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GENERATION FAITHFUL

**Love's Rules Vex and Entrance Young Saudis**By **MICHAEL SLACKMAN**

RIYADH, [Saudi Arabia](#) — Nader al-Mutairi stiffened his shoulders, clenched his fists and said, "Let's do our mission." Then the young man stepped into the cool, empty lobby of a dental clinic, intent on getting the phone number of one of the young women working as a receptionist.

Asking a woman for her number can cause a young man anxiety anywhere. But in Saudi Arabia, getting caught with an unrelated woman can mean arrest, a possible flogging and dishonor, the worst penalty of all in a society where preserving a family's reputation depends on faithful adherence to a strict code of separation between the sexes.

Above all, Nader feared that his cousin Enad al-Mutairi would find out that he was breaking the rules. Nader is engaged to Enad's 17-year-old sister, Sarah. "Please don't talk to Enad about this," he said. "He will kill me."

The sun was already low in the sky as Nader entered the clinic. Almost instantly, his resolve faded. His shoulders drooped, his hands unclenched and his voice began to quiver. "I am not lucky today; let's leave," he said.

It was a flash of rebellion, almost instantly quelled. In the West, youth is typically a time to challenge authority. But what stood out in dozens of interviews with young men and women here was how completely they have accepted the religious and cultural demands of the Muslim world's most conservative society.

They may chafe against the rules, even at times try to evade them, but they can be merciless in their condemnation of those who flout them too brazenly. And they are committed to perpetuating the rules with their own children.

That suggests that Saudi Arabia's strict interpretation of Islam, largely uncontested at home by the next generation and spread abroad by Saudi money in a time of religious revival, will increasingly shape how Muslims around the world will live their faith. Young men like Nader and Enad are taught that they are the guardians of the family's reputation, expected to shield their female relatives from shame and avoid dishonoring their families by their own behavior. It is a classic example of how the Saudis have melded their faith with their desert tribal traditions.

"One of the most important Arab traditions is honor," Enad said. "If my sister goes in the street and someone assaults her, she won't be able to protect herself. The nature of men is that men are more rational. Women are not rational. With one or two or three words, a man can get what he wants from a woman. If I call someone and a girl answers, I have to apologize. It's a huge deal. It is a violation of the house."

Enad is the alpha male, a 20-year-old police officer with an explosive temper and a fondness for teasing. Nader, 22, is soft-spoken, with a gentle smile and an inclination to follow rather than lead.

They are more than cousins; they are lifelong friends and confidants. That is often the case in Saudi Arabia, where families are frequently large and insular.

Enad and Nader are among several dozen Mutairi cousins who since childhood have spent virtually all their free time together: Boys learning to be boys, and now men, together.

They are average young Saudi men, not wealthy, not poor, not from the more liberal south or east, but residents of the nation's conservative heartland, Riyadh. It is a flat, clean city of five million people that gleams with oil wealth, two glass skyscrapers and roads clogged with oversize S.U.V.'s. It offers young men very little in the way of entertainment, with no movie theaters and few sports facilities. If they are unmarried, they cannot even enter the malls where women shop.

## Guardians of Propriety

Nader sank deep into a cushioned chair in a hotel cafe, sipping fresh orange juice, fiddling with his cellphone. If there is one accessory that allows a bit of self-expression for Saudi men, it is their cellphones. Nader's is filled with pictures of pretty women taken from the Internet, tight face shots of singers and actresses. His ring tone is a love song in Arabic (one of the most popular ring tones among his cousins is the theme song to "Titanic").

"I'm very romantic," Nader said. "I don't like action movies. I like romance. 'Titanic' is No. 1. I like 'Head Over Heels.' Romance is love."

Three days later, in a nearby restaurant, Nader and Enad were concentrating on eating with utensils, feeling a bit awkward since they normally eat with their right hands.

Suddenly, the young men stopped focusing on their food. A woman had entered the restaurant, alone. She was completely draped in a black abaya, her face covered by a black veil, her hair and ears covered by a black cloth pulled tight.

"Look at the batman," Nader said derisively, snickering.

Enad pretended to toss his burning cigarette at the woman, who by now had been seated at a table. The glaring young men unnerved her, as though her parents had caught her doing something wrong.

"She is alone, without a man," Enad said, explaining why they were disgusted, not just with her, but with her male relatives, too, wherever they were.

When a man joined her at the table — someone they assumed was her husband — she removed her face veil, which fueled Enad and Nader's hostility. They continued to make mocking hand gestures and comments until the couple changed tables. Even then, the woman was so flustered she held the cloth self-consciously over her face throughout her meal.

"Thank God our women are at home," Enad said.

Nader and Enad pray five times a day, often stopping whatever they are doing to traipse off with their cousins to the nearest mosque.

Prayer is mandatory in the kingdom, and the religious police force all shops to shut during prayer times. But it is also casual, as routine for Nader and Enad as taking a coffee break.

To Nader and Enad, prayer is essential. In Enad's view, jihad is, too, not the more moderate approach that emphasizes doing good deeds, but the idea of picking up a weapon and fighting in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Jihad is not a crime; it is a duty," Enad said in casual conversation.

"If someone comes into your house, will you stand there or will you fight them?" Enad said, leaning forward, his short, thick hands resting on his knees. "Arab or Muslim lands are like one house."

Would he go fight?

"I would need permission from my parents," he said.

Nader, though, said, "Don't ask me. I am afraid of the government."

The concept is such a fundamental principle, so embedded in their psyches, that they do not see any conflict between their belief in armed jihad and their work as security agents of the state. As a police officer, Enad helps conduct raids on suspected terrorist hideouts. Nader works in the military as a communications officer.

Each earns about 4,000 riyals a month, about \$1,200, not nearly enough to become independent from their parents. But that is not a huge concern, because fathers are expected to provide for even their grown children, to ensure that they have a place to live and the means to get married.

To many parents, providing money is seen as more central to their duty — their honor — than ensuring that their children get an education.

Each young man has the requisite mustache and goatee, and most of the time dresses in a traditional robe. Nader prefers the white thobe, an ankle-length gown; Enad prefers beige.

But on weekends, they opt for the wild and crazy guy look, often wearing running pants, tight short-sleeved shirts, bright colors, stripes and plaids together, lots of Velcro and elastic on their shoes. In Western-style clothes, they both seem smaller, and a touch on the pudgy side. Nader says softly, "I don't exercise."

### Family Life

There are eight other children in the house where Enad lives with his father, his mother and his father's second wife. The apartment has little furniture, with nothing on the walls. The men and boys gather in a living room off the main hall, sitting on soiled beige wall-to-wall carpeting, watching a television propped up on a crooked cabinet. The women have a similar living room, nearly identical, behind closed doors.

The house remains a haven for Enad and his cousins, who often spend their free time sleeping, watching Dr. Phil and [Oprah](#) with subtitles on television, drinking cardamom coffee and sweet tea — and smoking.

Enad and Nader were always close, but their relationship changed when Nader and Sarah became engaged. Enad's father agreed to let Nader marry one of his four daughters. Nader picked Sarah, though she is not the oldest, in part, he said, because he actually saw her face when she was a child and recalled that she was pretty.

They quickly signed a wedding contract, making them legally married, but by tradition they do not consider themselves so until the wedding party, set for this spring. During the intervening months, they are not allowed to see each other or spend any time together.

Nader said he expected to see his new wife for the first time after their wedding ceremony — which would also be segregated by sex — when they are photographed as husband and wife.

"If you want to know what your wife looks like, look at her brother," Nader said in defending the practice of marrying someone he had seen only once, briefly, as a child. That is the traditional Nader, who at times conflicts with the romantic Nader.

Soon his cellphone beeped, signaling a text message. Nader blushed, stuck his tongue out and turned slightly away to read the message, which came from "My Love." He sneaks secret phone calls and messages with Sarah. When she calls, or writes a message, his phone flashes "My Love" over two interlocked red hearts. "I have a connection," he said, quietly, as he read, explaining how Sarah manages to communicate with him.

His connection is Enad, who secretly slipped Sarah a cellphone that Nader had bought for her. These conversations are taboo and could cause a dispute between two families. So their talks were clandestine, like sneaking out for a date after the parents go to bed. Enad keeps the secret, but it adds to an underlying tension between the two, as Nader tries to develop his own identity as a future head of household, as a man.

Enad teases Nader, saying, "In a year you will find my sister with a mustache and him in the kitchen."

"Not true," Nader said, mustering as much defiance as he could. "I am a man."

Another flashpoint: The honeymoon. Nader is planning to take Sarah to Malaysia, and Enad wants to go. He suggests that Nader owes him. "Yes, take me," Enad says, with a touch of mischief in his voice. Nader cannot seem to tell whether he is kidding. "You know, he can be crazy," Nader said. "He's always angry. No, he is not coming. It is not a good idea."

### Back in the Village

Nader grew up in Riyadh, and his parents, like Enad's, are first cousins. Enad says his way of thinking was forged in the village of Najkh, 350 miles west of Riyadh, where he lived until he was 14 with his grandfather. It is where he still feels most

comfortable.

When he can, he has a cousin drive him to his grandfather's home, a one-story cement box in the desert, four miles from the nearest house. There is a walled-in yard of sand with piles of wood used to heat the house in the cold desert winters.

Inside there is no furniture, just a few cushions on the floor and a prayer rug pointing in the direction of Mecca. Enad and his cousins absentmindedly toss trash out the kitchen window, and around the yard, expecting that the "houseboy," a man named Nasreddin from India, will clean up after them — and he does.

Enad is quiet and hides his cigarettes when his grandfather comes through. He would never tell his father or grandfather that he smokes. Enad remains stone-faced when a cousin mentions that another of his cousins, a woman named Al Atti, 22, is interested in him. The topic came up because another cousin, Raed, had asked Al Atti to marry him, and she refused.

The conflict and flirtation touched on so many issues — manhood, love, family relations — that it sparked a flurry of whispering, and even Enad was drawn in.

Al Atti had let her sisters know that she liked Enad, but made it clear that she could never admit that publicly. So she asked a sister to spread the word from cousin to cousin, and ultimately to Enad. "It's forbidden to announce your love. It is impossible," she said.

Word finally reached Enad, who tried to stay cool but was clearly interested, and flattered. At that point Enad was himself whispering about Al Atti, trying to figure out a way to communicate with her without actually talking to her himself. He asked a female visitor to arrange a call, and then pass along a message of interest.

Enad said it was never his idea to pursue her, but that a man — a real man — could not reject a woman who wanted him. To get his cousin Raed out of the picture, he suggested that Al Atti's brother take Raed to hear Al Atti's refusal in person, at her house.

"From behind a wall," Enad said.

"Love is dangerous," Al Atti said as she sat with her sisters in the house. "It can ruin your reputation."

#### A Question of Romance

It was a short visit, two days in the village, and then Enad was back to Riyadh for work. In Riyadh he seemed to be both excited and tormented by Al Atti's interest.

That weekend, he and Nader went out to the desert, just outside of Riyadh, where young men go to drive Jeeps in the sand and to relax, free from the oversight of the religious police and neighbors. They sat beside each other on a blanket.

Nader began.

"I am a romantic person," he said. "There is no romance."

What Nader meant was that Saudi traditions do not allow for romance between young, unmarried couples. There are many stories of young men and women secretly dating, falling in love, but being unable to tell their parents because they could never explain how they knew each other in the first place. One young couple said that after two years of secret dating they hired a matchmaker to arrange a phony introduction so their parents would think that was how they had met.

Now, in the desert, Nader's candor set Enad off.

"He thinks that there is no romance. How is there no romance?" Enad said, his eyes bulging as he grew angry. "When you get married, be romantic with your wife. You want to meet a woman on the street so you can be romantic?"

Nader was intimidated, and frightened. "No, no," he said.

"Convince me then that you're right," Enad shot back.

“I am saying there is no romance,” Nader said, trying to push back.

Enad did not relent, berating his cousin.

Under his breath, Nader said, “Enad knows everything.”

Then he folded. “Fine, there is romance,” he said, and got up and walked away, flushed and embarrassed.

*Mona el-Naggar contributed reporting.*

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