

A NEW LOOK IN BAGHDAD

DURING THE WORST YEARS OF THE IRAQ WAR, MUSLIM CLERICS DECIDED WHAT WOMEN COULD WEAR. NOW, WITH SECURITY IMPROVING, THE FASHION RULES HAVE BEGUN TO CHANGE.

By Timothy Williams & Abeer Mohammed in Baghdad

The young women of Baghdad acknowledge that there are more serious concerns for Iraqis these days than hair, clothes, and makeup. But they also say that there's nothing quite as exhilarating for them as stepping out of the house in a dress, with their hair flowing freely, behaving as if their country had not been shattered by war and dominated by religious fanaticism for much of their lives.

"For girls," says Merna Mazin, a 20-year-old engineering student at Baghdad University, "life would be tasteless without elegant fashion."

What Mazin calls elegant fashion bears little resemblance to the warm-weather clothes of the U.S. or Europe. It was 104 degrees in Baghdad, and Mazin wore a sleeveless dress over a pair of jeans, with a black long-sleeve shirt covering her arms.

But her hair had no head covering—a small victory for Mazin, a Christian who was forced to wear a traditional Muslim woman's head scarf for two years to avoid being harassed, or worse, by Islamic militias.

Under the brutal rule of Saddam Hussein from 1979–

2003, life was not easy for Iraqi women, or men for that matter. But during those years, women could work, attend college, and go out without a head scarf or an abaya—the cloak-like covering designed to conceal the shape of a woman's body.

AFTER SADDAM

When the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 toppled Saddam's regime, several years of chaos, lawlessness, and deadly violence followed. With conservative Islamic militias taking control of large parts of Iraq, women found their fashion choices dictated by Muslim clerics and enforced by armed militiamen who would threaten, kidnap, or even kill women who were provocatively dressed—in their view, any woman who wasn't wearing

an abaya. Women were often forced to quit their jobs or school and retreat home.

While there is still violence, often deadly, security has improved as Iraqi and American forces and the government in Baghdad have taken back areas that had been controlled by Islamic militias. (The progress on security led President Obama to announce plans earlier this year to withdraw most of the 120,000 U.S.



Name

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1. What was life like for women under Saddam Hussein? (three areas)
2. What happened to a women's freedom after the conservative Islamic militias took control of large parts of Iraq?
3. Which group of young women today feels most confident dressing more like the women they see on television?
4. What are more and more stores in Baghdad offering as options for women to wear?
5. In your own words, explain the idea of a "modern veiled girl"?

Saudi Arabia's Freedom Riders

In a country where women's rights are severely limited, some Saudi women are demanding the right to drive

BY NEIL MACFARQUHAR IN SAUDI ARABIA

Maha al-Qahtani, an information technology specialist for the Saudi government, got in her car one day early this summer and did something revolutionary: With her husband seated next to her, she took the wheel and drove for 45 minutes around the capital city of Riyadh.

Her defiance is part of a nationwide right-to-drive campaign that involved more than 40 women taking to the road to protest the fact that Saudi women are not allowed to drive. They say their campaign is inspired by the uprisings this year in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world known as the Arab Spring.

Some of the female drivers, like Qahtani, have been stopped by police

and ticketed. Others have been arrested. Last month, a Saudi court sentenced a woman to 10 lashes after she was found guilty of driving in Jidda. (The king overturned the sentence a few days later.)

"If Saudi police think arresting women drivers is going to stop what has already become the largest women's rights movement in Saudi history, they are sorely mistaken," the Saudi Women for Driving coalition said in a statement. "On the contrary, these arrests will encourage more women to get behind the wheel in direct defiance of this ridiculous abuse of our most basic human rights."

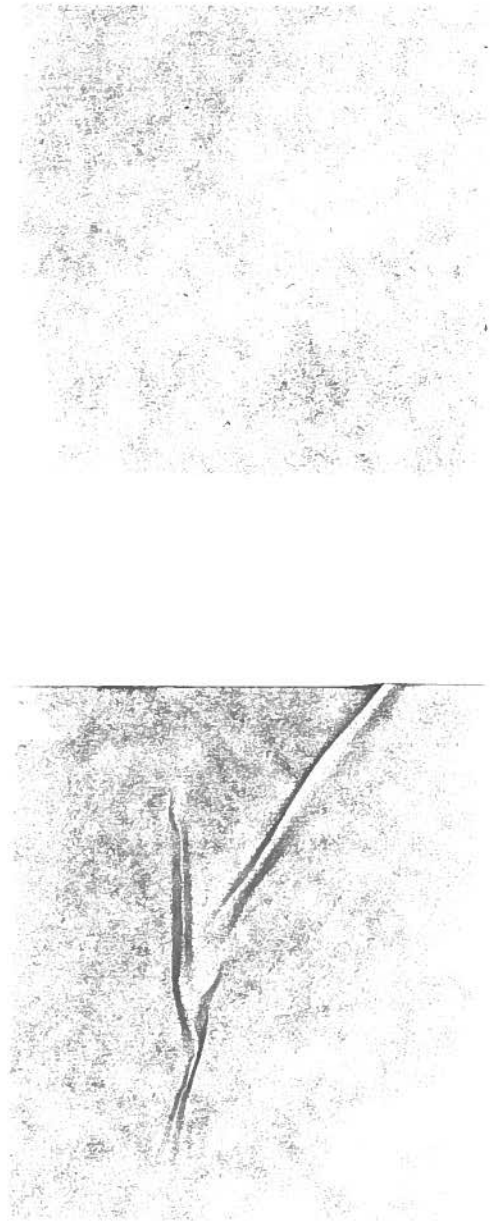
In September, perhaps looking for a way to placate women's rights advocates, King Abdullah granted women

the right to vote and run in municipal elections for the first time, starting in 2015. Ironically, though, political participation for women is less controversial than the right to drive—perhaps because voting isn't likely to have much impact in an absolute monarchy where local elections have little influence.

No Dating

The ban on driving is just one of many restrictions on women in Saudi Arabia, which is probably the most strictly gender-segregated country in the world.

As soon as they're considered adults, Saudi women must wear *abayas*, black head-to-toe cloaks, in public at all times. They attend girls-only schools and university classes, and they eat in



special “family” sections of restaurants, which are partitioned from the areas used by single men. Riyadh, the capital, has women-only gyms, boutiques, and even a shopping mall. While many Saudi women go to college, very few get jobs afterward—largely because of the logistical difficulty of maintaining gender segregation in the workplace.

Saudi girls are not allowed to date—or even be friends with boys—and their marriages are arranged. Most Saudi girls meet their husbands for the first time on the day they become engaged.

While Saudi Arabia has taken some small steps toward democratic reforms in recent years, Saudi women are still denied the basic equality and rights that women in the West, and even in

many Arab countries, take for granted.

They need written permission from a male relative before they can get a job, leave the country, travel within the country, or even undergo a medical procedure. In court, a woman’s testimony does not carry the same weight as a man’s. And despite the king’s decree granting a limited right to vote, women may have few chances to participate in politics given the ban on mingling with men.

The restrictions are part of the country’s very conservative interpretation of Islam, although many Muslims dispute that Islam calls for any of these limitations.

“Women are treated like perpetual legal minors in Saudi Arabia,” says Christoph Wilcke of Human Rights Watch. “It’s hard to think of another

country where women’s rights are so systematically restricted.”

Of all the rights denied to women, the ban on driving is perhaps the most sensitive. Most Saudi women are shuttled around by foreign male drivers in cars with tinted windows. For religious conservatives, the ban is a sign that the kingdom still holds to its traditions and has not caved in to Western pressure.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton seems to understand the sensitivity. Not wanting to create a diplomatic rift in the already strained—and crucial—relationship between Saudi Arabia and

With additional reporting by Nada Bakri, Dina Salah Amer, and Steven Lee Myers of The Times, and by Patricia Smith.

the U.S., she has expressed support for the protesters, but has been careful to emphasize that they're acting on their own initiative, not that of the U.S. (See sidebar, facing page.)

"What these women are doing is brave, and what they are seeking is right," Clinton said. She added, "I am moved by it, and I support them."

King Abdullah's family has ruled Saudi Arabia since the country's founding in 1932. The country is a near-absolute monarchy, but the royal family depends on support from conservative religious leaders, so it must tread carefully in terms of implementing reform.

rules, arresting and sometimes flogging those caught violating them.

The campaign to allow women to drive seems to have struck a particular nerve. When Manal al-Sharif, a 32-year-old woman from Al Khobar in eastern Saudi Arabia, posted a video on YouTube of herself driving an S.U.V. last May, she was arrested and jailed for nine days.

"Women in Saudi Arabia see other women in the Middle East making revolutions, women in Yemen and Egypt at the forefront of revolutions, being so bold, toppling entire governments," says Waleed Abu

the royal family confiscated their passports and fired those who worked for the government. Many went into hiding for their own safety.

But unlike in the past, this time the government's harsh treatment of Sharif—her arrest and nine-day detention—did not quash the debate. Instead, the Internet buzzed to life in Sharif's defense. Twitter and Facebook overflowed with comments denouncing both Saudi Arabia's ruling princes and the clerics who called for her to be flogged. More than 30,000 comments about Sharif's arrest showed up within days on Twitter, mostly from supporters.

"Are you accusing a woman of being a sinner because she went to jail for driving? What kind of religion would come up with that?" wrote a woman in Jidda.

Social media, which helped spur protests across the Arab world last spring, seems tailor-made for Saudi Arabia, where public gatherings are illegal and women are strictly forbidden to mix with men they're not related to. Virtually any issue that contradicts official Saudi policy now pops up online.

The women's driving campaign shows what online organizing can accomplish—and what it cannot.

Saudi activists say they realize social media alone will not bring changes, but it exposes issues and links organizers.

"If you can reach the public, it will put pressure on the royal family to modernize," says Abdulaziz AlGasim, a lawyer and activist in Riyadh. But he adds, "Change will come from demonstrations, not from talking." ●

'Women are treated like perpetual legal minors in Saudi Arabia.'

A young woman wearing an abaya at a restaurant with her family

A strict fundamentalist interpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism governs all aspects of life in Saudi Arabia, with the Koran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad effectively serving as a constitution. The justice system is governed by Islamic law, known as *shariah*, and includes punishments such as cutting off hands for stealing and beheading for murder. Religious police roam the streets to enforce the

Alkhair, whose wife drove around the city of Jidda in protest. "The women of Saudi Arabia looked at themselves, and they realized, 'Wow! We can't even drive!'"

30,000 Tweets

The last time Saudi women tried to challenge the ban on driving was in 1990. Clerics branded the 47 women who got behind the wheel as amoral;

In your small groups, analyze the following questions.



1. What are these women attempting to do in the political cartoon? Where is this taking place?

2. Why would you need a driver's license to vote? Why could it be a problem for these women?

3. What do you think is the message the author would like readers to take away from the cartoon?

Saudi Arabia Freedom Riders

New York Times Up Front October 24, 2011

1. In Saudi Arabia, women are fighting for the right to drive mainly by the
 - a. Marching and protesting in the capital city Riyadh.
 - b. Enlisting the aid of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.
 - c. Illegally getting behind the wheel.
 - d. Writing books and blogs about the restrictions they face.

2. In September, Saudi women won the right to
 - a. Drive on a limited number of local roads.
 - b. Testify in court.
 - c. Attend coeducational schools.
 - d. Vote and run for local office.

3. Women in Saudi Arabia rarely find jobs because
 - a. It is too difficult for employers to maintain gender separation in the workplace.
 - b. It is against the law for women to attend college.
 - c. They are required by law to stay within five miles of their homes.
 - d. They are not allowed to use computers or other technological tools.

4. Women in Saudi Arabia are required to wear head-to-toe covering called abayas in public when
 - a. When they feel they have lived up to Islam's teachings.
 - b. They have committed any action considered offensive by men.
 - c. They have reached adulthood.
 - d. They had had children.

5. The word wahhabism describes
 - a. The systemic prejudice that women in Saudi Arabia face.
 - b. The concept of a religious monarchy.
 - c. Minor reforms that the Saudi government has undertaken since 1990.
 - d. A strict, fundamentalist interpretation of Islam.