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Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org

F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223

Transcript

The Prospects and Limits of Women's Mobilization in Saudi Arabia

Professor Madawi Al-Rasheed

Department of Theology and Religious Studies, King's College London

Chair: Dr Maha Azzam

Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

9 March 2012

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Maha Azzam:

It's a great pleasure to be chairing today's meeting. My name is Maha Azzam, and I'm an associate fellow on the Middle East and North Africa Programme. The meeting is on Saudi women and the obstacles they face in terms of emancipation and in terms of gender equality, but it's going to be situated in a slightly different context today by Professor Madawi Al-Rasheed, who's going to place it much more in the context of the authoritarian state.

Professor Madawi Al-Rasheed is professor of social anthropology at King's College London. Her research focuses on the history, society, religion and politics of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. She also looks at Middle Eastern Christian minorities, at Arab migration, and Islamist movements. She is also the author of many publications, among them *The Politics of an Arabian Oasis*, published by IB Tauris in 1991; *A History of Saudi Arabia*, the second edition of that came out in 2010 and it's published by Cambridge University Press; and also *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, published in 2004. It's a great pleasure to be chairing this meeting, Madawi. Please.

Al-Rasheed:

Thank you, Maha. Thank you for asking me to speak to this distinguished audience. I would like to just give you a little background about this project. I've been working on gender, religion and politics in Saudi Arabia for the last 18 months, until the Arab Spring derailed me and I had to do other things, but hopefully I'll get there. This project looks at some developments in Saudi Arabia. I adopt sort of a historical approach, like all my work, and also try to focus on the contemporary issues.

As a Saudi woman who lives, who has lived in Britain for a long time, I'm always amazed by the level of discussion and how it actually deteriorates, even among very distinguished journalists, when the subject is Saudi women. There's something about Saudi women that brings out the worst in people, I think. So in a way, the opinion is divided. I always come across articles in newspapers and even sometimes in scholarly work that they're either victims of their own society or they are survivors of the oppression that they are subjected to. Just to assure you that I myself have never been oppressed, and I did not suffer from the kind of stereotypes that dominate the media and common wisdom in the West. And therefore, after working on Saudi Arabia for almost 20 years, I had the courage to address this in a forthcoming book that is, the title is *A Most Masculine State: Religion, Politics and Gender in*

Saudi Arabia. It will be published by Cambridge University Press, hopefully by the end of this year.

I say I had the courage simply because a lot of people, when I started my academic career, would ask me, oh, so are you doing research on women? It was one of the most annoying questions that a young graduate student would have. It's like, because you are a woman, you have to study women. And therefore, tell us why women don't drive in Saudi Arabia. And 'Poor you, you are an oppressed woman whose father insists that you wear the veil,' etc, etc. All the stereotypes would come. But after familiarizing myself with the history, with the politics of the country, I decided to actually go and do this work about, not women, about gender relations, and there is a big difference. Women, studying women, has always been, well, you women, you do women's studies, and men study the structures of power and the economy, etc. So I tried to resist that, and I'm putting my study back into the domain of politics.

I would say that what I'm going to present today is the Saudi women question rather than a problem. In the advertising for the talk, it said Saudi women's 'problem' in inverted commas, and I hope on the website it appeared in inverted commas because I think manufacturing a problem has been, it had a history about women – that Arab women, Muslim women, and in particular Saudi women, they have a serious problem. And therefore, I don't take it that they do, I take the approach that this problematizing Saudi women is a construction done by many actors inside Saudi Arabia and outside Saudi Arabia.

So I start with the Gender Gap Index, and if you go to the Gender Gap Index of 2010-11, you'll find that Saudi Arabia is almost at the bottom of the Gender Gap Index in the sense that women are excluded from employment in a very big way. They do not constitute more than 12% of the labour force, although they are over-represented in education, specifically at university level. So what is the problem of this Gender Gap Index and what does it tell us about the situation? In a way, it tells us also that the so-called problem is not only local, it has become global, in the sense that there are global agencies, from the United Nations to civil society in the West, that problematize Saudi women. And they all think that we seriously have a problem. Yes, there are some problems, but I don't know of any society that doesn't have a problem when it comes to gender relations. But yes, I acknowledge that the problem is exaggerated in Saudi Arabia.

Now, how do we deal with this? Why do women not drive, why isn't there an age, a minimum age for marriage, or marriage of girls in Saudi Arabia? Why are women not allowed to leave the country on their own? Although some women do, and in fact quite a lot of them do leave the country without a guardian. So there is this sort of discourse that exists in the newspapers and at the legal level, that these are restricted women, that they can never actually get out of this oppression.

Now, two explanations have been put forward regarding this so-called Gender Gap Index. The first one, and the most common one that I have come across almost everywhere is that Islam, the Wahhabis, the Salafis, they are the ones who oppress women, and their religious opinions, called fatwa, are responsible for the miserable state and exclusion of Saudi women. Now, I look at that and I find that Wahhabi ulama, like many religious scholars, not only within Islam, but historically within Judaism and within Christianity, perpetuated ideas and opinions that tend to exclude women literally and metaphorically from the public sphere.

Within orthodox Judaism, within Hindu fundamentalism, within Christian evangelical groups, we find that the same discourse is there. So the conclusion is that Wahhabi ulama are simply, or share quite a lot with, for example, orthodox Judaism. It shares quite a lot with evangelical Christians. It shares quite a lot with fundamental Hindu groups in India, in contemporary India. Therefore, what is it that makes this particular tradition responsible for the discrimination, I would say, or exclusion of women? And I will try to explain to you why in a minute. So, this is given as the reason. It's all about the Committee of Promoting Virtue and Prohibiting Vice. It's all about the Wahhabi religious scholars. And they are responsible for every miserable state in Saudi Arabia.

The second argument is usually given in terms of culture. Well, this is a conservative society. It's a tribal society. It doesn't allow women to do certain things. And again, I don't see a difference between the Saudi tribal society and, for example, Kuwaiti tribal society. Yet women in Kuwait have been able to mobilize and to press for their rights. Also, I don't see a big difference between Saudi tribes and Yemeni tribes across the border in the south. I don't see that Saudi tribalism is exceptional, as some people would like us to believe. Qatar is very tribal. Oman, which I've visited several times, is extremely tribal. Yet their women drive, they work in hotels, they work in embassies, they had an ambassador, etc.

Now, I dismiss conservatism or tribalism as a factor that actually impacts the situation of women in Saudi Arabia. So how do we interpret the fact that in the twenty-first century Saudi women are excluded and they only constitute 12% of the labour force? Why isn't there a minimum age for marriage, why they're not given the right to travel, the right of movement? Why do they lag behind in terms of their rights, not in terms of their achievement, in a way?

So I propose to explain this situation by relying on three factors. The first one, I argue that it is not religion or Wahhabiyya, it is the transformation of Wahhabiyya into a national religious movement. This is the crucial thing that we have to remember about Saudi Arabia. Sunni ulama, or any ulama in the Muslim world, there is a diversity of opinion about women, their rights, whether she needs her guardian to sign the paper for her when she gets to marriage, whether she can leave the country without a guardian – there are variations in the Islamic tradition.

But it is the transformation of Wahhabism into a religious nationalist movement that is crucial. So what do I mean by religious nationalist movement? Religious nationalism is actually about constructing community, very much like nationalism. It is based on certain mythologies about the family, the nation as a family and the place of women in the family and in the nation. So Saudi women are appropriated in order to represent the credentials of the whole society. Therefore, they have become symbols for the piety of the nation regardless of whether the nation is pious or not. This kind of authenticity hangs on the shoulder of women because of two reasons: Women are responsible, in this religious nationalism, for the physical reproduction of Saudis. They are the ones who give birth to them, and therefore they have to be controlled lest they give birth to Syrians or Palestinians or British citizens, and therefore you have to control their physical reproductive abilities in a religious nationalist context.

The second thing: they are responsible for the social reproduction of the pious nation. So Saudi women are endowed with this responsibility of creating the homogeneous, pious, obedient citizen. And therefore you have to control them, you have to survey them, in order that they don't go astray and fail to reproduce the right citizen for the nation. And in this particular way religious nationalism shares quite a lot of characteristics with secular nationalism. So Atatürk, for example, or Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, or [Abdelaziz] Bouteflika, or the Shah of Iran, or even Mubarak, they all wanted women to represent the modernity of the nation. And therefore they had to control them. They didn't give them rights. In fact what they did was to control these women rather than give them rights.

So in a way, women become in this, religious nationalism, important as boundary makers. They draw the boundaries between the infidels and the pious, between the people outside the nation and the people inside the nation, between real Saudis and naturalized Saudis, or Saudis with mixed descent, et cetera. And therefore they have to be regulated and controlled and also excluded from the public sphere, the domain where people mix together in the public sphere. Unless, also, they pollute men, so there is this added characteristic that if you find them in the public sphere, they would pollute men in a religious sense, in terms of real pollution, and also in a metaphorical sense, in the sense that if women venture in the public sphere they would create chaos among the believers, that you can't actually have them around like in this particular room. So regulating marriage, regulating their nationality, who they should marry and which category of person they can marry, the custody of the children, these have to come under control in order to ensure that they remain within the boundaries marking us Saudis from everybody else in the world.

Added to this you have, women inherit in Saudi Arabia – and this is something that the economists and the investment banks discovered, probably late, but you know they did come to it – and therefore they have money. In a world where we have excessive consumption, excessive, almost aggressive policy to go and grab that money within a capitalist, neoliberal economy, therefore Saudi women become important. This is why *The Economist* would have a whole page on Saudi women, because the bankers reading *The Economist* would like to know where this wealth is and how we could get hold of it.

Now Saudi women have a double problem because they can't represent themselves legally, their relation is mediated by men who are their guardians. And therefore you have to break that relationship and go straight to Saudi women, get their money, get the investment, but at the same time sell them things, like consumption, excessive consumption. So why do we have newspapers in London or in Washington telling us that Saudi women spend millions on L'Oréal or cosmetic products, how many lipsticks they use. This is because they have a purchasing power. And this neoliberal economy wants to turn Saudi women into investors, and also into consumers, and therefore today the Saudi women question is a global issue. Because there are so many people that want to have those women consume and put their capital on the market for investment.

But anyway, Saudi men have a way of breaking that. I don't want to talk about it now, but we could discuss it. So the fact that Saudi Arabia is founded on

religious nationalism, which is the religion of the state, makes these kind of questions about gender politics and religion all intertwined.

The second factor is oil. Everybody tells us that oil is a blessing from God. Yes, it is a blessing from God, but it's a double-edged sword. Oil allows Saudi women to have education, to have health – which they didn't have before, quite a lot of them used to die when they gave birth, now they don't – and therefore there are serious economic, health and social benefits from oil. But at the same time, this kind of oil delayed the emancipation of women because it made controlling women affordable, separating them from the public sphere very affordable. You can create two universities, two banks, a separate hotel for women, you could hire a driver from Asia to drive your women. You could let them stay in a confined space because you can afford to do that. You could bring the latest communication technology to let a man beam his lecture in a university to women.

And therefore oil allows the state to employ more controlling agencies. For example, it allows the state to expand the employment of the religious committee in order to survey the public sphere. Imagine a poor country – would it be able to separate women? Or create duplicate institutions? In countries with minor wealth, again for example in Oman, you find there is one university for men and women. They can't afford to have universities for men and women. They can't afford to have banks for women only. Therefore, oil contributed to the marginalization of Saudi women. It created what I call 'educated but idle women'; highly educated women who are not needed in the labour force or are not allowed.

On top of everything, the oil industry remains a masculine industry. It is not like textiles or factories in the Philippines or in Bangladesh or even in Morocco, where a huge number of women are employed as textile or garment manufacturing industries, which attract women because they are labour-intensive and there are quite a lot of women willing to work. Whereas the oil industry, women can only be secretaries, IT specialists, maybe, more recently in labs as analysts or scientists. But historically, even when the Americans started looking for oil, the only women they brought with them were the secretaries or the wives. Therefore, the oil industry itself, by its own nature, is a very masculine industry. Unlike in societies where there is scope for women's participation in light industries.

So yes, as a result of all this, it was possible for the state to exclude women. They didn't need the income. They didn't need them in the labour force. And there was a deliberate attempt: exclude women and bring labour from

outside. And this was a state decision. At the time, early on, there weren't enough experienced or skilled women to occupy the jobs, and it was the most natural thing to do. But later on it became a state policy to exclude women from quite a lot of professions in Saudi Arabia. Therefore oil has to be taken into account when we talk about Saudi women. Women gained education, but I think as a result of oil they lost control over their bodies and their destiny. So oil is important to consider.

The third factor, and it's my last factor, it's the state. Now, Saudi Arabia differs from every other country in, let's say, the Arabian peninsula because it is the only country that is founded on religious nationalism, with all the implications. So Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Yemen – they are not founded on this religious nationalism. And therefore it has become easier for them to have flexibility when discussing gender issues and the place of women in society.

What does it mean to be founded on religious nationalism? It means that the state measures its piety by how women are treated. Basically they measure, the state measures its piety by excluding women. The more you exclude them, the more the state would look good from a religious nationalist perspective. But the state is not constant, and if you look at how the Saudi state dealt with women over 50 years, I would say, you find that there is a zigzag, a fluctuation. Because religious nationalism by its own nature is dogmatic and unchanging. Whereas the state falls within the domain of politics, which is changing, and therefore you change your policies. But they may clash with the fundamentals of religious nationalism.

So if you look at the state, I would say from the 1950s onward – because before that it is very difficult to talk about a centralized Saudi state – from the second half of the twentieth century we can begin to see state institutions, state income, et cetera. The first issue was the education of girls in the 1960s. And here the state must be seen within the context of the Arab world, where Abdel Nasser was flaunting the education of Egyptian women, where other Arab leaders were trying to be, secular Arab leaders were trying to promote women as icons of modernity and show that they need them for the labour force. Egypt needed women to work. Iraq also did. Syria and Algeria, you're talking about completely different histories. There were national struggles in these countries where women were demonstrating against colonial powers, where Saudi women were not doing that. And therefore there was this atmosphere of expectation. It all went wrong afterwards, as we all know. But the Saudi leadership felt that 'Oh, we have to do the same!' They have to educate women, and therefore this is the context. So they introduced girls' education against a background of opposition.

But this is not the whole story. There were important voices in Saudi Arabia calling for women's education that the state at the time suppressed. And what is coming out now is the state is the modern agency whereas society is the backward one; they resisted women's education in the 1960s, they came from Buraydah, you know the heart of Wahhabi Islam, demonstrating against women's education. We have to look at these constructions of the past now and see what purpose they serve. They serve the purpose of promoting the state as the reformist state and society as the backward group. And therefore, after that, there was a period actually when Saudi women were allowed to travel alone to go and study abroad. A lot of them got, the first generation of educated Saudi women went to Cairo, Beirut, Baghdad, and they got university educations, and they came back and started writing in newspapers. So, this is important to remember.

Then we come to 1979, and if you remember, there's the Juhayman incident, when Juhayman seized the mosque and criticized the state as a morally corrupt agency in society. And therefore we have a reversal, and more restrictions were put on women throughout the 1980s, and then we begin to have these bizarre fatwas that were increasing in publication and dissemination. With government money, they were distributing, not only in Saudi Arabia but across the Arab world, fatwas about women not [being] allowed to wear high heels, women not allowed to do their hair in a particular way, women not allowed to go to the gym. So all these kind of issues began to be promoted as the natural universe.

Now when it comes to the 1990s and onwards, especially in the last decade, we have a reversal of that policy. And here comes the role of King Abdullah, constructed as the great gender reformer, and I'm sure if you've seen quite a lot of his photos with groups of women, and this is seen as a presentation of how enlightened he is. But obviously I don't take that. I think the state agenda now is to use women as a minority group, very much like authoritarian states use minority groups in order to fight battles with society.

So the women's question first of all divides the Saudi public, and this is extremely important for the state. It divides the Saudi public and prevents the emergence of national consensus because the state knows, as an authoritarian state, that if the constituency remains divided on these kinds of issues it is the better. Because women are allowed to promote their own interests but not link up with men in order to call for more major political change. And this is the important development at the moment. We have quite a lot of women who take up women's causes. But this, and they isolate themselves from national politics – that we want to elect, we want to

participate in elections, we want to have the child marriage abolished, we want to do all the things that women suffer from. They do campaigns for driving, campaigns for election, campaigns for breast cancer. Just two days ago they were demonstrating in the university to improve the conditions under which they study. Saudi universities are in an appalling situation, especially in this particular area, Abha, in Saudi Arabia. But this kind of mobilization is co-opted by the state. It's isolated from national politics in order for these educated women, high achievers, not to link up with the constituency and call for serious political change. And this is a strategy that most authoritarian states use. We have seen it with Mubarak and the other examples that I gave.

So, how are we doing with time? So let me just conclude. I think the gender issue and the question of women succeeds to divide Saudi society and increase its polarization. Women have unfortunately found that the authoritarian state is their protector because as a minority, without the consensus of their own society, they had no option but to look for the authoritarian state to champion their causes.

And as a result, I think they have perpetuated the myth that this particular regime in its last five years is a reformist regime. This appeals to multiple audiences. It appeals to the women who have been deprived of serious recognition in their own society. It appeals to the West, which is extremely important. The Saudi regime likes the West to think, to gain international legitimacy on the basis of promoting women's causes. And other dictators, other authoritarian rulers have done the same. The only difference is that the Saudi ones have come, have joined the queue at a later phase. Also, it means that anybody reporting on Saudi Arabia would only report on women because, as if this is the only problem that Saudi Arabia has. And therefore driving is extremely important. It needs to stay there to be used and abused by so many interested people, in Saudi Arabia as well. For example Islamists have taken it as a signal of the piety of Saudi Arabia and its distance from the rest of the Muslim world, and therefore they will not compromise on driving. Now the liberals in Saudi society have taken it also to think that they can defeat the Islamists by allowing women to drive and they work so that the government does that, but the government is not doing that because it wants to perpetuate the struggle and it serves quite a lot of interests.

So basically, the issue of gender that is used by so many people, including Western governments – so for example, you know, Hillary Clinton could criticize Saudi Arabia on the way it treats women, or the religious courts, but she wouldn't dare criticize the Saudi king for depriving two million people of their right to represent themselves. But it can, and she can get away with it if

she just criticizes them for lifting, or not lifting the guardianship system. So it serves, gender issues serve so many groups. Also, when Western governments talk about women's rights, or civil society groups in the West, they think that well, they're doing something good because it clears their conscience, at least they don't accept the discrimination against Saudi women, and as Western allies, Western governments allied to basically dictatorships, they have sometimes to make concessions. So human rights and women become extremely important in order to appeal to local constituencies here in London, the feminist civil society groups, not Saudi women there. So these are extremely important for Western governments as well. It is important for the polarization of Saudi Arabia, Saudi society. It is important for the state as well, for the Saudi state.

Now it is a phase that Saudi women are going through. Their mobilization has a lot of prospects of developing, and no doubt, I have no doubt that they will realize sooner or later that authoritarian states do not emancipate women. Authoritarian states suppress men and women. They do not guarantee social and personal and political rights. In fact, they may give one right in order to take away so many other rights. I will stop here.