.com/video/middleeast/2011/06/201161713200141723.html>.

124. Al-Sharif, "Driving My Own Destiny," 101.

and opinions. Without the immense changes brought by oil to Saudi Arabia, the protest would not have occurred in 1990 and would be very difficult today. For example, education funded by oil money allowed women to develop ideas, take courage, and gain respect. It gave many the opportunity to travel and widen their experiences. Employment opportunities also allowed many Saudi women to become more independent. These developments were necessary for these protests to occur.

But change can only come from within society, as one Saudi woman explained in 2008:

*Education alone cannot improve our lives. If local customs and values are deeply ingrained in the life of a person, then a long time is needed before the mentality changes and new things are accepted.*¹²⁵

Another Saudi woman, in charge of a women's welfare association in Jeddah, stated, "The unemployment problem is basically among women [and] is mainly due to the social customs...The Labor Ministry alone will not be able to solve the unemployment problem... It requires joint efforts of families, schools and individual and social institutions."¹²⁶

Many of the same obstacles of 22 years ago still stand in the way of women's right to drive, including a powerful religious minority, a conservative and traditional society, and continued contentious gender issues. Eventually such obstacles will be overcome as long as women such as Manal al-Sharif, under the auspices of the 1990 protest, remain vigilant in the struggle toward achieving their vision of freedom. "I don't know how long it will last, and I don't know how it will end. But I do know that a drenching rain begins with a single drop. And eventually there are flowers."¹²⁷

125. Mona al-Munajjed, "Women's Education In Saudi Arabia," *Ideation Center* (Riyadh: Booz and Co., 2008), 10.

126. Mona al-Munajjed, "Women's Employment in Saudi Arabia: A Major Challenge," *Ideation Center* (Riyadh: Booz and Co., 2009), 10.

127. Al-Sharif, "Driving My Own Destiny": 101.