

The Saudi Blogosphere: Implications of New Media Technology and the Emergence of Saudi-Islamic Feminism

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Abstract

he Kingdom of Saudi Arabia serves as a protector of the social, cultural, and religious epicenters of the Islamic faith; Mecca and Medina. While other Islamic autocracies have fallen in the wake of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia and its religious and political elite remain. However, threats to their legitimacy are growing. Especially relevant are increasing calls for women's rights. The Saudi Arabian public sphere of the pre-digital era had effectively banned women's participation in public. More recently, the spread of Internet authored blogs has created a new public sphere for women's deliberation.

This study seeks to analyze how the Saudi blogosphere, as a public sphere of deliberation, provides insight into the emergence of Saudi-Islamic feminism through a critical discursive analysis. Three discursive themes emerge to identify how Saudi women negotiate identity and manage dialectical tensions stemming from their intersectional positions: displaying and defending iman (faith), repositioning the 'ulamā,' and restoring Saudi history. Taken together these discursive themes detail a Saudi-Islamic Feminist perspective that is emerging in resistance to Western feminist frameworks and in defense of a distinctively Islamic claim to women's rights, education, and equitable treatment within the public sphere.

Keywords

Islam, Saudi Arabia, gender, Muslim women, blogs

Formed as a nation less than a century ago, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, serves as a protector of the social, cultural, and religious epicenters of the Islamic faith; Mecca and Medina. Saudi Arabia's role as guardians of Islam's most holy sites is embraced with a national piety and devotion to Islam that is represented in the state's adherence to Wahhabi Islamic doctrine. Wahhabi Islam calls for a return to authentic Islam, purging impurities and rejecting Western innovations. The Wahhabi doctrine permeates the social

sphere of Saudi Arabia and is actively enforced by the Saudi Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV). The CPVPV's main priority is ensuring compliance with the tenants of Islam and Sharia. However, they also concern themselves with public dress codes, dispersing public gatherings of women, and enforcing the prohibition of *Ikhtilat*, or gender mixing. "Saudi social space is compartmentalized in order to prevent *Ikhtilat*" (Kraidy 2009:349). The boundary that exists is described as a deep division between men and women. In Saudi society women cannot enter the Saudi public sphere without the company of a male guardian, are unable to drive motor vehicles, and only recently earned the ability to leave the country without a male relative.

However, new media technologies are subverting Saudi prohibition of *Ikhtilat*, providing Saudi citizens with cyber avenues of community and expression. The Saudi state and CPVPV are finding it increasingly difficult to control public sphere deliberation. Where Saudi Wahhabi Shari law prevented gender mixing, Saudi women are now networked with the rest of the world. New media channels of communication like blogs, social networking, and instant messaging have increased the frequency and ease of communicating across distances and through barriers. In addition to breaking down barriers to communication these new media methods allow for the selective disclosure of personal information including gender and location. This research seeks to explore how Saudi women navigate the intersection of technology, faith, and gender in deliberations on the blog Saudiwoman.me. A discursive analysis of blog posts and their resulting deliberations seeks to identify how the blogosphere, as a public sphere of deliberation, provides insight into the emergence of Saudi-Islamic feminist perspectives.

The Saudi Public Sphere

Despite being formed as a nation within the last century, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is home to the crossroads of the world's oldest monotheistic religions. This rich history extends beyond the scope of this research. Most important in the context of this research is an examination of the way

political, social, and religious factors have affected discourse and deliberation within the public sphere. Increasing dissent within the public sphere has correlated with the rise of Saudi Internet technology. Efforts to discuss religious interpretations and politics have been concealed in the physical public sphere. “A more open and honest debate flourishes in printed books published outside of Saudi Arabia and in Internet discussion boards” (Al-Rasheed 2007:87). Saudi Arabia has experienced a technological growth that far exceeds any that western nations have experienced. From 2000 to 2008 Saudi Arabia experienced an 11,466 percent explosion in registered Internet users (Al Nashmi et al. 2010:724), with well over two and a half million users (Samin 2008:199). Saudi Arabia has become one of the most active producers and consumers of Internet content in the Middle East (Samin 2008:198). Indeed the growth of Saudi blog readership exploded 650 percent from 2000-2009, “with a conservative estimate of [Middle Eastern] feminist blogs being upward of 240,000” (McCauliff 2011:62). It is important to analyze how Saudi women have utilized Internet technology to create a public sphere of deliberation.

The Saudi Arabian government, while maintaining limits and control on Internet use, has in many ways encouraged and facilitated the development of an Internet infrastructure (Samin 2008:199). The Saudi government did not introduce Internet access to citizens until they were able to ensure that they would have effective Internet filtering (Zittrain and Palfrey 2008:40). While some of the strictest regulations and limits may exist on the Saudi Internet, these are typically unable to target user created communication forums, but instead focus on pornographic and anti-government sponsored websites (Al-Shohaib et al. 2009:22). A spokesman for the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information conceded that they do not regulate blogs, “there are just so many we cannot control them. If I shut one [blog] down, it would just pop up the next day under a new name” (Khalil 2011:141). Conservative religious groups are not absent from Internet discourse, conservative religious groups have also developed blogs to express their dissenting opinions. In societies with an absent free press there are few options for seeking news and opinions. For this reason many Saudi Arabians have sought an alterna-

tive in online media such as blogs (Al Nashmi et al. 2010:734). In addition to breaking down barriers to communication these new media methods allow for the selective disclosure of personal information including gender and location.

The women of Saudi Arabia are uniquely positioned to organize a collective call for agency, “Saudi women under the age of 30 grew up with satellite television, the Internet, and mobile phones. Their broadened view of the world far exceeds that of their mothers and older sisters” (Wagner 2011:para. 12). However, it is important to remember the duality of Saudi Arabian Internet communities. While the Internet is capable of providing a venue or medium for the marginalized voice it is just as capable of reinforcing the existing status quo and norms (Samin 2008:198). In order for the marginalized voice to gain collective agency it must be organized and accepted in the Saudi public sphere. For women this means deliberation of a Saudi-Islamic feminism in relation to existing Islamic feminist perspectives. Recent research indicates that some Saudi women are utilizing social media to develop grassroots campaigns for rights.

Revolutions in neighboring Arab countries have raised the consciousness of women who are questioning why Saudi society is marginalizing them. This consciousness has sparked the stirrings of what some women are describing as the potential for a ‘Saudi-Islamic feminist movement’ (Wagner 2011:para. 5).

Indeed “the social dynamics of the kingdom make it fertile ground for a new generation of tech-savvy youths seeking new forms of expression” (Khalil 2011:142). Research is necessary to determine whether the Internet can support an online feminist movement in Saudi society, and also, how Saudi-Islamic feminism may emerge as a new form of expression distinct from other forms of Islamic feminism. Saudi-Arabia and its feminisms are distinct from other Middle Eastern states for political, social, and religious reasons. However, because there is a lack of research related to Saudi female perspectives and because the momentum is only now building for such a

perspective it is important to first analyze the standpoint of Saudi woman before then analyzing the existing literature surrounding the emergence of Islamic feminism elsewhere.

Saudi Women's Standpoint

Historically, Saudi women have made advances and demanded their voices be heard. Most significantly, Saudi women overturned the 'ulamā,'s rejection of women's education. When the first educational opportunities for women were introduced in 1959 men rioted in protest; today education for women is mandated. Since 1962 Saudi women have been admitted to state universities and now mirror the separate male classroom population with a near 1:1 gender ratio (Mellor 2010:210). A large number of Saudi women have a university education and several have gone on to found women's-only banks, clothing lines, and hospitals. The present study seeks to analyze how Saudi women navigate the blogosphere to organize a collective identity and community with one another.

Previous Saudi women's movements have been fractured and kept beneath the surface. In 1991, 47 Saudi women protested the ban on female drivers by driving through Riyadh. The response from authorities was swift, "religious leaders in Mosques across the Kingdom called them 'prostitutes' and encouraged their harassment" (Grant 1999:1263). Many were fired from their jobs and found their families and themselves harassed in public. Following the drive-in there was little organization or action by women's rights advocates. Until recently, on May 19 2011 Manal al-Sharif decided to resume the protest. She recorded herself driving on several occasions. She was arrested on May 22 on charges of "inciting women to drive" and "rallying public opinion." Her May 30 conditional release was largely a result of pressure from an online petition demanding her release which had organized 4,500 Saudi's signatories. The campaign continued to organize after Manal's release and utilized a Facebook group to call more than 12,000 supporters of the page to drive in protest. Cognizant of the drive in of the early

1990s Saudi women must now overcome what collapsed previous efforts. The networked structure of the Internet is uniquely positioned to facilitate deliberation and collective organization for social change.

Previous efforts to organize Saudi Islamic feminist coalitions have been restricted by Saudi laws prohibiting women's involvement in the physical public sphere (Wagner 2011:para. 2). The blogosphere, as a public sphere of deliberation, facilitates a forum for dialogue and discourse previously denied to women's emerging perspectives. As women converse on the blogosphere they do not share a singular perspective, a multitude of voices may be heard. Saudi women's perspectives vary greatly. Some Saudi women find themselves supporting Western feminism and others have found inspiration in nearby Middle Eastern women's movements. The minority viewpoint is that of the Western feminists, "The face of Saudi feminism, many say, should be more conservative and reflect Islamic values" (Leslie 2011:para. 6). Saudi women resist Western methods that they see contributing to increased divorce, infidelity, addiction, and a weakened family structure. The Western world and its "narrow-minded" ethnocentric feminist frameworks are seen promoting "double standards of American men and women" (Mishra 2007:270). Instead Saudi feminist deliberations are "testing the waters" and utilizing a variety of feminist readings to raise consciousness and spark "the stirrings of what some women are describing as the potential for a 'Saudi-Islamic feminist movement'" (Wagner 2011:para. 4). Rather than seek to articulate a homogenous Saudi feminist perspective this study seeks to analyze responses to confrontations and challenges raised in blog deliberation.

Saudi Arabia's strict adherence to Wahhabi Sharia law and gender segregation has positioned women as the representatives of piety and devotion. "Muslim women are considered to be symbols of Islamic authenticity; they are also made a distinguishing feature between Muslim societies and all that is perceived as Western" (Mishra 2007:263). As Saudi women deliberate online they may embrace or contest representations and discourses of piety. Islamic feminist movements elsewhere have reappropriated representations of piety, organizing the piety movement. While these movements are often

not organized as feminist movements Saba Mahmood argues that, “despite the self-avowedly apolitical stance of the pietists, their practices have a profoundly transformative affect in the social and political fields. They have transformed the very ground on which nationalist, statist, and other kinds of secular-liberal projects can be envisioned and practiced” (Mahmood 2005:xi). In an effort to map the grounds on which Saudi Islamic feminism is emerging it is first necessary to analyze how other movements have articulated Islamic feminism.

Islamic Feminist Perspectives

There is no one Islam, instead there are many perspectives, so we should talk about the Islams of Islam (Said 2002:70). The differences in the status and treatment of Muslim women vary from country to country and are the result of cultural differences not ubiquitous religious commands (Halim & Meyers, 2010). Women’s conditions are instead, “the result of a gender-biased misreading of the Quran, not the text itself” (Moghissi 1999:130). While both, “Western feminism and Islamic feminism oppose violence against women, Islamic feminism ties that opposition to the Quran and the *ahādīth*, and in doing so can be empowering to Islamic women in ways that Western feminism simply cannot” (Halim and Meyers 2010:87). This contrast between Western feminism and Islamic feminism necessitates a notion of empowerment that is reflective of the Islamic experience. By reconciling issues of feminism and women’s advocacy with the teachings of the Prophet women adopt a framework that allows them to simultaneously affirm their religion and combat oppression.

The three vastly different forms of emerging Islamic feminist scholarship in the Middle East are: secular feminists, Islamic feminists, and Islamist feminists. Secular feminists, located on the left of the political scale, contend that religion has no place in public life; “they refuse any notion of feminism within an Islamic framework” (Morin, 2009, p. 386). Their struggle is mainly defined in political terms. Access to basic freedoms is a must. Secular feminists do not seek to redefine Islam or reinterpret the Quran, instead

they seek to make political gains so that women may have equal access to rights. Similar to Western Liberal feminists they advocate for maternity and marriage rights, equality in employment, and separation between religion and law.

In contrast, the Islamists seek to redefine religious texts and claim that “feminism and Islam are redundant concepts within the ‘true’ Islamic paradigm” (Morin 2009:387). They argue that there is, “a significant gap between what the Quran says and the manner in which its teachings are practiced” (Hashim 1999:9). This gap is due to the fact that “Islamic theology has been adapted and interpreted by male theologians who have claimed exclusive rights to the process” (Shirvani 2006:4). Islamists feminists, rejecting the patriarchy of theology, advocate that women reinterpret the Quran and holy texts from the Islamist perspective, what they claim to be the true perspective. Using Muhammad’s treatment of his wife, daughters, and several female advisers they claim that true Islam is meant to be gender egalitarian. Rather than push for equal rights they push for complimentary rights. They believe that authentic interpretations of the Quran provide a justification for the fair treatment of women in society. Islamist feminists reject honor killings and dowry with *ḥadīths* or reinterpretations of the Quran and proclaim their right to be educated and respected. However, the Islamist discourses fall short of advocating political reform. They do not seek equal pay or access to jobs, the right to vote, or political representation. Instead, their focus is on a respect for their role as mothers and sisters. This demand for complimentary but not equal rights puts them at odds with the Western feminists. The Western feminists see the Islamists’ adherence to their religion as another form of fundamentalism and feel that to be liberated they must give up their religion. However, the Islamists, “argue that they are ‘revivalist’ and are returning to the roots of Islam to regain a purified vision lost in the world. Their intent is to recapture both the purity and the spirit of Islam at its inception” (Shirvani 2006:3).

The third and probably largest group of Muslim feminists, the Islamic feminists, are located between the leftist secular feminists and the conservative

Islamists. Taking the middle ground these scholars claim Islam as a central part of their politics and identity, like the Islamists. Similar to the secular feminists the Islamic feminists oppose the male dominated hierarchy of most Islamic governments and, “advocate for equal rights for women through a reinterpretation or reformation of Islam” (Morin, 2009:387).

The emerging Saudi Arabian feminist perspective is most reflective of the Islamist feminists. A Saudi-Islamic feminist movement, much like the Islamist movement, relies on the rejection of Western feminism. Young Saudi women contend, “that a Saudi-led feminist movement must include the rights accorded women in the Quran and specifically in Sharia” (Wagner 2011:para. 8). The Saudi-Islamic feminist seeks to work within the system and does not seek democratic reforms or even equal rights. Many reject the label ‘feminist’ based on the grounds that they reject gender equality, advocating for gender equity instead (Cooke 2001:ix). While perhaps not explicitly feminist, or even political, analysis of the piety movement suggests that “transgressing gender norms may not be a matter of transforming ‘consciousness’ or effecting change in the signifiatory system of gender, but might well require the retraining of sensibilities, affect, desire, and sentiments” (Mahmood 2005:118). The Saudi Arabian blogosphere has a unique potential to facilitate online deliberation regarding both the personal and political dimensions of Saudi Islamic feminism. Islamic feminist deliberations reveal “multiple identities oscillating between the poles of collectivism and divergence, accommodation and confrontation, as well as locality and universality” (Khamis 2010:252). I seek to analyze the discursive tensions of collectivism and divergence, accommodation and confrontation, and locality and universality as they emerge in women’s deliberations on the blog Saudiwoman.me in effort to critique how this new public sphere of deliberation, provides insight into the emergence of Saudi-Islamic feminism.

Methodology

Eman Al Nafjan’s blog Saudiwoman.me was chosen for several reasons. First, this blog was chosen for its unabashed Saudi woman’s perspective, the

“straight from the source” authentic voice. Second, the blog has a long history in comparison to others, and consistently registers high comment counts from actively involved users. Third, Eman Al Nafjan was named as one of the top 100 Global Thinkers based on her blog being “one of the most influential English language blogs in Saudi Arabia” (Slattery 2011:10). Nafjan is incredibly well educated and travelled. She received a master’s degree in teaching English from the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom and is currently in Saudi Arabia finishing her PhD in linguistics at the University of Riyadh. While her travels and education are not shared by all Saudi women her blog is written to be widely accessible. The Foreign Policy article, credits her wide readership and following, with amplifying the driving videos and protests of 2011 and concludes with a quote from Eman Al Nafjan proclaiming that, “the country is fertile ground for a revolution” (Slattery 2011:10).

Eight blog posts and the resulting 889 comments were selected for analysis. Six of the eight blog posts included are listed on Eman al-Nafjan’s self-identified “Top Posts” which are hyperlinked on a side column that appears on every page of the website. Eman provides no justification as to why the blog posts merit “Top Post” status, but their high comment counts and relevance to the issues she believes in make them especially relevant to this study. The seventh and eighth posts had originally been designated a “Top Post” but were replaced during the course of this research. As the data was already collected and incorporated there was no reason to reduce the data set. The eight posts selected were titled:

Eman al-Nafjan’s About Page
What Does Being Wahhabi Mean?
Misyar Marriages
Saudi Girls Just Wanna Have
Prominent Saudis: Rania Al Baz
Punishment In Saudi Arabia
Ten Most Beautiful Saudi’s
Manal Al Sherif

The choice to analyze an English language blog is a choice of necessity and does create limitations. However, there are surprising advantages to analyzing a blog authored in English. The first is increased freedom of expression and a wider readership. Specifically, a report by the Index of Censorship described Middle Eastern bloggers consciously using English to “tackle controversial and unpopular subjects” (Khalil 2011:144). Others suggest that the “spread of English as the language of expression is closely tied to the direction of social development in Saudi Arabia” (Monteiro 2008:47). Finally, Saudi Internet adoption studies suggest that proficiency in English is a “compatibility attribute” that significantly determines Internet adoption. Indeed, a majority of Saudi bloggers are able to communicate in English (Al-Shohaib et al. 2009:24). However, there are users on the blog Saudiwoman.me who choose to post in Arabic. In such cases, I will make note of their frequency but will be unable to dedicate resources necessary to translate them.

A discourse analysis seeks to analyze those posts and comments on the blog that have generated substantial feedback to determine whether this deliberation promotes a uniquely Saudi-Islamic feminist perspective. A focus on blog deliberation allows for an analysis of the protocols of debate and reasoning, including which references are engaged in deliberation, and how they are rhetorically constructed and contested. A critical discourse analysis is interpretive and explanatory, implying a rhetorical methodology with a critical relationship between the text and its social conditions, ideologies, and power-relations. This study has identified those categories and varieties of Islamic feminism that have emerged elsewhere, but makes no attempt to place the parameters of these frameworks around its methodological inquiry. The point is not to support or deny the existence of categories but to analyze the way these categories are produced, experienced, and resisted in everyday life. Through an analysis of eight blog posts and the resulting 889 comments I seek to explore how the Saudi blogosphere has facilitated the production of a Saudi Islamic feminist identity by analyzing the way Saudi women’s deliberation is produced, experienced, and resisted.

Results and Discussion

Khamis (2010:252) identified three discursive tensions that surfaced among female blog users; collectivism and divergence, accommodation and confrontation, and locality and universality. These tensions appeared in the present study and provide insight into how Saudi-Islamic feminism is emerging within the Kingdom. A discourse analysis identifies the source of the tensions as they apply to the Saudi sphere before then identifying three themes that result from their deliberation.

Collectivism and Divergence

The tension between collectivism and divergence relies on discursive analysis of both individual posts and also their broader deliberative effects. Readers may choose to ostracize themselves or others through their comments or lack thereof. In several cases, flaming tactics were used to ostracize members from the cyber community, most notably in the “Misyar Marriage” post where several men left contact information seeking a Misyar wife. In these cases there were waves of fellow blog reader’s comments to outcast the soliciting men. In less frequent cases comments would support patriarchal or fundamentalist Islamic ideology. These comments, supporting the status quo’s treatment of Saudi women, would not be left unaddressed. Active users took it upon themselves to defend one another’s ideas so much so that Nafjan rarely replied to commenters. Replies from Nafjan were unnecessary; an active and empowered audience took it upon themselves to reply. This active and empowered audience illustrates not only the collective majority, but also the divergence of the minority. Collectivism is marked by shared interpretations and recognition of the group, where divergence is marked by semantic debate and communal shunning. The present study finds no examples of communal shunning; however, the presence of flaming would suggest that some users were more readily accepted to the blogosphere than others. Those welcomed were most often in favor of weakening the power of the ‘ulama,’ strengthening the protections and roles for women, while also speaking praise of Islam. The members whose presence was ignored or ostracized were those who spoke of Islam as perfect and unchangeable or those who spoke of it as if it should be disregarded.

Accommodation and Confrontation

Saudi Arabia's political elite have long sought to discourage political and religious dissent. The strict presence of the Saudi Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) ensures that dissent is eliminated and government owned or co-opted media prevents opportunities for dissenters to inspire others. Blogs have emerged as a public sphere capable of escaping the reach of authority and promoting opportunities for dissent. The low frequency of flaming suggests that confrontation is low. Where confrontations do surface, users comment to support one another and identify and enforce blog norms. Community norms ensure that racist and sexist language is explicitly rejected and may even be deleted from comment history. Furthermore users explicitly defend the purpose of the blog to promote the betterment of Saudi women and users attempting to oppose women's empowerment are quickly confronted. Also, users articulate the rules and norms to suggest that users should be willing to defend and explain their positions. Even where there are disagreements, confrontations are often avoided by sticking to facts and debating the issue rather than the person.

The largest source of confrontation is among those attempting to preserve the Saudi's status quo treatment of women. For example, in Nafjan's "Manal Al Sherif" post several users associate driving with being Western and identify women's mobility as the greatest threat to the Saudi social order. Despite being the minority, a large frequency of the comments involve users trying to refute the existing Saudi religious and political infrastructure's legitimacy. These confrontations are litmus tests for Saudi feminisms broader integration into the Kingdom. As Saudi blog users discuss women's status they test the waters of the religious, political, and social climate, becoming more sophisticated in designing persuasive appeals that will position them as opinion leaders for the next generation of Saudi women.

Locality and Universality

The tension between locality and universality reflects both an internal and exter-

nal dimension. Internally bloggers must navigate protecting their authentic identities while simultaneously entertaining, informing, or persuading readers (Liu and LaRose 2008:8). Externally the blogging community must decide what voices, if any, it wants to incorporate from outside of Saudi Arabia. These deliberations position Saudi Arabian feminist dialogue against several existing feminist theories ranging from secular Islamic feminism, Islamic feminism, Islamist feminism, and Western feminism. Comments advocating for Western feminism quickly promote much deliberation. Resistance to western feminism is apparent in the overwhelming dissent garnered by these comments. Users frequently identify western feminism with adultery, alcoholism, and unwed pregnancy. Those supporting secular feminism are labeled as *kafir*, and treated as atheists. Blog users advocate, not for the removal of the religious ‘ulama,’ but the repositioning of it. Users suggest that individuals should be able to critique and deliberate about the interpretations of Islamic texts free from the interference of the CPVPV.

The social consequences of the tension between locality and universality are exemplified in Nafjan’s “Manal Al Sherif” post. Two distinct elements become apparent through the resulting deliberative comments. First, an audience of Saudi expatriates in support of Nafjan and Manal struggle to understand their role in a Saudi political struggle they recognize is not their own. Second, Saudi women consider whether efforts should prioritize mobility rights in favor of appeals for broader rights to public inclusion. In both cases, as users navigate the tension between locality and universality, Saudi Arabian discourses are positioned as the local discourse and contrasted from the universal discourses.

The 8.4 million Saudi Arabian expatriates represent nearly one third of the country’s total population. These individuals live in separate expatriate communities with different social structures, but are still prohibited from driving. For expatriate users, punishment in shared Saudi public space is often severe, with expatriate individuals at risk of deportation if they are caught with a Saudi of the opposite sex. For expatriate bloggers, the shared exchanges through reciprocated blog comments may be their only opportunity

for interaction with Saudi citizens. In Nafjan's "Manal Al Sherif" post she details five instructions for those wishing to participate in the June 17 drive in. No mention of the expatriate population is included. Expatriate bloggers use the comments to inquire about their role in the movement, asking the "local" Saudi commenters for insight into their participation or lack thereof in Saudi women's movements. A user identified as "expat in saudi" writes:

As an expat living in the Eastern Province I do want to address what some of the other expats have said. I do not believe that this issue of women driving is an issue only for Saudi women. There are many expat women living in Saudi who are affected by this rule. I am struggling with an appropriate response to this myself. I would love nothing more than to show solidarity on June 17th with the Saudi women who want the right to drive and take to the streets ... I would love to hear feedback from Saudi readers of this blog. What do YOU think? What is the place of a Western expat in this debate? How can we best help? (Manal Al Sherif 2011)

Nafjan responds and confirms "expat in saudi's" concern that driving would not be in Saudi women's best interest. Nafjan writes in response:

Thank you so much for your concern and support... Going out now would work against us. However as soon as the ban is lifted officially then the more women driving of every nationality, the sooner Saudis will get used to the sight. What you can do right now however is raise the issue wherever you can, ask your politicians to raise the issue when they meet Saudi delegations. Ask car manufacturers from your country why they sell cars at a place where women are banned from driving them. Talk and write about it as much as you can. (Manal Al Sherif 2011)

Nafjan's response identifies the tension between locality and universality by identifying "Expat in Saudi" as a member of an out-group. However, her

response also suggests that this out-group has a role, and in trying to accommodate expatriates Nafjan provides several options for them to support the movement. “Expat in Saudi” responds incorporating Nafjan’s advice:

Yes, I’m working on getting the word out. It’s the one comfort I have right now when I feel like my hands are tied and I question the morality of being here. The fact is I am here now, and I can help tell the story. (Manal Al Sherif 2011)

She describes the tension she experiences as similar to having bound hands, and expresses relief at her ability to share the story with others. In this way the blog has already served its purpose, informing and reducing the tensions of a supportive expatriate community. In reducing these tensions, expatriates find their role in the movement, and Saudi women protect their authentically Saudi movement from well-intentioned but misguided outside interventions.

Discursive Themes

A discursive analysis guided by an awareness of the dialectical tensions of Islamic bloggers revealed three themes that provide insight into the emergence of Saudi-Islamic feminism. These themes articulate the boundary lines for Saudi women’s organized efforts. Saudi-Islamic feminism, in its early stages, is probably best described as a women’s rights movement. Many women themselves would be hesitant to describe themselves as feminists. The term feminist carries with it a Western connotation that is likely to draw disdain among the Saudi political elite. Unlike feminist movements elsewhere, their calls are not revolutionary, but are instead rooted in discourses of religious righteousness. Those calling for increased women’s participation in the Saudi blogosphere followed three deliberative themes; displaying and defending iman (faith), repositioning the ‘ulama,’ and restoring Saudi Arabian history.

Displaying and Defending Iman

Iman is one of three crucial dimensions of a Muslim’s practice. The first, Islam, means to submit. Second, iman, means adherence to religious law

and practice. The final dimension, *ishan* denotes applying iman to obtain excellence in worship. In the Saudi blogosphere observed on Nafjan's Saudiwoman.me, user posts were contested along questions of proper adherence to Islam. To be identified as "western" or "liberal" were second in offense only to charges of "atheism" or "kafir." Saudi women seeking change recognize that their message must first resonate domestically. While blog posts reveal high levels of international support for Saudi women's issues, Saudi voices resist coalitions with international advocates and position religion as central to deliberation. This deliberative tactic has the effect of positioning Islamic theology and interpretation at the center of deliberation. Further, it ensures that Saudi women's voices are not coopted or misrepresented by other feminist discourses.

Comments that ignore challenges of religious legitimacy are ignored or negated and contested. Those that engage religious texts often fill several printed pages of text, with users acting as religious scholars to demonstrate their Islamic knowledge. Posts like Nafjan's "What Does Being Wahhabi Mean?" explicitly recognize and reject the fracturing of Islam through religious interpretation and practice. Instead, Nafjan and several of her supporters suggest that the histories be re-read. By examining Islamic theology and texts from multiple perspectives new readings may impact how old questions are answered. One of the largest debates that played out in Nafjan's "Manal Al Sherif" post, concerned not whether Manal and the June 17th Drive-In were necessary, but whether they were conducted Islamically. User's defensiveness in regard to Islam, and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia, signal a movement that seeks approval from these forces.

While many Muslims identify the time of the Prophet's life as the golden age of Islam, bloggers resist canonizing historical texts and instead promote a controlled modernization of the religious texts, guided by the hands of the entire community, rather than just among the religious elite or Saudi 'ulama.' Where Quranic Surahs appear in support of violence against women, Saudi bloggers utilize a wealth of religious knowledge to undermine the user's assertion of its meaning, provide contrasting Surahs and ahādīth,

in addition to stressing its historical context. This deliberative process introduces historical and religious meanings to critique in the public sphere, and in doing so, may threaten “Muslims’ sense of their past and thus also of themselves” (Barlas 2002:87). In responding to this cognitive dissonance, Saudi bloggers reposition the ‘ulama’ in effort to justify their ‘taking back’ of religious interpretation.

Repositioning the ‘ulama’

Nafjan’s “get it straight from the source” attitude fosters a community of open deliberation and encourages new contributors to the social, religious, and political deliberations. The posts and their associated comments create a new space for deliberation that is discursive, performative, and participative, and unlike any offered in the tangible Saudi public sphere. Voices previously silenced now have a forum to organize and deliberate and researchers as well as the international public should be listening. While a Saudi women’s movement is early in its formation, Nafjan’s posts concerning women’s mobility rights reveal a movement steadfast in seeking progress. In a June 11, 2012 post Nafjan submits her translation of a petition titled “My Right To Dignity” seeking signatories. The petition discourages protest and pledges to work within the Kingdom’s avenues for political change. However, it very cautiously articulates discontent with ruling religious elite and seeks the king’s support to guide the ‘ulama’:

This campaign does not seek to disrupt the government or to violate any national laws or regulations. Here it is important to point out that there is no explicit law banning women from driving. We are not in cooperation with any foreign organizations or bodies nor do we represent a political party or opposition. We do not intend to start a public protest... Our hope is now hanging on the generosity of your response and support for this campaign. We hope that your majesty will instruct all those who have in their capacity to support us to do so, such as the regional princes, the police and the Commission for Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue. We hope that you will

command them to enable women who have valid licenses to drive their own cars when running their basic daily errands and thus lift the financial and social burden on some families that has lasted far too long. (Translation of My Right to Dignity petition 2012)

By pledging to work within the existing political structure and discouraging protest the movement seeks political influence. The petition details frustration with Saudi 'ulama' while still positioning itself in a politically favorable way by seeking the king's blessing. This appeal effectively seeks to use the double-discourse described by Al-Rasheed (2007:26) to the movement's advantage. Recognizing division between Saudi political and religious elite, and growing tired of contesting the religious factions controlled by the Shura council, activists seek political influence to persuade the 'ulama.' While petitions for political influence may not constitute feminist resistance or political subversion elsewhere, the political efficacy of such movements is not drawn from their political potentials. Instead, the political efficacy of such movements is "a function of the work they perform in the ethical realm" (Mahmood 2005:35). As Saudi women organize online they identify new strategies of persuasion. Exploiting the double-discourse of Wahhabi rhetoric, Saudi women are able to forge ethical claims against the political. As religious debates are moved into the Saudi public sphere, Saudi women are given an opportunity to participate as defacto members of a cyber 'ulama.' In this cyber public sphere women's interpretations and opinions are valued and developed, and through deliberation they are contested and compared. This emerging public sphere promotes new and varied challenges to laws, interpretations, and practice which open the existing public sphere to multiple opportunities for religious and political opposition.

Restoring Saudi Arabia

First by positing their support of Islam, secondly by shifting the religious debate into territory where it may be more easily contested, and finally by reshaping and restoring Saudi Arabian history and values, Saudi women in the blogosphere are actively 'taking back' discourses previously controlled by ruling elites. Posts similar to Nafjan's "Punishment in Saudi Arabia" and

“Saudi Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” seek to describe Saudi Arabian history and values as though they are supportive of women’s efforts for progress. Saudi men and ruling parties are held accountable for their deviations from the original values and scriptures of Islam. In many cases men who are protective of the status quo are described as weak and fearful of women’s power and roles within society.

Saudi women describe the necessity of male participation in the movement and seek to offer them a history whereby they are justified in their supportive efforts. In some cases, faith is positioned in support of the effort and religious texts are quoted to support their movement. In other cases, examples of the Prophet’s fair treatment of women are presented. Often men are reminded of their role as fathers, and of the need to protect and defend their mothers, sisters, and daughters. This recognition of separate roles is paramount to a Saudi women’s rights movement that seeks restoration of the egalitarian modes of Islam rather than following more secular and demanding women’s movements as seen in Egypt or Malaysia. The calls for reform are echoed in posts such as Nafjan’s, “Misyar Marriage,” “Punishment in Saudi Arabia,” “Manal Al Sherif” and “Prominent Saudi’s: Raina Al Baz.” The voices engaging these discussions seek not to replace leadership or oust the ‘ulama,’ but instead to inspire an active public which may guide the political and religious factions.

For those navigating the Saudi Islamic blogosphere, the communication exchanges encountered are significantly more open than those found in communal markets, news outlets, and business or academic conferences. The discursive deliberations on Saudiwoman.me revealed a blog audience that sought to reconcile religious identity, connecting Saudi tradition with desires for reform. Posts like Nafjan’s “Saudi Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” and the resulting comments argue for a view of Saudi women that incorporates their autonomy and resists depictions of victimization. One user comments on Nafjan’s critique of veiled Saudi women’s as either “victimized and brainwashed or surprisingly educated and powerful.” The user writes:

I am happy to be a voice for all the women who feel that the burqa is a source of oppression. Just as I am happy to stand by the women for whom it is the biggest sign of their faith, the very backbone of their beliefs. I am happy to do both because my say doesn't count unless I am the one wearing the burqa. The West has a misplaced notion of being the freedom-giver of all the world's oppressed. Just as Islamic nations have a misplaced notion that only tradition without innovation and change will carry them into the future. What we need is the best of both worlds. Nobody is above anyone else, however different the view on the other side may be. (Saudi Girls Just Wanna Have Fun 2008)

This response wonderfully typifies the necessary compromise between accommodation and confrontation and provides each perspective a role in the dialogue. This user confirms Nafjan's restoried depiction of Saudi women and suggests that victimized portrayals stem from a western superiority complex. It is awareness of this complex that drives Saudi reform to distance itself from western feminism while simultaneously advocating for modernization of the public sphere and women's place within it. Those who restory western visions of Saudi women often detail rampant drug and alcohol abuse or unwed pregnancy. Adherence and submission to Islam are supreme in any vision of Saudi women's reform. Second to Islam is nationalism and pride in being Saudi. Reconciled between the two are women's issues. By restorying Saudi feminist identity women's issues become about nationalism, religion, and society from their standpoint and intersections. By creating Saudi-Islamic feminist discourses they uniquely resist the restraints of victimizing labels and promote empowerment.

Implications and Conclusion

While revolutions elsewhere have called for the establishment or removal of a secular regime there are no such calls in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia dissent is framed from within a revivalist Wahhabiyyaa framework. In this framework, Islam and interpretations of it, become the center point for

contestation. “What is at issue is challenging the monopoly over the divine held by a government based on religion. Islam in Saudi Arabia is therefore a subject of contention, primarily between the regime and the Islamists, but also among the Islamists themselves because of the multiplicity of visions that motivate them” (Lacroix 2011:2). The women deliberating on Saudiwomen.me open a space for women’s voices within Islamist discourse. As users interact with one another they refine their social, religious, and political worldviews. By collectively defending women’s knowledge of Islam, positioning women’s ethical claim within the ‘ulama,’ and restoring male and female identities a new form of Saudi deliberation is facilitated. The dissenting discourses that emerge from these deliberations challenge the state, not at the political or legislative level, but at the very root of what it means to be an authentically Islamic state. From women’s varied perspectives it is possible to imagine a Saudi Islamic state that encourages women’s active deliberation in the public sphere.

In attempting to address whether the public sphere can be reconstituted to promote increased deliberation, scholars must address socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors that influence the development and maintenance of public and counter public spheres. This multidisciplinary approach contributes to a wide range of disciplines and promotes a flexible and varied approach to identifying the emergence of women’s discourses in publics where they were previously discouraged or prohibited. While this research highlights existing forms of feminism as they have appeared in the Middle East, it makes no attempt to provide a framework for future Middle Eastern feminist study. Instead, political, religious, and cultural knowledge should be combined with a knowledge and respect for previous women’s movements within the region to allow for the recognition of intersectional identities and relevant tensions. Research should be guided by an awareness that Saudi women’s standpoint is unique and largely resists Western frameworks of feminist theory. Continued development and awareness of Islamic feminist theory offers researchers ever increasing opportunities to study the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and faith as they affect public sphere deliberations. As Saudi women continue to organize for social change, scholars

should examine how their messages are constructed and interpreted in the public. As contrasting discourses attempt to position Islam and women's rights in binary opposition, scholars should give considerable attention to those advocates that are able to reconcile the two.

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