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NERVOUS ENERGY

## The (Not So) Eagerly Modern Saudi



Shawn Baldwin for The New York Times

**IMAGINE** Atop the Kingdom Tower in Riyadh, a modern future seems near. But many Saudis wonder about the cost.

By **MICHAEL SLACKMAN**  
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RIYADH, [Saudi Arabia](#)

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Shawn Baldwin for The New York Times

**QUESTION TIME** A Saudi television crew seeks out opinions in a Riyadh mall.

SAUDI ARABIA, home of Islam's holiest sites, flush with oil revenue, and increasingly the most influential player among Arab countries, has long resisted changing its ultratraditional ways. Now the intrusions of global economics and technology have begun to challenge some traditions in ways that the country's idealists could not. And the strain that this is causing is showing in the form of surprisingly open debate about how much Saudis really want to modernize.

While the notorious religious police still roam this capital city, much is evolving in the way people live. Saudis are suddenly overwhelmed with credit card debt. Thousands have grown rich, and thousands more have lost large sums, in the stock market. Foreigners can now invest in the country's insurance services, mining, railroads, airlines and satellite transmission services, all once off limits.

Much of this economic activity has been driven by the leaders' desire to have Saudi Arabia be more economically competitive, more a part of the modern world beyond its borders. The government is building huge new industrial cities that will have to attract many tens of thousands of foreign professionals; that is expected to bring more changes — in social and legal habits — as a price of admission to a global consumer economy.

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“In order for the cities to succeed we have to ease all kinds of regulations and rules in order to compete not only with the world, but with the region,” said Jamal Kashoggi, the editor of the daily Al Watan.

One example of adaptation involves the [World Trade Organization](#), which requires members to follow uniform trade policies, including protecting copyrights. When Saudi Arabia asked to join, its religious judges had to be convinced that bootlegging videos and software constituted stealing under Islamic law. So a group of judges was flown to Geneva, where officials participating in the talks said they were, eventually, convinced.

Meanwhile, even as efforts to bring elements of representative democracy to Saudi Arabia have stalled, it has been impossible to shield it from outside sources of information like satellite television and the Internet.

The intrusion of all these temptations and influences has left Saudi rulers caught between two impulses — the drive, which they support, to push their nation toward modernity so it can compete, and the expectations of the country’s many conservative and religious citizens that the government will continue to guard Saudi traditions.

So Saudis are engaged in an increasingly public debate over their identity. Should the school curriculum be changed, with English taught before seventh grade? Should women drive? Should stores stay open past 10? What constitutes religion and what is tradition?

The surprisingly open nature of this discussion, itself a rarity in a society where people often do not know their own neighbors, has rattled nerves.

“Whether it is good or not, it is there,” said Saleh al-Wohaibi, secretary general of the World Assembly of Muslim Youth. “It is there for discussion. It is there in the media. It is there in the prayers.”

Fifty years ago, Riyadh, the Saudi capital, was a city of mud houses and people who had to make their own shoes. Today, the center of the city is wireless and has Starbucks, Saks Fifth Avenue and Baskin-Robbins.

And the debate over its future can be openly satirized.

One day last month, a young man stood at the center of a stage with long ropes bound around each wrist. One pulled him to the left, the other to the right — one toward secularism, the other toward religious extremism. His father struggled to hold him in the middle, shouting “Enough! Enough!” Looking at the religious side, he said, “From here, there is destruction and zeal.” Then looking to the other side, he said, “There, is doom.”

The play, “A Moderate With No Moderation,” had been performed since last November at Al Yamamah College, one of a new group of private schools that are considered a concession to the reform agenda. During the opening performance, religious zealots attacked the audience and the performers and forced a cancellation of the show. But the next day the show went on.

“It is an unusual circumstance,” said Fawziya Abou Khalid, a sociology professor at King Saud University who presses for women’s rights. “Five years ago maybe the whole college would be shut down, not just the play.”

Saudi cities have traditionally had no central square where people could mix easily and express opinions openly. In many neighborhoods, families build towering walls around their houses to protect privacy and shelter women. The main place for large gatherings outside the family has been the mosque.

But today in Riyadh, shopping malls have become town squares. Air-conditioned against the withering heat, they are often filled until early morning with men and women. A year and a half ago a new television program, “Question of the Day,” sent reporters into the malls to ask people, on camera, for their opinions.

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At first, people declined, but now the show is so popular, the producers said, that it has spun off a sequel. The questions have covered wide ground — women in the work force, religious attitudes, bird flu. The channel, Al Ekhbariya, for the first time in decades has allowed a woman to read the news.

When King Abdullah assumed the throne two years ago, there was great anticipation he would speed up social and political reform. But he needs consensus among various power bases — notably his extended family, which includes princes in line for the throne who are politically aligned with religious conservatives.

That is one reason the government simultaneously supports the most radical religious elements while also trying to chip away at their efforts.

The leadership, for example, has not pushed to change a public school curriculum loaded with teachings that promote intolerance — even hostility — toward other faiths. But the curriculum often has been criticized as failing to prepare Saudi graduates for the modern world. So, after an international ranking put three Saudi universities among the world's worst, the king announced that \$32 billion would go to new education-related projects, including a plan to bring in foreign consultants.

In other words, the signals remain mixed. Ms. Abou Khalid, the sociology professor, said that for 14 years she and a few other women gathered in their homes to debate and discuss issues. A few months ago, the government announced that sites for such gatherings must first get permission, effectively shutting them down.

Muhammad Al Zulfa, a historian and member of the Shoura Council, an advisory body to the king that resembles a parliament but with no legislative authority, said: "The conservatives are not happy to see any change." "The conservatives say they are protecting the values of society," he said. "They are protecting their privileges."

Sheik Ibrahim al-Huqeil, the leader of a community mosque, disagreed, saying the intent was to preserve Islamic identity. His biggest fear, he said, is that Islam might end up like Catholicism, in which, he said, church members do not feel a need to obey their leaders.

"The liberals, if they want to promote Western values, they cannot say they want to deny Islamic values," he said. "The people will not go for that. So they go through the process of changing these things into tradition. But at the end of the day, it is about changing our Islamic identity."

*Mona el-Nagggar contributed reporting.*

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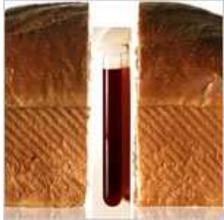


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