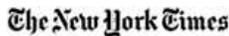


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RIYADH JOURNAL

## Cultural Collisions in the Slow Lane to Modernity



Shawn Baldwin for The New York Times

At a golden-arched symbol of globalization in Riyadh, modernity yields to tradition with separate sections for men and completely covered women.

By [MICHAEL SLACKMAN](#)  
Published: May 9, 2007

RIYADH, [Saudi Arabia](#) — Mansour al-Atayan sat at a table in one of the Starbucks that are as ubiquitous here as they are in Manhattan and explained how unhappy he was with the social changes occurring in his country. He said he thought that it would be better if women were not allowed to work in his office at all.

“Society is opening up too much,” said Mr. Atayan, 25.

“You’re lying,” replied his friend, Saud Aldughaiter, also 25, who was seated at the other side of the table. “You like it, but you think it is wrong.”

Mr. Atayan hung his head and with a weak smile acknowledged that, perhaps, his friend was correct.

Saudi Arabia is an extremely conservative country. Conservative in faith and tradition. But within those parameters — where individual expression is often discouraged — there is a conflict brewing between the desire to “have fun,” as Mr. Aldughaiter said, and a desire to conform. Life here may be constrained, but there is often comfort in the predictable.

“People enjoy the changes,” said Ziad Muhammad, a young officer in the Royal Guard. “But they are afraid they are wrong.”

Mr. Aldughaiter said, “We are always pulled back by tradition.”

Perhaps more than most societies, Saudi Arabia is a land of contradictions, a nation that

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demands conformity to very strict social rules even as it rides a wave of oil wealth into modernity. Heads and hands can be chopped off as punishment for crimes. But more young people than ever have been awarded scholarships by the government to attend universities in the United States.

It is the extremes that tend to define Saudi Arabia in the Western consciousness, particularly the radicals who see terrorism as a valid way to spread their ideas.

But a lot of people here also say that what they want is something in the middle, not quite Western democracy and not quite the restrictive life forced on them by the ultrareligious. The issue is less immediately about whether women can drive, or whether there should be movie theaters, as it is about the more abstract concept of allowing people to decide some things for themselves.

“Some people think that all you can find here are conservatives or liberals,” said Shemoukh al-Almaei, 23, a university student studying language and translation, as she walked through a mall in the capital city. “But there are people in the middle.”

The problem, she said, is that the middle is often silent. That seems to be partly because society is so conservative people do not want to stand out and partly because people are afraid to be charged with violating their faith. So change comes slowly, often behind closed doors.

“In private clubs, women’s sports are excellent,” she said. “You wouldn’t believe it! But people tend to think that Saudi girls or women don’t do anything, that they just stay home waiting for their husbands or waiting to get married. But we are very up to date.”

The dueling pressures on society can reveal two distinctly different faces of the kingdom. One is the face of an angry-looking man behind the wheel of a GMC truck on a recent day, an agent of the Committee to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice.

The truck was packed with employees of a restaurant who had made the critical error of failing to shut it down during evening prayers. But what really set him off was when he thought a photographer, for The New York Times, had stopped to take a picture of him and his human cargo.

He leaped from the car, arms flying, shouting, grabbing at the cameras, which he eventually seized. He examined the cameras and made sure they were not harboring any offending photographs. Then he and his colleagues forced the restaurant’s Muslim staff to pray and to sign papers promising to pray in the future.

The Christian staff members did not have to pray, but they did have to sign the papers.

Was this the face of Saudi Arabia?

Only half. During the turmoil outside the restaurant, a passer-by witnessed what was happening and started to shout at the enforcers. “These are visitors to our country,” he said as he charged at the religious police, putting himself in danger of being detained. “What are you doing? This is wrong.” When the enforcers turned on him and demanded his identification, the citizen locked himself in his car.

Increasingly, it appears, Saudis are pushing back against the morality police. In 2006, there were a record numbers of physical attacks by irate citizens against the religious police. The head of the Committee to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice, who has minister-level status, issued a public statement asking people to stop assaulting his troops.

None of this restrained defiance dilutes Saudi Arabia’s foundation as a fundamentalist Islamic state. The Koran and the Sunna, the teaching of Prophet Muhammad, still serve as the constitution. People all over the kingdom said they lived by the word of the Koran, the literal word. But as with any other religious practice, the literal word is often a matter of interpretation.

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“Nobody wants to separate Islam from the state,” said Hussein al-Shobokshy, a writer and television commentator from Riyadh. “But, I am talking for myself, I want to separate sect from the state. We don’t have any choice but to open.”

It is in the space between religion and tradition where many Saudis say they are trying to have it both ways, to enjoy the benefits of the modern world without giving up the traditions of the old. It is a struggle that so far has produced anxiety, like that felt by Mr. Atayan, who is worried about working in the same office with women.

But it also has produced optimism, like that expressed by Amira Salman, a woman working as a reporter for state television who conducts interviews with her body and face completely covered in black material. Only her eyes are exposed, revealing heavy makeup and blue-tinted contact lenses.

“We hope to preserve our traditions, identity and religion,” she said, “and at the same time be up to date with life and see different cultures and choose the things we like to take from it all.”

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