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COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE AFTER

MOHAMED BIN SALMAN RISE TO POWER:

AN ANALYTICAL DISCRIPTION OF THE

OFFICIAL ONLINE ISLAMIC DISCOURSE IN

SAUDI ARABIA

BY

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ABSTRACT

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Title: Women in Religious Discourse After Mohamed Bin Salman Rise to Power: An Analytical Description of the Official Online Islamic Discourse in Saudi Arabia

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This study aims to examine women in the Saudi online official religious discourse after Mohamed Bin Salman's rise to power. The study hypothesizes that the official religious discourse in Saudi Arabia after Mohamed Bin Salman is changing in line with the recent policy changes. The sample of the study contains 106 Fatwas and articles discussing issues related to women. Sample items are collected from 4 official online Islamic Saudi platforms. Then, the study provides a frequency based analysis to examine how women are portrayed from the official religious perspective. Subsequently, a thematic analysis of the state's vision towards Saudi women is conducted. Both analysis results are compared to eventually examine the impact of the recent top down policy changes on the religious rhetoric towards women. Results indicate that the official online religious discourse is not in line with the state's approach towards Saudi women.

DEDICATION

To Lily. My little muse.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been witnessing drastic changes in the sociopolitical domain after Mohamed bin Salman rose to power as the crown prince in 2017, as a result of a recent shift in the power transition structure. The appointment of Mohamed bin Salman as the first in line to succeed his father has broken the Saudi power transition tradition set by the founder of Saudi Arabia King Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud. This shift in the power transition tradition has, subsequently, transferred the authority from one generation—sons of Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud—to another—his grandchildren. This shift resulted in a series of top down political, economic and social changes, indicating the rise of a fourth Saudi state (House, 2017). Mohamed bin Salman's ascendance to power is not merely contesting the power transition tradition, rather, it is contesting the principles that third Saudi state "modern day Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" has been standing for. 2017 and 2018 witnessed a series of decisions that shook the Saudi society to its foundation with its deeply rooted social norms, arguably, in favor of Saudi women in particular. Such decisions included allowing women to drive in 2017 (Okaz, September, 26th, 2017"), allowing women to serve in the military in 2018 (BBC, February 26, 2018), allowing women to attend sporting and entertainment events, and loosening up the segregation and dress code restrictions (The Guardian, October 24th, 2017).

No doubt that in Saudi Arabia, the Wahhabi school, had played a key role in creating deeply rooted norms and social standards that shaped Saudi women's lives (Al-Rasheed, 2013). For example, according to the 2017 Human Rights Watch report on Saudi Arabia, many discriminatory laws, i.e. guardianship system, remains applied

in Saudi. "Women regularly face difficulty conducting a range of transactions without a male relative, from renting an apartment to filing legal claims." (Human Rights Watch, 2017, p.6). To be a woman in Saudi Arabia means enduring a lifelong surveillance by male guard or *mahram*. "A father controls every aspect of girl's life until she is passed to a new dominant male—her husband" (House, 2012, p. 76). All of these legislations are based on religious justifications that is drawn from the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam (Haykel, B., Hegghammer, T., & Lacroix, S., 2015).

This study aims to examine the response of the religious discourse to the latest reforms related to women that came after Mohamed Bin Salman's rise to power. In other words, how women's matters are being discussed and viewed through the religious lens after the appointment of Mohamed bin Salman as the crown prince. This study aims to examine the content of the online official religious discourse in Saudi Arabia after Mohamed Bin Salman's rise to power and compare it to the state's vision.

Definition of Terms

Official religious institution: Religious scholars 'Ulama' endorsed by the government (Commins, 2006).

Religious discourse/ rhetoric: public content concerning religious issues delivered through religious channels.

Official religious discourse: content concerning religious matters issued by official/ state endorsed entities i.e. *Fatwas* and Friday sermons.

Online official religious discourse: online content published by official/ state endorsed entities on their respective official websites or online platforms.

Fatwas: a verdict issued by a religious scholar in response to an ambiguous matter. Fatwas are normally based on a reference from Quran or Sunnah or a previous verdict generally approved by jurists '*Ijmaa*'.

Wahhabi school of Islam: the *Hanbali* school of jurisprudence according to the writings and teachings of Mohamed Bin Abd al-Wahhab (Habib, 2009).

Research Questions and Study Hypothesis

Research Question

- 1- What are the most common matters concerning women that are being frequently discussed on official Saudi online religious platform?
 - What are the most common topics concerning women that *Fatwas* cover?
 - What are the most common topics concerning women that are commonly discussed in articles?
 - How are women visually depicted on Islamic websites? If found.
- 2- What are the recent governmental policy changes towards Saudi women? How does it reflect the state's vision towards Saudi women?
- 3- Is women portrayal in the Saudi official religious websites correspond to the recent policy changes?

Study Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that the online official religious discourse—after Mohamed Bin Salman's rise to power—is reflecting the policy changes concerning Saudi women.

Theoretical Framework

This study is inspired by two main theoretical frameworks in the field of social sciences and communication: framing theory and Durkheim's functionalist approach to religion.

Framing theory

The first framework that inspires this study is framing theory by Goffman. Framing is a set of notions and perspectives on how people perceive their reality. Framing theory suggests that the way an idea or a notion is presented to the public is called "the frame". This frame influences information processing among the audience. The theory was first introduced by Goffman as Frame Analysis. He argues that individuals process their surrounding events through a primary framework. This framework is considered primary because it is taken for granted by the individual. Goffman argues that there are two distinctions within a primary framework: natural and social. Both determine how an individual is interpreting data (Goffman, 1974). Framing is closely related to Agenda Setting theory. Both are concerned with how media present a specific topic. However, framing theory is particularly concerned with how the news is presented within a specific frame which is decided by the author. In this case, a frame refers to the way media as a gatekeeper is presenting specific ideas, notions, and topics.

Durkheim's Functionalist Approach

This research is also inspired by Émile Durkheim's functionalist approach to religion. Emile Durkheim defined religion as a set of beliefs, rituals, and practices that express the nature of the sacred in relation to the profane. From a sociological perspective, the importance of religion as a social institution lies within promoting a standard set of norms and behaviors, motivated by an individual desire for a positive experience in this life and in an eternal life to come, that serve their system of belief.

Durkheim's presented a functional approach in his work on religion. He argued that religion has three main functions in society. First, it is a mean of social cohesion and solidarity through shared beliefs. Second, it is a social control tool to enforce morals and norms to maintain conformity in society. And, it offers a way to answer any existential questions (Durkheim, E., & Swain, J. W., 2012).

Durkheim argued that religious rituals are a communal practice. By participating in a unified set system of rituals society members sustain their relationship with their community and their larger community of faith. This creates a deep sense of unity and cohesion among a given group or a community who hold common religious ideas (Durkheim, E., & Swain, J. W., 2012). He also argues that all major world religions promoted a standard set of behavior. A system of normative behavior that regulates social integrations and behaviors can be easily set when conformity is encouraged according to a set of standards (Durkheim, E., & Swain, J. W., 2012).

This study is particularly concerned with Durkheim's second function of religion "social control". It argues that religious ideals, promoted through media platforms, in Saudi society are being utilized as a tool to prompt certain norms in the society. In Saudi Arabia, as religion is the main source of legislation and setting social norms, it is crucial to examine the current religious discourse in its contemporary form to see how it is responding to the current regulations and changes regarding women in Saudi society.

Methods

Research Process

The independent variable in the current study is policy changes and the dependent variable is women portrayal in the religious discourse. An inductive

approach will be implemented as the focus of the study will expand from specific level to a general level. The research process of the current study is two folds:

- 1- Conduct a content analysis of the content published on the religious websites
- 2- Conduct a thematic analysis to the state's: National Vision 2030 document, National Transformation Plan 2020 and Mohamed Bin Salman's 2018 TV interview.
- 3- Comparison between the content analysis and thematic analysis results.

Content Analysis

This study will conduct a content analysis of four official Saudi Islamic electronic platforms through the following steps.

- 1- Searching the different synonyms of the word woman in Arabic (نساء، امرأة، امرأة،) via the search engine of the website itself. If there is no search engine available, content will be collected manually.
- 2- List content published from June, 2017 until present.
- 3- Collect multimedia content, if found.
- 4- Categorizing the results into groups according to its type (Fatwas, articles and multimedia content), and according to the topic (women's conduct
- 5- Results will be reported in graphic figures and tables.

Since this study is qualitative and generalization is not applicable, there are no specific rules when determining an appropriate sample size. Hence, the sample size is irrelevant. Therefore, the guideline of the sample size is data saturation which occurs when adding more participants to the study does not result in further information (Glaser, 1967). Saturation is not concerned with numbers *per se*, rather it is about the quality of the data. There is no universal data collection method that fits all qualitative

research (Fusch, P. I., & Ness, L. N., 2015). However, there are some general guidelines that researchers agree on: no new information, themes, coding, and ability to repeat the research (Glaser, 1967). The sample will be drawn from four official websites and platforms.

To study the religious discourse, after Mohamed Bin Salman was appointed as the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, the sample will include content from four official Saudi Islamic websites published after his appointment in June, 2017. The unit of the analysis is content from official websites/ official digital platforms (fatwas and articles).

Websites were initially selected as the main sources of content to best represent the Mohamed bin Salman era's online religious discourse for the following reasons:

- 1- Compared to broadcast and printed media, online websites are more interactive (Salman, A., Ibrahim, F., Mostafa, N., & Mahbob, M., 2011).
- 2- Unlike other digital platforms (YouTube, mobile applications, and social media websites) website content can be archived and categorized according to the topic, date, popularity, rating, viewing rate, etc. This will facilitate detecting the time frame of the study, coding and interpreting results.
- 3- Internet, along with TV channels, are the main source of religious of Islamic knowledge for Saudi women (Bochareb, 2013).
- 4- Digital platforms gained prominence in the Arab region after the Arab Spring (Center of International Media assistance, 2011).
- 5- on this websites and online platforms users are usually anonymous which gives them more freedom in voicing their inquiries.

However, one of the main official websites <http://www.alifta.net>, does not include the issue date of *Fatwa*, therefore, two official twitter account were chosen as an alternative to the website the official Twitter account of the General Presidency of Scholarly Research and *Iftaa* and official Twitter account of the Council of Senior Scholars. The analysis is intended to provide a quantified interpretation of the most common matters concerning women that are prevalent on Saudi Islamic websites. From that, we can draw a discussion if women's portrayal on the online religious discourse after Mohamed bin Salman.

Selected platforms are:

- 1- General Presidency for the affairs of the Holy Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque: <https://www.gph.gov.sa/ar-sa/Pages/default.aspx>
- 2- The official website of the Saudi Mufti Abd al Aziz Abdullah al-Sheikh: The Grand Mufti of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the head of the senior scholars and research Authority. <http://www.mufti.af.org.sa/ar/>
- 3- The official twitter account of the General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Iftaa
https://twitter.com/TPCV_SSA/with_replies
- 4- The official Twitter account of the Council of Senior Scholars
https://twitter.com/ssa_at?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor

Thematic Analysis

In order to address the second main research question: “What are the recent governmental policy changes towards Saudi women? How does it reflect the state’s vision towards Saudi women?”, a thematic analysis of the vision 2030, National

Transformation plan 2020, and a televised interview with Mohamed Bin Salman, will be conducted to reflect the government vision towards women. Then, a comparison between the results of the content analysis of the official religious discourse and the “recent policy changes towards Saudi women” will be provided to assist answering the third question “is women portrayal in the Saudi official religious websites correspond to the recent policy changes?”.

Limitations

Study Time Frame

The time frame of the study, 1 year, is relatively narrow. A longer period of time would provide a more sufficient, perhaps a larger set of data, to work with, and hence, draw a more comprehensive conclusion. Alternatively, a five year timeframe would have provided more sufficient data.

Generalization

Among main disadvantages of qualitative methods is that results cannot be extended to the wider population. This is because findings are not tested to determine whether they are statistically significant. In the case of the current study, the examined portion, the online religious discourse, cannot be generalized to the entire official religious institutions discourse. Instead, it examines a segment of its communication content. Other mediums TV channels, radio or Islamic academic research may be exhibiting different responses to the current policies.

Archiving properties

One of the main obstacles faced during the sampling process was archiving property on official Saudi websites. This study was intended to examine the content published after the coming of Mohamed Bin Salman, and measure its accordance with the state’s vision—in terms of women’s matters—during a one-year period. Hence, the

archiving property is crucial to identify when a certain content was published. However, the official website of the General Presidency of Scholarly Research and *Iftaa* www.aliftaa.net, which contains substantial portion of official *Fatwas*, research and article, does not have this feature. Due to the absence of the archiving feature, content of this website could not be sampled. If additional content from this website was sampled and added to the study, coding process and analysis might have differed.

Literature Review

Women in Saudi Religious Discourse

Madawi Al-Rasheed's work on Saudi history, women, and society is particularly a rich reference to consider when studying women and religion in contemporary Saudi society. In her book, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia*, Al-Rasheed explores the political, historical and religious factors that made women barely enjoy any social or legal rights. Under the patronage of the state and the religious establishment, women became captives to the state constructed religious outlook. She focuses particularly on the intersection between gender, religion, and politics. In the third chapter, *Symbols of Piety*, Al-Rasheed examines the official Islamic *Fatwas* concerning women during the 1980's and how it shaped the role of women in the Saudi society back then. This could be studied from the Framing theory perspective, where Islamic *Fatwas* determined what is permissible and what is prohibited for women within a specific frame created and promoted by the empowered official religious institution. Al-Rasheed examines the religious discourse during the 1980's, because she considers that the seizure of the Mecca mosque by extremists in 1979 was a turning point for the state and the religious establishment. Post-1979, the state was forced to revise and regain control over the religious establishment, which eventually prompted a sudden religious "state-led" religious enthusiasm to create a

conservative façade and maintain it through Islamic rhetoric. To achieve social control through religion¹, women, in particular, were seen as deserving of greater control, because women, with their different social roles, can ensure a pious façade of the society and maintain its character.

The Fatwas issued by the "official religious institution" in Saudi, embodied in the Scholars Council, were based on two sources: Quran and sayings of the prophet "*Hadiths*". While the council's role was to issue fatwas relevant to public life, Fatwas concerning women were considered considerable preoccupation for the *Ulama* and the council as the official religious institution. In one of the most comprehensive Saudi Fatwa anthologies, published by the council, a whole chapter was designated to women's Fatwas only. The chapter covers matter related to women's issues such as marriage, clothing and interacting with men (Abullah, 2005). Such references are used as a credible reference to resolve issues and controversies related to women (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Al-Rasheed argues that the examined Fatwas on women in the 1980's reflect the exclusion of women from the public sphere, prohibiting women from participating effectively in politics, prohibiting women from assuming key public roles, controlling their bodies, promoting marriage and polygamy, restricting education and travelling abroad and promote male guardianship (Al- Rasheed, 2013). Moreover, in his anthropological study of the Saudi Wahhabi society, Abdulla (2005) argues that the term *Fetnah* was framed in a way that associated it women's issues and matters particularly (p. 141). For instance, behaviors such as going shopping with no Mahram,

¹ See Durkheim's Functionalist Approach p.4.

wearing perfume, interacting with men or even coeducation can result in, from a Wahhabi point of view, catastrophic social corruption or *Fetnah* (Abdullah, 2005).

In her research, “*The Reality of Saudi women's Rights in Light of the Saudi Religious Discourse*”, Al-Zyab (2016) seeks to identify the rights of Saudi women in the light of the religious and legislative discourse in Saudi Arabia as well as its impact on the future of Saudi women in general. The study provided an overview of women's rights according to the Islamic religion. Then, it provided an analytical comparison between women's rights according to the Islamic law and the current legislative discourse in Saudi Arabia. The research delivered a list of recommendations in light of the legal and jurisprudence analysis provided. The study implied that the current legislative system in Saudi does not grant the women their rights according to the Islamic law. Meanwhile, Al-Besraty (2014) provided a more comprehensive examination that included political and social variables that reoriented the religious discourse in Egypt, particularly post the Arab spring. Additionally, the study examines the most commonly covered matters concerning women in the religious discourse and Egypt; and its role in placing a positive change on women's status in Egyptian society. Al-Besraty's study implemented observation and content analysis of contemporary and primary Islamic heritage resources. The results imply that the main issue with the religious discourse is not Islam itself as a religion, rather, it is how the society is perceiving Islam and devoted Muslims. Additionally, the current religious discourse and understanding in Egypt are stripping Islam from its core spiritual value by transforming it into a mere façade achieved through a set of rituals and rules. She also concludes that the ongoing extensive religious discourse is failing to achieve any tangible positive reform in the Egyptian society.

On the other hand, Bocharab (2013) decided to study how women themselves are representing their religious issues, such as veiling, guardianship, inheritance and political participation, through Islamic discourse. It focuses on the socio-religious or socio-Islamic depiction of women of themselves in the contemporary Islamic discourse. Hence, the study seeks an investigation on how women perceive themselves from an Islamic perspective. The study implemented a qualitative interviewing methodology to examine highly educated Saudi women's take on their own religious issues such as work, marriage, veil, and inheritance. The study showed that social and religious discourse on women is widely intersecting. This implies that religious discourse has a profound impact on the social discourse in Saudi Arabia. The study found that women topics and Fatwas were mainly focused on minor jurisprudential issues such as marriage, divorce, menstruation and practicing rituals and veil. Meanwhile, interviews revealed men's monopoly over the public religious discourse. Saudi women sampled in the study reported that they were particularly influenced by young male Islamic preachers or *daeia*. Bocharab also argues that women are mainly portrayed as dehumanized beings by employing a negative demeaning language that presents women as irrational or overly emotional beings.

Over all, it can be concluded through the above provided examples that women in different Islamic discourses within different social and political contexts are portrayed through specific molds or “frames”. All these molds are exported to serve a specific purpose within its context. For instance, Al-Besraty's study in Egypt showed that the Islamic discourse is not comprehensively reflecting the Islamic religion, rather, it is exporting an image of what the society approves as a “good Muslim”. These images created through the religious discourse, according to Goffman (1974), are the frames through which the public are expected to grasp social norms and concepts. Henceforth,

achieving social control and cohesion, as one of the main functions of religion, would be possible.

CHAPTER 2: THE RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF WAHHABISM AND THE SAUDI STATE

Wahhabism is a historical term that refers to the *Hanbali* school of jurisprudence according to the writings and teachings of Mohamed Bin Abd al-Wahhab (Habib, 2009). In the case of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Wahhabi school is not a mere separate institution; rather, the Saudi state itself is considered the political expression of the Wahhabi ideology. Moreover, Wahhabism acted as, not just the ideology that laid the foundation of the modern political structure, but also a social adhesive tool that created homogeneous society (Ayoob, 2009). This chapter aims to analyze the Wahhabi school's chief role as an early reformist movement that later evolved into a political expansion and social control tool.

Mohamed Bin Abd al-Wahhab and the Inception of the Wahhabi Movement:

Historical Background

The Wahhabi mission is one of the earliest Islamic revivalist movements that was founded in central Arabia by jurist and scholar Mohamed Bin Abd al-Wahhab who was born in a scholarly family in *Uyayna* (Commins, 2006). He studied Islam in a number of cities including Basra, Baghdad and Damascus. His encounter with Shiites in Iraq greatly contributed to the formation of his pioneering purist method.

“According to Sheikh Muhammad’s grandson, it was during his study with Basra’s scholars that God revealed to him hidden aspects of God’s unity and His attributes. This special divine inspiration set him apart from other scholars of his time and moved him to compose the seminal treatise for Wahhabism, *The Book of God’s Unity*, on the basis of Hadith collections he found in Basra.” (Commins, 2006, p. 12).

Abd al-Wahhab strongly criticized the superstitious practices that were common in central Arabia at that time such as visiting shrines, praying to saints or carrying amulets. According to Abd al-Wahhab's teachings, these rituals opposed the core of Islamic doctrine of *tawheed*. In his book, *Sheikh Mohamed abd al Wahhab's Movement and its influence on Mohamed Iqbal's Thought*, Mohamed Gamal al-Din states that the call of Sheikh Mohamed Bin Abd al-Wahhab was simple, its cornerstone was the doctrine of *tawheed*, and its motto is "There is no God but Allah". This is a slogan that is not strange to Muslims; it is the basis of their entire belief and the essence of their religion (Gamal al-Din, 1982).

Abd al-Wahhab was known for punishing men who missed attending the Friday communal prayer, or visited graves of holy figures for supplication, and those charlatans claiming to be pious saints. He also cut down holy trees and destroyed shrines that were claimed to be holy. He sought to purify his homeland from blasphemy and debauchery (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Furthermore, he undertook the responsibility of applying the *Shari'a* in matters concerned with inheritance, marriage, *zakat* and commercial transactions (Ibn-Ghannam, 1985; al-Rahseed, 2013; Commins, 2006). *Uyayna* ruler approved his actions as long as he did not threaten his political authority or legitimacy. No one saw him as a real threat until he stoned an adulteress in *Uyayna*, which was a drastic act to purify the community from adultery. According to the chronicles, the adulteress came to him and admitted her sin, repeating her confession four times. He asked her if she was fully in control of her mental ability, and she confirmed that she was fully stable. Additionally, he gave her several days to reconsider her confessions; however, she remained firm (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Later, Abd al-Wahhab gave the order to stone her in public. In fact, it was the ruler of *Uyayna* himself, along with several men, who stoned her to death (Ibn-Ghannam, 1985). After her

funeral, some people from the village were alarmed with the incident and decided to inform *Hasa* ruler, Sulayman al-Mohamed of bani Khalid tribe, who was worried about Abd al-Wahhab's approach. Hence, he forced ruler of *Uyayna* to expel Abd al-Wahhab.

After Mohamed Bin abd al Wahhab's expulsion from *al-Uyayna*, he travelled to *al-Dir'iyya* in search of political support. His call was welcomed and managed to gain popularity thanks to a pious female, wife of ruler Mohamed Ibn Saud, who was the first in *al-Dir'iyya* to voice her support to the Imam's call. She also urged her husband, Ibn Saud, to provide him with the support he needed (Al-Rasheed, 2013). This relationship between Ibn Saud and Abd al-Wahhab later developed into a political alliance in 1744. This alliance was a historical point that gave birth to the Saudi state and its Wahhabi ideological base. The Saudi state with its political and financial power granted the survival and expansion of the purist school of Islam.

Under the name of jihad—fighting the unbelievers—the political alliance of al Saud and Abd al-Wahhab carried out several conquests in order to fight those who rejected his teachings and did not abide by his purist approach, labeling them as infidels (Ibn-Ghannam, 1985). Some historians described these invasions as bloody. For example, Osman Ibn Bishr al-Najdi, the historian of the first Saudi state², described 1801 Karbala's invasion as a bloody massacre (Ibn Bishr, 1930). He wrote that Ibn Saud documented the massacre saying “we took Karbala and slaughtered and took its

² The First Saudi state was the Emirate of Diriyah. It was established in the year 1744 with an alliance between Imam Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Prince Muhammad bin Saud. This alliance started a socio-religious reform movement to unify the Arabian Peninsula and free it from Ottoman rule (Anderson, 1985).

people (as slaves), then praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, and we do not apologize” (Crooke, 2015, p.59).

After Abd al-Wahab’s death in 1803, his followers and al Saud were able to control the majority of the Arabian Peninsula including Mecca and Madinah, which were under the rule of the Ottoman empire then. Nonetheless, due to an internal power struggle, their control over the region survived only for nearly a century. Later in 1901 the alliance led by prince Abd al Aziz al Saud reclaimed control of the region (Ayoob and Kosebalaban, 2009).

Wahhabism and the State Structure

Wahhabism in the state structure in Saudi Arabia can be defined as a purist and literal Islamic interpretation implemented and endorsed by al-Saud ruling family and *Ulama* coalition (Commins, 2006; Ayoob, 2009). Neither al Saud family nor Wahhabism alone is the full story of Saudi Arabia; rather it is the fusion of both and the exclusion of the other that inhabits meaningful nation making (Ayoob, 2009). In other words, the alliance represents a marriage of convenience between al-Saud and Wahhabi establishment. They complement each other in the sense that al-Saud gave the Wahhabis the political and strategic power they needed to spread their ideology, while al Saud needed the Wahhabi *Ulama* to maintain their legitimacy (Commins, 2006). Throughout the state formation process, *Ulama* in Saudi Arabia shared authority with Al-Saud family. *Ulama* come from the al-Sheikh family, descendants of Mohammad Bin Abd al-Wahhab. They dominated all religious posts within the kingdom, which makes al-Sheikh family extremely powerful. The family’s power is also maintained through intermarriage with al Saud royal family (Elliott, 2012).

Earlier, Mohammad Bin Abd al-Wahhab's mission in the eighteenth century did not specify an official channel through which the *Sahri'a* law should be applied. However, following the Egyptian invasion of 1818, the doctrine of imposing the Islamic *Shari'a* by-law became central. As the Saudi state was becoming weaker, Saudi rulers realized the importance of imposing *Shari'a* law through an 'officialisation' process (Cook, 2000). One can argue that this step was the beginning of merging *Sahri'a* within the official state institutions.

The evolution of the modern Saudi state can be divided into three main phases, the period between 1902-1932, when territorial expansions were completed; between 1932-1945, that featured the unification of the Saudi territories and establishing a Saudi Wahhabi central government and a national identity; and the period between 1945-1953, when the government defined its regional and foreign policies according to the Wahhabi frame of reference (Commins, 2006).

By 1932, a unified, yet, primitive Saudi government was established, with the Quran acting as the official and sole constitution, and Islamic law '*Shari'a*' the base of the legal system. The state structure was very fragile and embryonic due to the limited resources of the country and its weak economy. With the 1950's the Kingdom witnessed a historical turning point when Ibn Saud had opened his country to foreign companies for oil exploration, expansion of trade, military training missions and western and foreign laborers. With that economic boom and openness to foreign expatriates, Ibn Saud vowed to preserve the Kingdom's conservative 'Wahhabi' character (Commins, 2006).

Before the 1950s, the Saudi polity consisted of the royal family, Several Arab advisors, heads of elite lineages, tribal leaders and the Wahhabi *ulama*. After the 1950s

the Saudi polity was entirely reconstructed due to the economic development that the kingdom was witnessing after the discovery of oil. Throughout the state building process had witnessed frequent rifts between westernized political elites and bureaucrats, who acquire technical expertise abroad, and the Wahhabi establishment due to a profound ideological gap between the political and the religious wings of the government. However, al-Saud were able to contain the Wahhabi *ulama* through the “bureaucratization of the establishment”. The integration of the religious establishment was achieved through creating official channels where the Wahhabi *ulama* were able to impose their Wahhabi interpretations such as religious research, girls’ education, mosques and judiciary. Later by the 1970’s, the board of Senior *ulama* and the Directorate of Religious Research, *Fatwas*, Propaganda and Guidance became the official institution for issuing *Fatwas*. Moreover, the Ministry of Pilgrimage and Religious Endowments took over appointing mosque employees and *Imams*. Meanwhile, education of girls was vested in the General Presidency for Girls' Education, as a compromise with the *ulama* who opposed girls’ education up until 1955. Last but not least, Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice³ was responsible for monitoring social order and discipline (Commins, 2006).

Wahhabism and Women

Wahhabi movement and its position on the status of women has triggered an academic debate between those who consider it a correctional movement that promises

³ In September 1926, a Company for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (Jama’at al-amr bi al-ma’ruf wa al-nahy ‘an al-munkar), was issued according to a royal decree. The company consisted of twelve members who were responsible for observe the public conducts and interactions according to the Islamic law. They had to ensure that prayers were performed on time, observe social transactions (*al-mu’amalat*), monitor the call to prayer and imams, and prevent people from using insults. In 1928, sex segregation, consumption of alcohol and use of tobacco were added to the above list (Mouline & Rundell, 2014).

“emancipation of women” from tribal injustice—within a certain historical context, and those who consider it the main reason behind degrading the status of Saudi women in modern Saudi Arabia (Al-Rasheed, 2013). The main aim of reviewing this debate is to examine the role of the revivalist movement in the evolution of gender construction throughout the state formation process from the eighteenth century to the modern Saudi state.

Natana Delong-Bas was one of the scholars who debunked the common portrayal of the Wahhabi mission. Her reading focuses on the impact of the mission on women at the time of its inception in the eighteenth century. Her revisionist reading provides that Abd al-Wahhab’s construction of gender was not sought to degrade women. In fact, her reading of the Wahhabi approach attributes misogyny to patriarchal Bedouin society rather than the Islamic school itself (Delong-Bas, 2004). Abd al-Wahhab interactions with women, she argues, had greatly reflected his concern about their rights and social justice in several matters. Arguably, saw them as human beings capable of serving as effective agents in both public and private spheres just like men. He also gave them greater power through enforcing the rights that Islam granted for them. He reformed regulations that were seen degrading and contrary to Islam, such as forced marriage and depriving women from their financial rights. In one of his written messages, Abd al- Wahhab condemned the unlawful practice of intentionally depriving women from their share in inheritance, describing it as a sin. He also listed a number of legal conditions for marriage that preserves women’s social and financial rights and eradicate forced marriage⁴ (Delong-Bas, 2004). He granted women to state their own conditions in the marriage contract, in accordance with the *Hanbali* tradition. Based on

⁴ It included: consent of both parties, acceptance of both parties, approval of the female’s male guardian and equal social status (Delong-Bas, 2004).

this, women were allowed to include a precondition in the contract that prevents their partners from taking more wives after marriage. Additionally, according to Abd al-Wahhab, men are obliged to spend time with their wives throughout the day to ensure that their wives are emotionally and sexually content, as well as to conceive offspring. He also urged men to treat their wives with affection and kindness and avoid forcing them to practice any sexual intercourse that might harm her physically or physiologically. In terms of women's financial rights, he stated that men should defray a proper alimony for their wives in addition to their dowries. Moreover, he applied a legal framework on punishing transgression such as adultery to protect women from unjust punishments by the community, husband or family members (Al-Jasser, 1983).

The life of Mohamed Bin Abd al-Wahhab saw women playing a central role in the political life and even military actions. In fact, the foundation of the first Saudi state was laid down by women who appreciated and, thus, transmitted the sheikh's message to other households. Cornicles of Ibn Ghannam assert that Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was introduced to the Mohamed Ibn Saud through this network of women. In fact, one of the reasons why women of *Deriyya* welcome Abd al-Wahhab's call was the enforcement of the adultery penalty particularly, because they will see the *Hadd* of adultery being imposed on those immoral women who seduce their husbands and deprived them from being secure in their marriages (Al-Rasheed, 2013). When his teachings eventually reached the wife of the ruler of *Deriyya*, Modi Bint Wahtan, she urged her husband to accept Abd al-Wahhab's call and provide ideological support to him.

Furthermore, Ghalia al Baqmia supported the coalition's warriors in their fight against the Egyptian army of Tusun Mohamed Ali in 1813, and again in another

retaliation battle against the father of Tusun, Mohamed Ali, where the Pasha tried to capture her.

Moreover, Al-Jawhara bint Abdullah bin Mo'amer, Abd al-Wahhab's wife had helped him in spreading his mission by consolidating her husband's relationship with prominent figures, such as her brother Emir Othman, who had a notable impact on the Imam's mission. From the above discussion, one can argue that the primary sources that focused on the role of women in Mohamed bin abd al-Wahhab were very limited (Al-Jasser, 1983). Yet, a considerable portion of it provides a positive reading of women's role in the Imam's time.

Women in the Wahhabi mission's early formation stage in the eighteenth century were central in the religious and social reform processes that Abd al-Wahhab intended. As previously mentioned, he was expelled from *Uyayna* for stoning a woman who committed adultery '*zaniya*' and failed to repent, yet, he was welcomed to his refuge town of *Deriyya* thanks to the efforts of another woman, the wife of Mohamed Ibn Saud. These two examples of women, the "pious" and the "sinner", have constructed a fixed moral model. In general, Abd al-Wahhab was concerned with enforcing the right *Sahri'a* law in all aspects from the central creed of *Tawheed*⁵, praying to commercial transactions. Meanwhile, a considerable portion of his teachings and writings were emphasizing the above mentioned contrasting examples of women. As he reviews women's role and rights according to Shari'a law, he was also concerned with enforcing social disciplinary penalties '*Hodod*' concerning women's conduct such as penalties of adultery and defamation (Al-Rasheed, 2013).

⁵ In his book, *The Three Fundamentals*, Abd al-Wahhab defines *Tawheed* as singling Allah out in worship. In Islam, supplication to others besides Him, *shirk*, is the greatest sin in Islam (Abd al-Wahhab, 2013).

While Delong and Al-Jasser provided a positive reading of the impact of the Wahhabi mission on women, other scholars such as Egyptian theologian Khaled Abo al-Fadl offered a counter view. By analyzing the Wahhabi influence on women, Abo al-Fadl argues, as cited in al- Rasheed work (2013), that “authoritarian interpretations” became dominant in the religious discourse. This resulted in the prevalence of *fatwas* on restricting the dress code, women conduct, segregation, guardianship, and even women’s voice being seductive.

Furthermore, historian Eleanor Doumato provided an anthropological interpretive perspective that focuses on the negative impact of the Wahhabi school on women in a later stage in the twentieth century. She argues that the teachings of the male dominated Wahhabi school led to the erosion of social and religious spheres in which women were prominent, particularly healing practices, that were taken over by male *ulama*. She also states that the *ulama* instigated a hostile and suspicious tone towards women that led to their exclusion from the sacred sphere of the mosque and religious learning which eventually led them to find alternative ways to connect with God (Doumato, 2000)

The relationship between the Al Saud and the religious establishment⁶ has been interlinked and interdependent throughout the history of the Saudi state. It seems that the interaction between al-Saud regime and the Wahhabi establishment has been inconsistent in terms of the control they exercise on each other.

As cited in Scott, M. K. (2013) work “Religion and State in Saudi Arabia and the Role of the Wahhabi Establishment in Governance”, according to an analysis by Alsaif, T (n.d), the relationship between al-Saud and the Wahhabi religious

⁶ Ulama, or body of religious scholars endorsed by the government (Commins, 2006).

establishment has gone through five main stages. The first turning point was in 1961 with the transformation of the religious institution from a traditional character into a state structured institution. The second was in 1979, after the success of the Iranian revolution and the Holy mosque seizer events, which pressured the kingdom to promote a countering *Salafi* influence to face the rise of Shiite power in Iran. This Sunni “righteous” outlook granted the government the legitimacy it needed internally. The third phase started with the 1990 invasion of Iraq which promoted internal accusations of complicity with western powers against the Saudi monarchy, and hence, resulted in the rise of “*al-Sahwa*” movement. Amid the 9/11 events a fourth phase started with the “break-up” of the religious institution power. “All of the various factions, groupings and sub-groupings in this religious hierarchy felt the impact of this decision, including the official state religious institutions and the state’s very own aura of religiosity” Scott, 2013, p.310). The fifth and final phase coincided with the outbreak of the Arab spring. This phase resulted in a rapid internal political and social change that, subsequently, was reflected in evident divisions in the internal religious institution. After the Arab spring, the official religious institution was deployed to further cement the legitimacy of the Saudi monarchy, while a systematic crack down on independent religious scholars who were enthusiastically backing the revolutions —such as *al-Sahwa*—was implemented (Lacroix, 2014).

“Mufti Abd al-Aziz Al al-Shaykh appeared on state TV to warn the population against any form of dissent, while the Kingdom’s highest religious body, the Council of Senior Ulama, issued a fatwa explaining that ‘there are legitimate ways for advice and reform that bring benefits and avoid evils, and writing petitions with the aim of intimidating and causing division ... is not one of them’, before adding that ‘reform and advice should not be through demonstrations

and other means that foster chaos and division in the community’ and reaffirming that ‘demonstrations are forbidden religiously’ (Lacroix, 2014, p. 14).

Concluding remarks

Piety and Political Community

According to the theoretical framework of the study, the centrality of the contrasting two main female examples in the Wahhabi mission, the *Uyayna* adulteress and the pious supporter of *Deriyya* through the 18th century Wahhabi religious discourse, has extended to the modern Saudi state, particularly after 1979. The historical narrative, intellectual production and religious discourse has been fixing these two images in the conscious of Saudi people. “From classroom teaching materials to advanced historical manuscripts, the population is reminded of the two women: one threatened the Islamic state; the other made it possible as a project” (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.49). Each one of these women presents a political model, one that is ideal and moral and the other is deviant and dissolute. Hence, establishing a clear distinction between the two female models, and their impact on maintaining or failing the pious state, resulted in a unique gender construction based on an ideological motive. This clear distinction is the exact mechanism intended to achieve social control through religion as referred to in Durkheim's functionalist approach. Within that contrast lies the “critical role of Saudi women” (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Through being pious or immoral, women in Saudi society have the power to make or break the “Islamic façade of the society”, which also explains the importance of moral control is an important component in the state policy.

CHAPTER 3: CONTEXTUALIZING CURRENT WOMEN STATUS IN SAUDI ARABIA IN THE MOHAMED BIN SALMAN’S ERA: IMPLICATIONS OF THE VERTICAL POWER TRANSITION ON SAUDI POLITY

“If Mohamed bin Salman succeeds at his transformation plan, he essentially will found a Fourth Saudi state, so different is his vision of the future Kingdom from that created by his grandfather and perpetuated by six of the founder’s sons who have ruled since his death in 1953. Because he is only 31, MBS should have decades, perhaps a half century, to rule giving him a long runway to remake the Kingdom.” (House, 2017, p.11)

Introduction

This chapter aims to contextualize Saudi women’s status within the latest changes or “reforms” that the Saudi society is witnessing amid the recent structural changes in the Saudi regime. In order to study the reflection of such social reforms on the concurrent religious discourse, it is crucial to position the latter within the latest political changes that dictates the time frame of the study—one year after the appointment of Mohamed Bin Salman as the crown prince. In addition to examining the cause and effect relationship between such chances and the power transition in the Saudi regime. On June 21st, 2017, the Saudi Press Agency announced the appointment of Mohamed bin Salman as the new crown prince replacing his cousin Mohammed bin Nayef in a major shake-up in the royal line of succession. The move challenged the conventional horizontal brother-to-brother pattern in power transition in the kingdom that has been a tradition set by the founder of Saudi Arabia King Abulaziz. The move resulted in transferring the power from one generation to another. Hence, several political changes within the royal family and in state policy were implemented to cement the crown prince’s legitimacy and boost his popularity among the local and

international communities. The 31-year-old Saudi crown prince has introduced new local economic and social reforms such as 2030 vision, allowing women to drive and allowing more entertainment options in the kingdom by lifting the ban on cinemas and concerts. Arguably, such changes are “shocking” to the Saudi society that has been controlled by a fixed set of conservative religious laws. The Wahhabi rhetoric has always been definitive in terms of identifying what is allowed “*Halal*” and what is forbidden “*Haram*”. This had been very evident in discussions and Fatwas addressing women. As suggested in the previous chapter, the Wahhabi Islamic discourse has produced two contrasting images of women: the pious and the deviant; hence, in the Wahhabi version of Saudi society a woman’s behavior leads her to be either pious or deviant. Based on the Wahhabi understanding of Islam the *Haram* and *Halal* concepts of *Shari’a* has been translated into a list of laws and “dos and don’ts”. However, since Mohamed bin Salman was announced the kingdom’s crown prince, such conservative Wahhabi norms are being contested.

Background

Mohamed bin Salman was an influential al-Saud personality and has had a noticeable role in the government and in social development before becoming the crown prince. In 2007, he was appointed as a full-time adviser to the Council of Ministers and served for two years. In 2009, he became a special adviser to his father, who was the governor of Riyadh at the time, while continuing to serve as a consultant of the Saudi cabinet’s expert commission until March 2013. He also served as the secretary-general of the Riyadh Competitive Council, special adviser to the chairman of the board for the King Abdulaziz Foundation, and member of the board of trustees for the *Albir* Society for development. His influence in social and economic development emerged when he founded a non-profit foundation called MiSK that aims

to promote learning and leadership among Saudi youth and supporting startups through business incubation programs. In recognition of his role in social and economic development he was awarded the "Personality of the Year" award in 2013 by Forbes Middle East for establishing MiSK Foundation.

In 2015 Mohamed bin Salman was named deputy crown prince in the same year of King Salman's accession to the throne. "Barely a year into the job he was promising nothing short of revolutionary change: to make Saudis dependent upon themselves, to grow the number of women in the Saudi workforce, to permit forbidden entertainment and to make the price of oil "irrelevant" to the Saudi economy. The bedrock of Saudi success, he promised, would be "moderation, tolerance, excellence, discipline, equity and transparency"—all values largely absent in the current Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." (House, 2017, p. 10).

In the same year, the prince had gained control over the military as he was appointed the defense minister on January 23rd. His first move as a minister was in line with al-Saud's all-time anti-Iran policy. He formed a pan-GCC coalition to intervene in Yemen and to launch an offensive against the Iranian backed Houthi rebels. By March 2015, Saudi Arabia was leading a coalition of countries to fight the Houthi rebels ("Profile: Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman", 2017).

As Mohamed bin Salman was extending his power over the economic, political and military aspects in the Kingdom, Mohamed bin Nayef, King Salman's nephew, was appointed as crown prince under King Salman's royal decrees in April, 2015 ("Profile: Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman", 2017). On June 21st, 2017, the country's king removed his nephew Mohamed bin Nayef as crown prince to appoint his son, Mohammed bin Salman, to become first in line to succeed his father King Salman as

ruler of the Kingdom. Mohamed bin Salman's appointment was inevitable for social and economic change to gain momentum (Chavez, N., CNN, June, 21st, 2017)

Implications of redirecting the power transition

Indicators of a Fourth Saudi State

As mentioned above, since King Abd al Aziz al-Saud, founder of the third Saudi state, the transition of power in Saudi Arabia had been a horizontal from one brother to the other. Such power transition formula was maintained in Saudi Arabia for seven decades but was changed in favor of Mohamed bin Salman. For Al-Saud's surviving sons—Mohamed bin Salman's uncles and half-uncles—it is already expected that they would never become kings. However, the appointment of Mohamed bin Salman as the crown prince by his father has placed him above his cousins. The King's decision, arguably, resulted in a number of internal impacts in terms of the stability of the royal family and internal policies. For instance, the arrest of 11 protesting princes in January 2017 was latest sign of tensions within the Saudi royal family. The princes were objecting a royal order that halted payments by the state to members of the royal family to cover their electricity and water utility bills. They also demanded a compensation for the 2016 execution of their cousin who was convicted of murder (Almasy, S., & Alkashali, H., CNN, January 07th, 2017). This incident was framed by the government as a crackdown on corruption. Pro-government analysts and officials have focused on the question of corruption and framed the arrests as evidence of the crown prince and king's dedication to reform ("Al-Arabiya, 2017, November 6th, 2017). When asked by the presenter Norah O'Donnell on CBS's 60 minutes the crown prince said regarding the arrests: "What we did in Saudi Arabia was extremely necessary. All actions taken were in accordance with existing and published laws." However, within the context of the rapid consolidation of power by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, one can

suggest that the move was aimed to cement his power as the crown prince and eliminating his political challengers within the royal family. Some of the arrested princes and officials represented a direct political threats, such as Mutaib bin Abdullah, the former king's son and head of the National Guard, while others held key governmental positions that were critical to implementing Mohammed bin Salman's economic reform plans.

Additionally, the crown prince's relatively progressive line, if compared to his uncles, resulted in a number of policy changes. In fact, the crown prince traces most of Saudi Arabia's extreme religious rhetoric traced back to the year 1979 with the establishment of the Shiite Iranian autocracy next door by Ayatollah Khomeini. The same year witnessed the seizure of the grand mosque in mecca by a religious extremist group in Saudi Arabia calling for the overthrow of the Saudi royal family. Hence, to contain Saudi's own religious radicals, Saudi government started to implement a stricter Policy according to Shari'a law. "After 1979, that's true. We were victims, especially my generation that suffered from this a great deal..." "This is not the real Saudi Arabia. I would ask your viewers to use their smartphones to find out. And they can google Saudi Arabia in the 70s and 60s, and they will see the real Saudi Arabia easily in the pictures." (CBS, March 8th, 2018). The crown prince is, therefore, intending to return Saudi Arabia to how it was before 1979. "We were living a very normal life like the rest of the Gulf countries. Women were driving cars. There were movie theaters in Saudi Arabia. Women worked everywhere. We were just normal people developing like any other country in the world until the events of 1979. Saudi women -- who've been virtually invisible in public -- have been given new rights, making it easier for them to start a business, join the military, and attend concerts and sporting events. In June, they will be able to get behind the wheel and drive." (CBS, March 8th, 2018).

In September 2017, three months after Mohamed bin Salman became the crown prince, several Saudi clerics were detained in a crackdown on potential opponents of the power that king Salman handed to his son. The list of the arrested included clerics outside the state-backed religious establishment with large online followers such as Salman al-Awdah, Awad al-Qarni and Ali al-Omary (Independent, September, 2017). The arrested clerics were known for previously voicing their criticism of the government; however, following the recent changes in the Saudi power structure they did not declare their loyalty to the regime and kept silent. Hence, given their political history, popularity and their huge number of followers on social media, the government considered them dangerous. The Saudi government has always seen Islamic activism as an internal threat to its legitimacy and hegemony. For instance, in the 1990s, the *Sahwa* movement⁷ had demanded political reforms that were considered as a threat to the royal family. As a consequence, prominent *Sahwa* scholar Salman al-Awdah was imprisoned from 1994-99 for calling for political change. He also voiced his support for democratic transition and tolerance during the ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings of 2011.

The MBS Effect: Changing the Saudi Society

In a Televised interview on Al-Arabiya news channel Mohamed bin Salman announced in 2016 “The Vision 2030 plan”, stating that the plan ensures that "we can live without oil by 2020". Among the reforms he announced included:

- Shares worth less than 5% of Aramco will be sold

⁷ Al-Sahwa movement (Islamic Awakening): A Saudi Islamic movement emerged in Saudi Arabia the 1960s coinciding with a widespread Islamic resurgence in Muslim world. In the Arab world the phenomenon was closely linked to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, who were seeking refuge in Saudi Arabia from the Egyptian socialist regime during the 1950s and 60s. Wahhabism and the Brotherhood had influenced each other resulting in the birth of al-Sahwa movement. It reached its peak in the 1990s before being repressed by the Saudi government (Lacroix, 2011).

- Some of the proceeds will go to a sovereign wealth fund worth \$2tn
- A new visa system that will allow expatriate Muslims and Arabs to work long term in Saudi Arabia
- An action plan will be implemented to diversify the economy, including investment in mineral mining and military production
- Increase participation of women in the workforce (BBC, April 25th, 2016).

Such economic reforms dictate implementing social changes to create a more open society that is able to accommodate and keep up with the long term reform plan. Saudi women's status is an integral part of the crown prince's modernization plan that includes the National Transformation Plan (NTP) 2020 and Vision 2030. Such process will be accompanied with social changes, pushing the Saudi society outside its comfort zone. For instance, the "National Transformation Program 2020" aims to create more employment opportunities through expanding the sports and entertainment sectors, in addition to empowering women. Allowing entertainment events such as the 2018 a Comic-Con event in Jeddah, musical concerts and movie theatres, is part of a wider economic reform plan and restore what Prince Mohammed bin Salman calls the "moderate" face of Islam (Chulov, M., The Guardian, October 24th, 2017). In February 2018, Saudi Arabia had its first music concert in Riyadh. Saudis flocked to the first of kind jazz festival in an unusual moment in the Islamic country. Later in the same week, the General Entertainment Authority announced it intend to stage 5,000 shows, festivals and concerts in 2018 (Dadouch, S., Reuter, February 24th, 2018). Furthermore, restaurants that were once divided by wooden partitions to separate men from women and families are starting to look like modern restaurants anywhere else in the world. Barefaced young Saudi women dine in so-called "family sections" that is separate but still visible to dinners in the other section, laughing and taking selfies without fearing

the religious police anymore (House, 2017).

In another new incident to the Saudi society, Saudi Arabia has kicked off its first-ever card game tournament “Baloot” in April, 2018 in Riyadh, with the former Imam of the Mecca Great Mosque Adel al-Kalbani attending the opening and pictured while dealing cards. Worth mentioning that according to (“Fatwas of the Permanent Committee”, Islam prohibits games such as chess and cards even if does not involve gambling, because it is considered to be distractions from religious duties ‘*Lahw*’⁸. Arguably, the picture of al-Kalbani while dealing cards at the tournament was sending a subliminal message to the Saudi Society declaring the start of the moderate Islam era, as the crown prince promised. The Mohamed bin Salman’s new era of ‘moderate Islam’ indicates a top down change in the Saudi state structure where Wahhabi clerics’ role in shaping the state’s policy will drastically shrink and remolded to serve the new state internal policies of modernization. In a subtle warning to the religious establishment, the prince criticized their previous preaches saying: “We have extremists who forbid mixing between the two sexes and are unable to differentiate between a man and a woman alone together and their being together in a workplace. Many of those ideas contradict the way of life during the time of the prophet and the Caliphs. This is the real example and the true model.” Mohamed bin Salman, CBS, 2018). However, so far kingdom's official clerics are holding their tongues, and have sworn allegiance to the King and his son.

Meanwhile, as part of the national vision 2030, bin Salman vowed to increase women’s participation in the labor market from 22% to 30% in 2030 (“2030 vision

⁸ Lahw in Qur’an and Sunnah is mentioned in the context of entertainment. It means to be distracted from religious commitments and duties with meaningless activities such as games, stories and singing (“Dangers of Organized Distraction (Lahw)”, April, 2010).

goals”, 2017). According to House, E. k. (2017), a more effective role of women, who constitute 60% of university graduates, in the labor market, will likely result in significant social impacts among Saudi women such as delaying marriage and birth control. “Prince Mohammed is presenting change for women as an economic necessity, not a feminist luxury. His approach makes it harder for the religious conservatives to object and mobilize public opposition. He similarly is seeking to reshape young Saudis to take risks and be the foot soldiers in his revolution.” (House, 2017, p.17). Changes in favor of women were unprecedentedly rapid for the Saudi society. In 2016, Sarah al-Suhaimi was named the first chairwoman of the Saudi stock exchange. Meanwhile in the same year another Saudi woman, Princess Reema bint Bandar bin Sultan Saudi, was appointed as head of women’s affairs at the General Authority of Sports, previously forbidden by the religious authorities as “following in the devil’s footsteps.” (Reuters, July 11th, 2017). Her mission is to make sports facilities available for Saudi women at a minimum to no cost. In July 2017, it was announced that for the first time, girls will be allowed to play sports and practice physical activities in public schools. The decision previously approved by al *Shura* Council in 2014, but was never implemented due to opposition from clerics who criticized it as “westernization” (Reuters, July 11th, 2017). In February 2018 alone, the government declared that women could join the military and the intelligence service, driving schools will open its doors for women by June 2018, after finally lifting the ban on women’s driving and stadiums, sports arenas and cinemas will be open to females as well. A month later, with no respond from the Wahhabi clerics, the traditional Saudi garment of Saudi women ‘*abaya*’ was declared by the crown prince himself as not obligatory under Islam, and should be regarded as a personal choice (Sanchez, R., The Telegraph, March 19th, 2018). “The laws are very clear and stipulated in the laws of Sharia: that women wear decent, respectful clothing,

like men. This, however, does not particularly specify a black *abaya* or a black head cover. The decision is entirely left for women to decide what type of decent and respectful attire she chooses to wear.” (Mohamed bin Salman, CBS, 2018). As a consequence, to the prince’s words, a growing number of women are now able to bare their faces and letting headscarves fall back to reveal their hair. This is considered a significant change in a society where until a year before the prince’s announcement, the so-called religious police had the power to arrest a woman for baring her face or hair. In another social transformation, the government opened an all-women municipality office to encourage more women to play a more effective role in the society. The women-only branch of the municipality provides all the routine services offered by other municipalities (Gulf Business, November 22nd, 2017). Additionally, almost every month, the prince’s MISK foundation, orchestrates mixed gatherings for young Saudis—male and females—blended with a minority of guests from other Arabs, Asian and western nationalities (Technical Review Middle East, April, 2017). The gatherings, often focused on top issues such as UNESCO, entrepreneurship and social media, aims to help young Saudis transcend regional, tribal and gender isolation that had been evoking a suspicious attitude among themselves rather than cooperative (House, 2017).

Concluding Remarks

The power shift from horizontal to vertical challenged the power transition tradition that was introduced by the founder of the Kingdom King Abdulaziz. This shift, implemented in favor of young crown prince Mohamed Bin Salman, resulted in a number of inertial policy changes to contain any potential internal tensions within the royal family and appease the local and international communities. Hence, the crown prince ordered the arrest of 11 princes in January 2017 for objecting a royal order that stopped payments by the state to members of the royal family to cover their electricity

and water utility bills. The move was portrayed by state media as a crackdown on corruption in favor of Mohamed Bin Salman. Also, he introduced a number of local “progressive” policy changes to gain popularity among young Saudis and promote to the wider international community a new modernized outlook to the Kingdom.

For the crown prince, 1979, when the Iranian autocracy founding sparked an internal radical Sunni opposition, was the turning point that transformed the Kingdom into a conservative society in order to contain the radical opposition and prevent it from violent revolting. Hence, Mohamed bin Salman has vowed to reform the Saudi society into a modernized version of the pre-1979 Kingdom. His strategy constitutes of a long term economic plan and series of social reforms. His proposal is intended to transform the Saudi economy into a diverse economic system with minimal dependence on oil. In order to diversify the economy and open up investment opportunities for both local and foreign investors, the face of the Saudi society has to change forever to accommodate the prince’s ambitious plan. Developing sports, tourism and the previously banned entertainment sector is now necessary to diversify the economy and achieve the outcomes of the 2030 vision. Yet, contribution of women in all fields, including former banned ones, is now desirable. Women who were once central in maintaining the Saudi conservative façade are now deemed integral as partners in the development process. Women who were once eliminated and invisible due to a particular political and social motive are now being prepared to bear an entirely different task that matches that matches the Kingdom’s brand new ideology.

CHAPTER 4: WOMEN IN THE OFFICIAL ONLINE RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE: CONTENT ANALYSIS

The first section of the research process “frequency based content analysis” is aimed at answering the question “what are the most common matters concerning women that are being frequently discussed on official religious Saudi websites?”. The second section “qualitative analysis” is aimed at answering the second main research question “Does women portrayal in the Saudi online official religious discourse correspond to the recent policy changes?”

Definition

Krippendorff (1980) simply defines content analysis as a research tool used for producing repetitive and valid implications from a specific content. Meanwhile, Weber (1985) refers to content analysis as a scientific research tool that draws valid inferences from data through a set of procedures. These inferences can be about the (a) sender/senders of the message, (b) the message itself, (c) or the targeted audience. According to Stone (1966), content analysis is the procedure of evaluating the relative extent to which certain patterns, behaviors, or responses prevail a specific message or content.

Content Analysis provides a scientific study of communication content, with reference to the interpretations, contexts and purposes of a certain messages. Generally, in content analysis the content of the message is the basis through which the researcher draws implications and conclusions (Nachmias, D. & Nachmias, C., 1976). Moreover, content analysis can also be considered as an “unobtrusive” or “non-reactive method” in social science research (Kerlinger, 1986). In other words, instead of extracting direct responses or answer from participants about a specific issue through direct interaction,

content analysis looks at the an already established communication or interaction to draw conclusions.

Introduction: Research process

As previously stated in the first chapter, an inductive approach will be implemented as the focus of the study will expand from specific level to a general level. To study the religious discourse, after Mohamed Bin Salman rise to power as the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, the study will examine content from four Saudi Islamic websites representing official institutions and figures. The sample will include content published after his appointment in June, 2017. Unit of analysis is content from official websites/ official digital platforms such as (*Fatwas*, articles, questions, etc.).

Selection of Communication Content and Sample

The prime consideration in the selection of the websites and the online platforms is reflecting and presenting the official religious institution in Saudi Arabia. In fact, only clerics associated with the Senior Council of scholars are authorized to issue fatwas⁹, and any *Fatwas* published on a website under the umbrella of the official institution is issued by an authorized scholar from the council of scholars (Boucek, C., 2010). Moreover, the archiving property of the websites is necessary to track the date of publishing and the category of the topic.

This study conducts a content analysis of four official Saudi Islamic online platforms in Saudi Arabia through the following steps.

⁹ According to the August 2010 royal decree in an attempt to reform the religious establishment. Arguably, such restrictions have been in process since 2005 but were not fully enforced (“Saudi Fatwa Restrictions and the State-Clerical Relationship”, 2010).

- 1- Searching different synonyms and forms of the word woman in Arabic (نساء، امرأة، بنت) through the search engine of the website itself. List all content concerned with women's matters. For social media platforms tweets were collected manually due to the lack of a research engine option.
- 2- List content published from June, 2017 until August, 2018.
- 3- Categorizing the results into groups according to type: *Fatwas*, articles, other. And according to topic.
- 4- Collect visual illustrations depicting women, if found, and categorize the pictures by topic.
- 5- Results will be analyzed and interpreted in tables, and narratives.

Selected online platforms were chosen for the current study because first, compared to broadcast and printed media, online platforms are more interactive (Salman, A., Ibrahim, F., Mostafa, N., & Mahbob, M., 2011); additionally, content can be archived and categorized according to the type, topic and date. This will facilitate detecting the time frame of the study, coding and interpreting results. Second, Internet, along with TV channels, are the main source of religious of Islamic knowledge for Saudi women (Bochareb, 2013). Lastly, digital platforms gained prominence in the Arab region after the Arab Spring (Center of International Media assistance, 2011). Official Twitter accounts of the permanent committee of *Fatwas* and senior council of scholar were chosen because their respective official websites do not contain a date reference for their published content. Hence, Twitter accounts were chosen as an alternative source for religious content. The analysis is intended to provide a quantified interpretation of the most common matters concerning women that are prevalent on

Saudi Islamic websites. Subsequently, the analysis of the content will be compared with the coinciding social and political changes that the Saudi government deems “favorable” to women (Mohamed Bin Salman, CBS, March 8th, 2018).

Sampling approach

A purposive sample of online content was drawn from the following websites and platforms:

1. General Presidency for the affairs of the Holy Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque

The General Presidency for the Holy Mosque and the prophet's mosque is a governmental body directly linked to the Saudi Prime Minister. It dates back to 1384 AH under the name of the “General Presidency of Religious Supervision at the Grand Mosque”. The current head of the presidency is Dr. Abdulrahman bin Abdulaziz Al Saudis. The headquarters of the General Presidency for the Holy Mosque is located near the Grand Mosque in Mecca.

The Presidency is responsible for the following obligations:

- Religious, administrative, technical and service supervision in both the Holy Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque.
- Promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice in the two Holy Mosques.
- Supervising the libraries of the Two Holy Mosques.
- The Zamzam water well maintenance.
- Planning, management and implementation of the construction projects of the two Holy Mosques.

- Participating in the High Hajj Committee and the Central Hajj Committee (“About the General Presidency for the affairs of the Holy Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque”, 2007).

An official website for the general presidency was launched in 2007 in Riyadh city in Saudi Arabia in King Abdul Aziz City for Science and Technology. It contains a total of 311. The website contains main sections including: information about the presidency, information about the two holy mosques, technical services, activities, employee portals, intellectual security, publications, media and communication. Additionally, the website provides a live broadcast from the two holy mosques in addition to a link through which visitors can directly contact the head of the presidency Dr. Abdulrahman bin Abdulaziz Al Sudais. The content sampled for the current study was collected from the *Fatwas* section under publication (<https://www.gph.gov.sa/ar-sa/Pages/default.aspx>).

2- The official website of the Saudi Mufti Abd al Aziz Abdullah al-Sheikh

The Grand Mufti of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the head of the senior scholars and research Authority. The website was launched in 2009 by al-Dawaa Saudi foundation operating under the supervision of the government (Al-Riyadh newspaper, Oct 2nd, 2006). The website contains all the *Fatwas* and research work by the current Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, who is also the head of the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Issuing *Fatwas*. The website contains 7 main listed sections including: about the Mufti, lessons, *Fatwas*, sermons, articles, news, multimedia (<http://www.mufti.af.org.sa/ar/>).

3- The official twitter account of the permanent committee of Fatwas

The Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and *Ifta'* is a religious organization in Saudi Arabia concerned with issuing *Fatwas* and Islamic research for the Council of Senior Scholars. Its members are senior Saudi scholars in Islamic *fiqh*, including the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia as its head. Official *Fatwas* in Saudi Arabia are issued by members of the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and *Ifta'* ("Boucek, C., 2010). The Twitter account was created in December, 2015. By the time the data collection process of the current study was concluded, the account had 2090 tweets, 689 photos containing official *Fatwas*, and 146 thousand followers ([https://twitter.com/TPCVS SA](https://twitter.com/TPCVS_SA)

4- The official Twitter account of the Council of Senior Scholars

The official Twitter account of the Council of Senior Scholars is another social media platform that is associated with Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and *Ifta'*. The Twitter account was created in December, 2014. By the time the data collection process of the current study was concluded, the account had 3282 tweets, 1200 photos and videos, and 367 thousand followers (https://twitter.com/ssa_at?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor).

There is no standard or commonly accepted sample size for qualitative research because the "optimal sample" depends on several factors such as, "the purpose of the study, research questions, and richness of the data" (Elo, et. al., 2014, p.4). Hence, the sample size is irrelevant in qualitative content analysis (Glaser, 1967). Therefore, the guideline of the sample size is data saturation which occurs when adding more participants to the study does not result in further information (Glaser, 1967). Saturation is not concerned with numbers *per se*, rather it is about the quality of the data (Fusch,

P. I., & Ness, L. N., 2015). However, there are some general guidelines that researchers agree on: no new information, themes, coding, and ability to repeat the research (Glaser, 1967). Based on the research objective, purposeful sampling¹⁰ is implemented in the current study. The sample targets content that is concerning women published a specific timeframe on Islamic websites and platforms established by the official Saudi religious institution. The sample is drawn from the above listed official websites and platforms: The General Presidency for the affairs of the Holy Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque, the official website of the Saudi Mufti Abd al Aziz Abdullah al-Sheikh, the official twitter account of the General Presidency of Scholarly Research and *Ifta'*, and the official Twitter account of the Council of Senior Scholars. A total of 106 items were collected over the course of 14 months from the aforementioned platforms, published between June 2017 and until August, 2018—when the collection process of the study concluded.

Content Categories

In response to the research's main queries "How are women portrayed in online Islamic religious discourse in Saudi Arabia in the Mohamed bin Salman era?" and "What are the most common matters concerning women that are being frequently discussed on official religious Saudi websites?", a frequency based analysis will be conducted to provide a quantified presentation of findings. The sampled items are categorized into three main categories according to the type of the content: *Fatwas*, articles and other. Moreover, a topic categorization is provided as illustrated in table

¹⁰ purposive sampling is one of the most commonly used approaches in content analysis research. It is known to be suitable for qualitative studies particularly since the researcher is interested in specific data that serve his research objective or topic (Creswell, 2013).

(1). No visual content concerning women was found during the stated period of the data collection. the sampled items (Fatwas, articles and announcements) covered the following themes concerned with women's issues:

Religious Rites

This topic category content was presented in the form of a question and an answer, and addressed obligatory and superfluous Islamic practices such as: prayer, *Hajj*, fasting, reciting *Quran* and observing body cleanness. The questions were predominantly concerning the accurate way to perform such religious rites.

Family Matters

This topic category was the most prevalent topic with a total of 30 items mostly in a question and answer form. content related to family issues in Islamic sharia that include: marriage, divorce, healthy marriage and marital disputes.

Divorce

Questions about when divorce becomes necessary for a married couple? Which situations allow women to ask for divorce? For example, if the wife is complaining about mistreatment, financial issues or even when the husband is not praying.

Marital disputes

This topic includes questions about certain marital issues such as mutual disrespect and constant arguing. These questions are generally seeking an advice from the scholar to solve different marital disagreements.

Engagement and marriage rules

This topic includes question or what is permitted during the engagement period and what is forbidden. For example, is the man allowed to look at his fiancé during the engagement period? If yes, what is he allowed to see? Is it allowed to break the

engagement without the consent of the other person? Is it obligatory to inform the other person about any physical flaws or diseases before the engagement? In the event of breaking up or divorce, what are the financial rights and obligations? And finally questions concerning marriage eligibility. For example, is it permitted to be married to a woman and her aunt at the same time in Islam? is it permitted for a woman to marry without a guardian?

Polygamy

Polygamy was also addressed in the context of marriage disputes and as a reason for divorce. However, answers indicate that polygamy is not an eligible reason for the wife to ask for divorce.

Choosing a spouse and marriage

Also choosing a spouse was addressed from an Islamic point view. Questions such as: what characteristics makes a good wife? How I make sure he/she is the right person for me? Answers recommended guidance prayer, patience and choosing a pious woman for marriage.

Women's Rights and Duties

This topic category was the third most prevalent topic with a total of 23 items. It addressed issues related to women's rights and duties in Islam such as: inheritance, obedience, guardianship, child bearing and nursing, wife rights, duties of the wife and financial and legal rights. The content included mostly Fatwas and few articles.

Women's duties

Predominantly addresses issues related to her duties as a wife, a child bearer and a mother. Again, content is presented in a question and answer form. According to the answers "*Fatwas*" women are expected to be obedient to her husband, loyal, honest and take care of their children. Also, feeding her family and house work are considered

a form of worship and a good deed. Moreover, questions regarding contraception and determining the sex of the fetus were addressed. Answers suggested that such methods are not necessary and should be avoided. Also, one Fatwa suggested that women are allowed to breastfeed their children for more than two years if needed.

Women's rights

Were also emphasized in terms of women's rights as a wife, kind treatment, inheritance and financial support. The issue of guardianship was mentioned in different contexts concerning women. For example, Fatwas indicate that women are not allowed to perform Hajj or leave the house without the permission of the husband. Besides, a designated article by the mufti condemned recent civil and women's rights campaigns that calls for cancelling guardianship, describing it as a crime (المطالبة بإسقاط الولاية عن " المرأة جريمة تستهدف المجتمع السعودي", June, 2017). Furthermore, one Fatwa states that it is the husband's obligation to accompany his wife to perform hajj as her guardian. Regarding allowing women to visit their families and work, Fatwas stated that is prohibited to forbid the wife from visiting her parents. However, when it comes to work, only one question addressed the issue on the Mufti's official website <https://mufti.af.org.sa>. It implies that it is not forbidden, however, the couple should reach an agreement regarding the issue of working before marriage.

Allowing women to drive was only mentioned once in a tweet by Senior Council of scholars stating the following:

هيئة كبار العلماء، (٢٤ يونيو، ٢٠١٨). اتخذ ولاية الأمر -أيدهم الله- قرار السماح للمرأة بقيادة السيارة؛ بناء على ما رأوه من المصالح الراجحة في هذا الموضوع، وبعد أن أخذوا برأي أغلبية أعضاء #هيئة كبار العلماء الذين أفادوا بأن الأصل الإباحة. والذي نوصي به الجميع تقوى الله، ثم التقيد بالأنظمة والتعليمات (تغريدة).

https://twitter.com/ssa_at/status/1010797856012292098

@ssa_at, (June, 24th, 2018). Our guardians - God help them – have taken the decision to allow women to drive based on what they saw favorable regarding that issue, and after considering the opinions of the majority of the members of the senior scholars who stated that it is originally permissible. We recommend everyone to be pious and abide by regulations and instructions [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/ssa_at/status/1010797856012292098

Women's Conduct

This topic category includes 22 items predominantly about women's appearance with a total 12 items out of 22. Other issues related to women conduct in Islam were also addressed such as mixing with men, proper behavior when outside the house and lowering the gaze. Items concerning women's appearance emphasized the importance of proper attire and Hijab. For instance, in an article the Mufti condemned calls for giving up the Hijab, emphasizing the importance of Hijab and its role in protecting women from men's lustful looks and maintaining her chastity and integrity. He also advised women to avoid embellished and "fashionable" forms of Hijab (المفتي: "الدعوة لترك الحجاب إفساد للدين والأخلاق والقيم", June, 2017).

General Topics

This category included general topics discussed from an Islamic point of view.

It includes the following 5 items:

- 1- Article: Forbidding treating women as source of pessimism.
- 2- Announcement: for the holy mosque library female users: remote digital access is now available for women.
- 3- *Fatima al Zahraa*: a role model for Muslim women

4- Article by Mufti: Daesh and women exploitation: the article condemns the actions of the organization and reiterate that it is related to Islam. it also condemns the groups exploitation of women as captives and killing innocents. The Mufti also described the organization as a “criminal gang” that seeks to destroy our *Ummah*.

("مفتي المملكة: «داعش» خدعت الكثيرين وادعت الإسلام كذبا" June, 2017)

5- Mufti denies Fatwa that permit eating women’s flesh in case of extreme hunger.

Table 1

Content topics categories developed for the study on themes covered by online official Religious discourse

Category	Family Matters	Religious Rites	Women’s Rights and Duties	Women’s Conduct	General Topics	Total
Number of Items	30	26	23	22	5	106

Table 2

Content topics subcategories

Family matters N= (30)	Religious rites N= (26)	Women’s rights and duties N= (23)	Women’s conduct N= (22)	General topics N=(5)
Divorce: 4	Hajj: 8 items	Guardianship:4	Women’s appearance: 12	Forbidding treating women as source of pessimism.
Disputes: 5	Prayer: 7 items	Wife duties: 4	Leaving the house:1	Announcement: library female users: remote digital access is now available for women

Engagement rules: 6	Observing body cleanliness: 5	Child bearing and child care: 5	Mixing with men: 7 items	<i>Fatima al Zahra</i>
Marriage rules: 7	Fasting: 5	Treatment of wife in Islam: 4	Lowering the gaze: 2	Article by Mufti: Daesh and women exploitation
Polygamy: 3	Reciting Quran: 1 item	Traveling: 2 items		Mufti denies Fatwa that permit eating women's flesh
Choosing a spouse: 5		Working: 1		
		Driving: 1		
		Inheritance: 1		

1- From the above analysis and tables we can draw the “family matters” content was the most prevalent topic category with a total of 30 out of 106.

2- the most frequent subtopic is “women’s appearance and clothing” with 12 items.

3- least discussed topics included driving, working, inheritance, reciting Quran and leaving the house, each with 1 Fatwa.

4- Most of the content collected from the websites was in a question and answer form (*Fatwas*). Only 14 items out of the total sample (106 items) were designated articles on topics related women and one announcement.

5- No multimedia content or illustrations concerning women’s topics were found on the websites.

Interpretation of results

Portrayal of Women in the Official Saudi Religious Discourse after Mohamed Bin Salman’s Rise to Power Frequency based analysis

As previously established in the second chapter the official religious institution in Saudi Arabia follows the Wahhabi school of Islam, which started with a political

alliance between Mohamed bin Abd al-Wahhab and ruler of Nejd Mohamad ibn Saud in 1744 (Commins, 2006). However, the relationship between the Al Saud and the religious establishment¹¹ has been interlinked and interdependent throughout the history of the Saudi state. The interaction between the Al Saud regime and the Wahhabi establishment has been inconsistent in terms of the control they exercise on each other.

As explained in the second chapter, according to an analysis by Alsaif, T (n.d)¹², the relationship between al-Saud and the Wahhabi religious establishment has gone through five main stages¹³. One can argue that the period after Mohamed bin Salman's rise to power is an extension to the fifth stage¹⁴, since the religious institution is continuing to support the government's decisions.

Saudi women who were once central in maintaining the Saudi conservative social façade (Al-Rasheed, 2013), have become integral partners in the reform process vowed by Mohamed Bin Salman. According to the framing theory by Goffman (1974), it can be concluded that the first mold was initially created and promoted by the religious institution and supported by government strategies. On the other hand, the later frame through which women are granted more opportunities of participation, has been initially intended and promoted through official state channels and strategies. Women who were once eliminated and invisible to serve a conservative outlook to the state, are now allowed to drive cars, start businesses, join military, attend concerts and no longer required to dress in black garments "*abayas*" (Chulov, M., The Guardian,

¹¹ Ulama, or body of religious scholars endorsed by the government (Commins, 2006).

¹² As cited in Scott, M. K. (2013) work "Religion and State in Saudi Arabia and the Role of the Wahhabi Establishment in Governance".

¹³ See page 23

¹⁴ Coincides with the outbreak of the Arab spring, through which the "tamed" official religious institution was deployed to further support and endorse the government's political stances Alsaif, T (n.d).

October 24th, 2017). Based on the aforementioned results, in terms of frequency, women's matters are predominantly concerned with modesty, performing religious rites, placing her within a specific social frame as a wife, mother and care giver. The content does not place emphasis on the latest policy changes regarding women discussed in the previous chapter. In fact, women's driving was the only issue that was addressed by the *Ulama* in a single tweet endorsing the new regulation.

CHAPTER 5: SALMAN'S VISION

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

In order to address the second and third main research questions: “what are the recent governmental policy changes towards Saudi women? How does it reflect the state’s vision towards Saudi women?”, this section will utilize the vision 2030, National Transformation Plan (NTP 2020), and a televised interview with Mohamed Bin Salman as a source to reflect the government’s vision towards women. A thematic analysis will be conducted in order to identify certain patterns or themes regarding state policy changes towards women within qualitative data. Subsequently, a comparison will be carried out between the results of the online official religious discourse and the government’s vision to assist answering the third question “is women portrayal in the Saudi official religious websites correspond to the recent policy changes?”.

Thematic Analysis Definition

In a nutshell, thematic analysis can be identified as the process through which patterns or themes are detected and identified within a set of qualitative data. Subsequently, themes or patterns are used to address the research question or an issue. In other words, thematic analysis provides an interpretation for identified patterns and makes sense out of it (Maguire, M. & Delahunt, B., 2017).

The Sample

The thematic analysis will be driven from Mohamed Bin Salman’s interview with Nora O’Donnell on “60 minutes” broadcasted and produced by American news network CBS. O'Donnell's "60 Minutes" conversation with the crown prince of the Saudi throne was his first U.S. television interview. In fact, according to CBS, the last time a Saudi leader gave an interview to an American TV network was in 2005. The interview was aired on the 18th of March, 2018, nine months after being appointed as

the new crown prince. The interview addressed different political issues such as Saudi-U.S. relations, Yemen crisis and rivalry with Iran, it also placed a major focus on his sweeping changes for women, such as allowing them to drive for the first time in their history and women's right to choose what to wear in public (60 Minutes, CBS, 2018). A transcription of the interview was used in order to generate the initial codes associated with "women's matters". Then a list of all the issues and topics were listed.

The second source will be the English document of the vision 2030 where women's role was emphasized numerous times. It was issued on April, 25th, 2016. The Vision is built around three main themes: first a vibrant society, second a thriving economy and third an ambitious nation. The first theme addresses the importance of a vibrant society in the state building process where its members live in accordance with the moderate Islam, national identity and its culture. The second theme is concerned with improving economy and providing more opportunities for Saudis, improving the education system and encourage small and medium enterprises as well as large business. The third theme concerns enhancing the government performance.

Results will be interpreted and compared with previous results from the research methods section "women in online official Saudi religious discourse". This comparison will help establish an answer to the third research question: "is Saudi online official religious discourse is in line with the state's vision?".

Thematic Analysis of CBS's 60 Minutes Interview with Mohamed Bin Salman

Generating Initial Codes

This step aims to organize the extracted data from the interview systematically (Maguire, M. & Delahunt, B., 2017). This will be done through identifying all the answers, topics, opinions, etc. concerning Saudi women addressed by the crown prince in his interview. Then, a theoretical thematic analysis will be conducted, given that the

purpose with the analysis is addressing the research question. From the interview transcript main subjects and sub-subjects were listed as followed:

Table 3

Topic subjects and subjects addressed by the Crown Prince in the CBS TV interview

	Subject	Sub-subject
1	women before 1979	- driving cars - working women
2	Women's equality to men	
3	women and "extremist" school of Islam	- segregation
4	Curbing the powers of the country's so-called "religious police"	- arresting women for not covering up - the current policy allows women to choose how they dress as long as it is "decent and respectful". Black <i>abayas</i> are no longer obligatory -
5	Women's use of technologies:	- Saudis have been always open to virtual socialization
6	Women work force:	- Enforcing equal pay - Increasing women's participation in the labor market
7	Women's driving	- Will be permitted in June 2018
8	Guardian ship and travelling and Obtaining full rights	

Themes can be identified as patterns that captures a significant meaning or impression from the data. As cited in Maguire, M. & Delahunt, B. (2017) work, Braun

& Clarke (2006) explained that there are no standard rules to construct or identify a certain theme, rather it is simply characterized by its significance. From the extracted data the following categories were established: women's rights, women and religious rhetoric and women and society.

Finally, each of these categories will be deliberately analyzed to deconstruct the predominant themes and frequent patterns in his statements. The analysis will eventually lead to answering the research question. Worth mentioning that the themes are predominately descriptive and trace patterns relevant to the research question.

Themes Analysis

First, the interview was opened with a question about Osama bin Laden, which led to discussing the question of "religious extremism" in Saudi Arabia. Through his answer, Mohamed Bin Salman acknowledges that Saudi Arabia has, for 40 years, been suffering from religious extremism. In fact, he references the issue of extremism 5 times throughout the interview, and it was associated with segregation, education, Osama bin Laden and combating terrorism, as cited in the following quotes:

- *"We have extremists who forbid mixing between the two sexes and are unable to differentiate between a man and a woman alone together and their being together in a workplace."*
- *"extremists within Islamic groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, that have infiltrated Saudi society, including its schools."*
- *"Of course, no country in the world would accept that its educational system be invaded by any radical group."*
- *"In order to create an environment conducive to recruitment and spreading his radical message that the west is plotting to destroy you."*

- *“We will try to publicize as much as we can and as fast as we can, information about these individuals in order to make the world aware of what the government of Saudi Arabia is doing to combat radicalism.”*

According to Bin Salman, Bin Laden was deliberately spearing “radical messages” among Saudis to serve specific purposes. Additionally, another earlier factors he mentioned was the 1979 Iranian revolution and the seizer of the holy mosque. After these two turning points, Saudi people became victims of Islamic extremism, especially his generation who suffered from change a great deal.

Mohamed Bin Salman’s on “women’s rights”

Under this category Mohamed Bin Salman addresses certain issues regarding Saudi women such as: working, driving, freedom to travel, equal payment, choosing their clothing, abolishing guardianship and obtaining full rights on the long term. Again, he references the pre-1979 Saudi society were Saudis had “a very normal life” were women drove cars and worked everywhere. He also addresses women’s rights to choose their clothing. After curbing the role of the religious police, women are no longer required to dress in black *abayas*, and have the right to choose their garments as long as it is “decent, respectful clothing”. He also added “just like men” implying that the decency applies to both men and women in Saudi society. When he was asked about equal pay and driving, he stated that new regulations will be issued to ensure equal pay for women, in addition to allowing them to drive by June. However, when he was asked about the remaining issues such as guardianship and freedom to travel, the crown prince did not say that legal reforms will be considered rather, he stated that Islam grants women many rights that they still do not enjoy yet. His answer implies that *sharia* law is the solution that will grant women the rest of their right. The main problem, for him, is not just lack of official regulation or top down changes, rather it is the “interpretation”

of Islam law, which was being systematically radicalized after 1979.

Mohamed Bin Salman on women and the religious rhetoric

For Mohamed Bin Salman the issue of religious rhetoric is problematic since he sees it as the root cause of the extremism his generation suffered for three decades as previously mentioned. He openly rejected segregation and even implied that “extremist” religious rhetoric forbid mixing between men and women “They are unable to differentiate between a man and a woman alone together and their being together in a workplace” (CBS, March 8th, 2018). However, despite officially declaring his rejection to segregation, it is yet to be implemented. In May, 2018 Saudi government launched a “Quality of Life Program 2020” designed to make the kingdom more open entertainment (Al-Arabiya, May 3rd, 2018). The program has also called to “legalize gender mixing” and allow shops to open during prayer times, however, according to Reuters news agency, these items were removed from the online versions of the program (Dadouch, S., Reurters, May 5th, 2018). For decades Saudi Arabia has imposed an "institutionalized segregation" system where men and women are not allowed to mix in public spheres i.e. government offices, banks, universities, schools, hospitals, etc. Moreover, companies must create segregated work environment to operate inside the kingdom (Le Renard, A., 2008). According to former grand mufti of the Kingdom Ibn al-Baz, mixing of males and females is prohibited in Islam even if it was in a work environment. In fact, he even criticized unnecessary female employments in fields other than teaching, nursing, medicine where their serviced will be offered exclusively for women in a segregated environment ("خطر مشاركة المرأة الرجل في ميدان عمله", n.d.). Although the government has been hesitant when it comes to official top down policy changes towards segregation, the heir to the throne personally implied that segregation is an extremist interpretation of Islam.

Women and social role

Mohamed Bin Salman has elaborated throughout the interview his view regarding women's social role, particularly before and after 1979. He believed that Saudi Arabia was just a "normal society" just like the other gulf countries where women were allowed to drive, movie theaters were allowed in Saudi Arabia and women worked everywhere. In fact, he believes that that was the real Saudi Arabia

"I would ask your viewers to use their smartphones to find out. And they can google Saudi Arabia in the 70s and 60s, and they will see the real Saudi Arabia easily in the pictures."

The normality that Bin Salman strives for has to do with women's role in society, particularly with their ability to participate in the job market and to be able to drive. He also curbed the powers of the "religious police" who were able to arrest women for not covering up properly. Not just that he wants to return Saudi society back to what it was before 1979, he also states that Saudi people have been adopting to social media and the digital sphere; indicating that social and religious restrictions set by the government and religious scholar did not halt Saudis from "virtually" breaking the rules.

Saudi Women's Position in state Strategies

Vision 2030 and National Transformation Plan 2020

The 2030 vision was introduced by Mohamed Bin Salman as the Chairman of the Council of Economic and Development. The vision provided an outline to the 15 years strategic plan of comprehensive reform. Saudi women were mentioned in 4 segments in the vision 2030: the forward article by Mohamed Bin Salman, learning for working, providing equal opportunities and being responsible in business.

"Together we will continue building a better country, fulfilling our dream of prosperity

and unlocking the talent, potential, and dedication of our young men and women.”
(Mohamed Bin Salman, Vision 2030, 2016, p.7)

“We will continue investing in education and training so that our young men and women are equipped for the jobs of the future.” (Vision 2030, 2016, p.36)

“Our economy will provide opportunities for everyone - men and women, young and old - so they may contribute to the best of their abilities.” (Vision 2030, 2016, 37)

“Saudi women are yet another great asset. With over 50 percent of our university graduates being female, we will continue to develop their talents, invest in their productive capabilities and enable them to strengthen their future and contribute to the development of our society and economy.” (Vision 2030, 2016, p.37)

“Among our goals by 2030: To increase women’s participation in the workforce from 22% to 30%” (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 39)

“We expect our companies to observe their social responsibilities and contribute to creating a sustainable economy, including by creating the stimulating opportunities for young men and women that can help them build their professional careers.” (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 73).

From the above segments quoted from the vision 2030 English document one can conclude that women were addressed as equal partners in different development context such as education, economic reform and labor market. However, the vision did not provide action plans targeting enhancing the status of women specifically, except in the main goals section where it was stated that women participation in the workforce will be increased by 2030. Furthermore, the vision acknowledged the importance of Islamic religion is forming the countries culture, being the main source of legislation,

decision making and setting actions and goals. In fact, the vision stated that living by Islamic values will help the kingdom to realize its vision. It has set a goal to promote the kingdom's Islamic roots and upholding its religious identity through three main objectives: increasing the capacity of holy sites and facilities to welcome more pilgrims to the Kingdom annually, building an Islamic museum to celebrate the kingdom's Islamic heritage, civilization and holy sites. None of the aforementioned goals and strategies addressed religious reform or enforcing certain religious laws, rather, it provided an outlook to how the kingdom's Islamic identity will be culturally promoted to the world through visitors and pilgrims. Hence, one can conclude that the 2030 vision introduced by Bin Salman will work on building a new religious façade to the country through welcoming more pilgrims, improving the services provided for them and opening a museum. The Kingdom's revamped Islamic façade is –arguably—intended to be different than the original one created and cemented through the bureaucratization of the Wahhabi scholars during the state building phase between the 1950s and 1960s (Commins, 2006).

It can be concluded that the vision 2030 document has contextualized Saudi women as partners in state building throughout its different segments. For instance, the document states that the percentage of female university graduates surpasses male graduates. It is also highlighted that the state will invest in its youth both men and women through unlocking talents, training, education and opening more opportunities. However, thorough action plans of top down policy reforms are not detailed. Hence, referring to the state's National Transformation program 2020 —introduced as an action plan to realize the 2030 vision—is necessary to comprehend women's position in the crown prince's strategic plan (The National Transformation Program 2020, 2016, p. 10). the National Transformation Program 2020 was launched across 24 government

bodies to help building an institutional capacity needed to achieve the goals of “Vision 2030”. Furthermore, the first phase of initiative implementation was launched in 2016. Compared to the vision 2030 document the National Transformation Program 2020 is more detailed and specific in terms of strategic objectives, performance targets, the government bodies involved and listing the initiatives and action plans to be undertaken by state agencies. Targets set by the government concerning Saudi women included the following:

1. Objective 1 of civil service: Improving work culture in government sector states the following indicators concerning women: Percentage of females in Civil Service, Percentage of females occupying top positions (Grade 11 and above)
2. Objective 8 of the ministry of labor and social development marked indicators and targets in terms of the proportion of female labor force
3. The ministry of labor and social development: Promotion of female workforce
4. Civil service: Improve women’s participation in the civil service sector
5. Ministry of social affairs: Develop mechanism to improve women’s employability
6. Ministry of social affairs: Provide adequate transportation for working women with adequate prices
7. General presidency of youth welfare: Implement licensing women sports halls

From the above data, it can be concluded that plans targeting women is focused on women employment and women employees and offering adequate public infrastructure to serve women exclusively such as sports halls and transportation.

The Kingdom’s keenness to increase women’s employment rates is evident in the ministry of Labor and Social Development current strategies. The Saudi minister

of Labor and Social Development Ali bin Nasser Al-Ghafis stated during his speech at the 107th International Labor Conference in Geneva, held under the theme of “Women at Work”¹⁵ that “Saudi women are an important element of our strength. We will continue to develop talents and invest their energies to enable them to obtain appropriate opportunities to build their future and contribute to the development of our society and economy,” (القناة السعودية الإخبارية, May, 31st, 2018). He added that the government is keen to support women’s and help them overcome difficulties and eventually increase women’s participation in the labor market and increase the contribution of productive families. He also implied that decision makers also acknowledge Saudi women’s social roles as wives, mothers and caregivers. According to his speech a significant emphasis is placed on enabling women to balance between social life and work through a number of social welfare services and more convenient opportunities. Among the initiatives aimed at empowering Saudi women is the “Qurra” program that provides childcare services for working mothers, and the “Wusul” program that provides adequate transportation (Al Arabiya العربية, 2018). The ministry also launched the “Support for Self-Employment” program, which provides greater opportunities such as part-time and remote working programs to increase their income while balancing between work and family care. The ministry has also launched programs targeting women in rural areas with the aim of engaging them in the labor market,” ("القناة السعودية الإخبارية" , 2018).

¹⁵ The conference addresses problems and issues that obstruct women’s role in the development of society (“*Vision 2030 based on three axes, Saudi women important element of Kingdom's strength: Minister*”, May, 2018).

CHAPTER 6: RESULTS DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As explained in the second chapter, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was born as a result of a marriage between the Wahhabi reformist movement and the al-Saud's expansionist ideology. With that said, the Saudi state, especially during its early formation states, was a political expression of the Wahhabi ideology. Moreover, from a social outlook, Wahhabism acted as an "adhesive tool" that created a homogeneous Saudi character (Ayoob, 2009). According to an analysis by Alsaif, T (n.d), the relationship between al-Saud and the Wahhabi religious establishment has been fluctuating through its history and has gone through five main stages—discussed above in the fourth chapter. The most recent turning point that the relationship has gone through was the Arab spring, where divisions within the religious institution started to emerge. As a result, the official religious institution was utilized in that political context to back the Saudi government. Meanwhile, independent religious scholars who voiced their support to the revolutions were being restrained (Lacroix, 2014).

This study considers the period after Mohamed Bin Salman's rise to power as an extension to the Arab spring phase where the official religious institution is still being utilized to back and bless the government's actions or, at least, is being sidelined. Recently, the loyalty of the official religious institution was evident through several political situations. For instance, after expulsion of the Canadian ambassador to Saudi Arabia amid Canadian calls to release arrested civil rights activists in Saudi, the Council of Senior Scholars gave an official statement to the Saudi news agency condemning the Canadian stance, describing it as "blatant interference" (Kassam, A., *The Guardian*, August 6th, 2018).

"الأمانة العامة لـ #هيئة_كبار_العلماء : الموقف الكندي يعد تدخلاً سافراً للتأثير في نظام العدالة الجنائية ويرفضه الشعب السعودي كما رفضته قيادته بكل حزم وقوة."

#واس <http://www.spa.gov.sa/1794189>

@spagov, (Aug, 7th, 2018). "The Canadian position is a blatant intervention to influence the judicial system and it is firmly and forcefully rejected by the Saudi people and its leadership" [Tweet]. Retrieved from

<https://twitter.com/spagov/status/1026739771371134976>

Moreover, under the hashtag #تحريرالحديدة "freeing Hodeida", the committee showed their support and endorsement to the government's actions in Yemen through the following tweet.

اللهم أيد بالحق والتوفيق والتسديد إمامنا وولي أمرنا، وولي عهده القوي الأمين، وجنوده الأبطال.. اللهم أمدهم بقوة من عندك، وجند من جندك، واجعل الدائرة على عدوك وعدوهم، أنزل بهم بأسك الذي لا يرد عن القوم المجرمين. #تحريرالحديدة

@ssa_at, (June, 13th, 2018), "Oh Allah, support our strong and faithful Crown Prince and his courageous fighters. Oh Allah, give them strength and defeat their enemy and your enemy and extend them your strength." [Tweet]. Retrieved from

https://twitter.com/ssa_at/status/1006865394605416449

Hence, this study assumes that the content published online on the official religious websites and platforms will be, accordingly, in line with the recent policy changes towards Saudi women. Hence, the following discussion seeks to provide an answer to the following questions: Has the religious rhetoric towards women changed within the first year after Mohamed Bin Salman rise to power? If yes, how is it changing to accommodate the new state vision? If no, how does it differ? And, why? This will be answered in light of the previous content analysis and discourse analysis results.

To do so, a comparison between the religious institution and the state's approaches towards the common areas and issues that they both approached will be conducted. These topics include: women's social role, women's conduct and women's rights.

Results Comparison

Women's Social Role

The official religious discourse has discussed women's social role within the context of the household as wives, caregivers and mothers. As seen in table (2), the majority of content addressing women's social role in Islam is revolving around her duties as a wife, child bearer and a mother. Content related to women's issues outside the household such as working, driving and travelling was very limited with 1 to 2 items for each. For instance, on the mufti's website a question asking for an explanation to the Al-Ahzab: 33 verse: "And abide quietly in your homes, and do not flaunt your charms as they used to flaunt them in the old days of pagan ignorance" was answered as the following:

"مو بمعنى أنه المرأة ما تخرج بس معناه إنه المرأة ينبغي أن يكون بيتها مقر تواجدها، ما هو المطلوب منها التبرج والخروج من المنزل، المنزل مأواها بيتها بيت زوجها بيت أبيها بيت أمها بيت أبنائه هو مقرها ما تخرج منه وتقول نريد نغير جو البيت .. العمل محدود تعميلها متحفظة في عمل محدود وفي مجتمع، نعم، في عمل محدود مع أخواتها، ما عندهم رجال وتعود لبيتها" ("وَقَرْنَ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ" June, 2nd, 2017)

"This does not mean that women should not leave their houses, rather, it means that her house is where she belongs to originally. This means that she should leave the house overly adorned. The house is a woman's shelter (House of her husband, her father's house, her mother's house, her children's house). The house is her base and she should not go out for leisure...Work in a limited work and in a community is not forbidden. If she is working with her sisters without male coworkers and after she

finishes she goes back to her house. And what do they have in their homes.”

This implies that the household is the sphere that women inherently belong to, and should not leave it without a pressing reason. On the other hand, the state’s policy, as concluded in the previous chapter, addresses women’s social roles within different contexts besides her household. The government is acknowledging women’s role as mothers and care givers while also considering her as an equal partner in the state building process. *“Together we will continue building a better country, fulfilling our dream of prosperity and unlocking the talent, potential, and dedication of our young men and women.”* (Mohamed Bin Salman, Vision 2030, 2016, p.7). According to the vision 2030 and the National Transformation Plan (NTP 2020) the government has set targets concerning women that aims to promote female work force in different state sectors and improve their employability, improved work environments to accommodate Saudi women’s needs, improve transportation and proper infrastructure to encourage women participation in the labor market and sporting activities, increasing women’s participation in the workforce from 22% to 30% and offering more training and work and business opportunities for women. Also, the ministry of labor and social development has launched several initiatives that aim to enable women, mothers and caregivers to work while fulfilling their social roles such as “Qurra” and “Wusul” initiatives. Furthermore, in his first English televised interview aired on CBS network, Mohamed Bin Salman discussed a host of topics related to women that reflected his vision and his thoughts on women’s status. He pointed out he believes that men and women are equal. He also vowed that he will bring Saudi society back to the way it used to be before 1979, where women used to work, drive, and exist in public spheres and not confined to the household.

Also, the leadership’s vision does not seem to consider women’s sole and

original base is her house. As previously mentioned, the government, for example, has allowed women to attend concerts and football matches for the first time (BBC, Jan 12th, 2018; Dadouch, D., Reuters, February, 24th, 2018).

Women's Conduct

Another contrast is manifested in their different views on women's conduct in public spheres. In his CBS interview, Mohamed Bin Salman stated that women have the right to choose the way they dress as long as it is respectful and decent, adding that black *abayas* are no longer an obligation. He also implies, opposing to what is agreed upon by the Wahhabi scholars, that mixing should not be forbidden. *"We have extremists who forbid mixing between the two sexes and are unable to differentiate between a man and a woman alone together and their being together in a workplace."* (Mohamed Bin Salman, CBS, March 8th, 2018).

On the other hand, the official religious institution placed a major portion of its content on women's conduct. According to table 2, the majority of content published concerning women's conduct was related to women's proper appearance and clothing followed by mixing with men. In fact, women's appearance was the most prevalent sub-subject with a total of 12 items out of 106 items. For instance, in an article published on the Mufti's official website, he condemns calls for giving up the Hijab, emphasizing its importance in protecting women chastity and integrity. He also advised women to avoid embellished and "fashionable" forms of Hijab (*المفتي: الدعوة* "الفتي: الدعوة", June, 2017), which contradicts what the crown prince stated regarding the same matter. Again, regarding mixing with men, the mufti clearly stated that mixing between men and women is pure evil that the nation has to avoid. (*"سماحة المفتي: لا نخادع أنفسنا.. الاختلاط شر محض ومصيبة وبليّة"*, June, 2017).

"يجب أن تكون المرأة العاملة والموظفة في مكان مستقل بعيدًا عن الرجال والتأثر بهم". وقال أمس الجمعة في برنامجه

الأسبوعي "مع سماحة المفتي" على قناة المجد عن حكم المشاركة في بعض الأعمال التي يشوبها الاختلاط بين الجنسين، كالأعمال التطوعية أو الصحية أو التجارية: "يا إخواني، اختلاط الرجال بالنساء شرٌ محض، ومصيبة وبلية، وليس هناك مبرر؛ فيجب أن نتقي الله في أنفسنا. ولا يمكن أن نتجاهل هذا الشيء، ونخادع أنفسنا". وأضاف: "المرأة مأمورة بالتستر والعفة، والبُعد عن مجامع الرجال".

“Women should work in segregated spaces away from men and their influence. He said in his weekly Friday program "with His Eminence the Mufti" on Al-Majd channel regarding the participation in some activities that involve mixing with the opposite sex, such as volunteer work or business, that the mixing of men with women is pure evil, disaster and affliction, and there is no justification; we must fear God. We cannot ignore this matter, and deceive ourselves. "He added:" Women are ordered to cover up and chastity, and stay away from the mixed environments”. (سماحة المفتي: لا)
"سماحة المفتي: لا) (June, 2017, نخادع أنفسنا.. "الاختلاط شر محض ومصيبة وبلية"

Women's Rights

Based on the content and discourse analyses results, this issue will be deconstructed into the following matters: guardianship, freedom to travel, driving and working. Hence, discussing the issue of women's rights in Saudi Arabia will be exclusive to the topics mentioned in the sampled data of the study.

Driving

The fatwas and articles gathered from official Saudi Islamic websites did not contain any significant content on the issue of women's driving, however, one tweet by the Senior Council of scholars endorsed the leadership's decision to allow Saudi women to drive.

@ssa_at, (June, 24th, 2018). Our guardians - God help them – have taken the decision to allow women to drive based on what they saw favorable regarding that issue, and after considering the opinions of the majority of the members of the senior scholars

who stated that it is originally permissible. We recommend everyone to be pious and abide by regulations and instructions [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/ssa_at/status/1010797856012292098

Worth mentioning that the religious institution had previously rejected driving for women as prohibited in Islam. For example, in an interview aired on al-Majd TV channel on April, 4th, 2016 stated that “driving for women may open up evil and unwanted consequences, things might not go well, we should reject that matter because it exposes us to evil consequences, ..., perhaps if women are allowed to drive they might go out everywhere, even without her family’s knowledge, so many evil consequences may Allah grant us wellness”. (Al-Majd TV, April, 4th, 2016).

"قيادة السيارة قد تفتح أمامها شر ولا تنضبط أمورها، المطلوب منا ألا نقر بهذا لأن هذا أمر خطير، يعرضنا للشرور، ...، وربما سبب خروج النساء لكل مكان من غير علم أهلها بها.. شرور كثيرة نسأل الله العافية"

Interestingly, throughout the time frame of the study, there were no initiatives, programs or campaigns launched by the government to encourage driving for women. The programs that the government launched by the ministry of labor and social development to increase women’s employment were limited to providing proper transportation. This, arguably, implies that the government is attempting to gradually change the society and its perception in that regard.

According to Mohamed Bin Salman’s interview, allowing women to drive is the norm that used to be accepted and common in the Saudi society before 1979. “We were living a very normal life like the rest of the Gulf countries. Women were driving cars. There were movie theaters in Saudi Arabia. Women worked everywhere. We were just normal people developing like any other country in the world until the events of 1979.” (CBS, March 8th, 2018). Hence, for Mohamed Bin Salman allowing women to

drive is just going back to being a “normal society”.

Overall, despite their definite rejection to allowing women to drive, the religious institution has rapidly and drastically altered its opinion on the issue to be in line with the government’s new regulations.

Women’s employment

There is no striking difference between the religious intuition’s and the government’s approaches in term of women’s work. The government approached the issue from a pragmatic point of view to increase women’s participation in the labor market with very specific goals and an execution plan deliberated in the vision 2030 and NTP 2020. “Among our goals by 2030: To increase women’s participation in the workforce from 22% to 30%” (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 39). Whereas, the religious institution does not oppose nor promote women’s employment; rather, it sets specific conditions for it to be religiously permitted. These conditions include: agreement of the husband, not negatively affecting her role as a wife and a mother, to dress modestly and cover up and working in a segregated work space.¹⁶

Guardianship and freedom to travel

Fatwas indicate that it is crucial for women to seek their guardian’s approval in specific cases such as leaving the house or performing Hajj. Besides, a designated article by the mufti condemned recent civil and women’s rights campaigns that calls for cancelling guardianship, describing it as a crime (“المطالبة بإسقاط الولاية عن المرأة جريمة”, June, 2017). Hence, from the point of view of the official religious institution guardianship in Islam is obligatory. On the other hand, the

¹⁶ As explained in the following Fatwas by the Mufti:
1- منع الزوجة من الذهاب إلى أهلها والعمل.
2- سماحة المفتي: لا نخادع أنفسنا.. "الاختلاط شر محض ومصيبة وبلية"
3- وَقَرَّرَ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ

government did not promise any reforms regarding the issue of guardianship. When Mohamed Bin Salman was asked about the issue of women's freedom to travel and guardianship he was asked about the remaining issues such as guardianship and freedom to travel, the crown prince did not promise any legal reforms in the near future. Yet, he stated that Islam grants women many rights that they still do not enjoy yet.

Overall, these results do not support the study's hypothesis "content on the religious institution's online platform is in line with the current state policy concerning women". Although the religious institution and the leadership seem to "recently" agree that driving for women is permitted, other issues concerning women do not seem to be in line with the state's vision. For instance, according to the content sampled in the study, the religious institution sees that women's original base is her house and that her existence in the public sphere should be restricted. Again, a striking difference was noticeable between Mohamed Bin Salman's view and the mufti's rhetoric regarding segregation. Moreover, women's social role from the religious institution's point of view was emphasizing her duties as a wife, mother and a care giver¹⁷.

Such difference can be due to the fact that scholars reference older documented *fatwas* that are not updated accordingly with the recent social and political circumstances. For instance, on the official twitter account of the permanent committee of Fatwas, a number of published Fatwas had referenced previous official fatwas issued by the committee as an answer¹⁸. These documents dates are ranging from 1413 A.H to 1425 A.H, corresponding to the period between from 1992 to 2004. In fact, all fatwas

¹⁷ According to table 2: the majority of content referenced women's social role as a wife, child bearer and child care, with very few items listed discussion her roles outside the household such as working, travelling or driving.

¹⁸ See items: 77, 78, 79, 81, 82, 84,85,86, 88, 89, 90, 91, 93, 94, 96, 101, 103, 104 in appendix A.

are answered through a referenced official document or a link that redirect the user to a similar question previously published on the official website of the committee www.aliftaa.net. The website contains a digital tome, categorized into 18 topic category, that references all the official Fatwas issued and approved previously by the committee.

Since *iftaa* authority is limited to the council of scholars, according to 2010 Saudi King decree, fatwas need to be approved and documented by members of the senior council to avoid passing on false information (Al-Suhail, T., Middle East Newspaper, August 13th, 2010). This restriction be a factor in delaying revising the existing official fatwas, given that fatwas has to be reviewed and approved first by the council.

Moreover, the content concerning women on the mufti's website is published on 02/6/2017 and 02/07/2017. Meaning that they were added collectively on those dates with a significant number of Fatwas criticizing mixing even at work place, as shown in appendix A. They are still listed even after the crown prince's criticism of segregation. Nonetheless, no fatwas on segregation were added or posted on any other platform after the crown prince's statements—until the end of the data collection process; instead, Fatwas regulating interaction between men and women were published¹⁹. Generally, the content listed is still not in line with the government's vision except in the issue of allowing women to drive, where the religious institution posted only one tweet that shows a drastic change.

¹⁹ See item 99 and 101 in appendix A.

Conclusion

To sum up, this study is intended to examine women's issues in the official religious discourse throughout the first year that followed the appointment of Mohamed Bin Salman as the crown prince. This is to discover any potential changes in the online religious rhetoric that might be rising in response to political changes. The hypothesis of the study was built in light of the framing theory and Durkheim's functionalist approach²⁰. This implies that women are being framed through the religious online discourse in order to be perceived in a specific way that serves social and political purposes. The study found that framing of women through the examined communication medium is not in accordance with the state's new policies, which defies the usual stance of the Wahhabi institution of reinstating and legitimizing the government's decisions, as stated in the second chapter. Hence, the sampled religious content does not serve the Durkheim's function of achieving social harmony and control. In the case of Saudi Arabia and the Wahhabi institution, agreement and endorsement is the way to achieve stability and control.

Throughout the first year that followed the appointment of MBS, a number of rapid top down political, and economic reforms have dictated a drastic overhaul, initially assumed to be reflected through the religious discourse. Hence, the study implemented a "frequency based content analysis" aimed at answering the question "what are the most common matters concerning women that are being frequently discussed on official religious Saudi websites?". Results shows that women in the official religious discourse, with the emphasis placed on certain topics, are predominantly portrayed as wives and caregivers who mainly belong in the house. No

²⁰ See Theoretical Framework p. 3

detailed interpretation could be provided at this stage because an analysis of the state's policies and vision was important to provide a comparative discussion. However, results were interpreted in the framework of the framing theory, which implies that women are being framed through the religious discourse in a specific way for the public to perceive them through a certain perspective. In other words, women's matters and topics of discussion were selected to create a specific religiously approved mold. Consequently, the second section of the methodology provided a "thematic analysis" that aims to answer the second main research questions: "what are the recent governmental policy changes towards Saudi women? How does it reflect the state's vision towards Saudi women? Eventually, a comparison between the official religious discourse and the "recent policy changes towards Saudi women" is provided to help answering the third question "is women portrayal in the Saudi official religious websites correspond to the recent policy changes?". Through the comparative analysis it was concluded that women were perceived as wives and care givers with the household as their main base. On the other hand, the state's vision showed different perspective of women. While acknowledging her role as a mother and a wife within the household, women were also perceived as equal partners in the development process. Such contrast is not necessarily intended to challenge the government, rather, it is due to limiting the *Iftaa* authority to the committee of senior scholars, and using older references and documents in the *Fatwas*, mainly issued between 1992 and 2004.

Recommendations

In order to comprehensively examine the response of the official religious discourse to policy changes in general or towards women in particular, other media channels should be studied too. Such communication content may include: Islamic TV programs on state television, Friday sermons, articles published in newspapers and radio programs. Moreover, it is important that such content would be examined over the course of a longer time period after Mohamed Bin Salman's rise to power. Also, personal interviews with religious officials, operators of Islamic websites or media professionals would be very beneficial to draw an impression on how the official religious discourse is addressing certain matters. Furthermore, a comparison between the ongoing religious discourse, on any given media channel, and earlier discourses would help study how the religious discussions are changing, hence predict future changes.

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APPENDIX A

The official website of the grand Mufti					
Topic category		Link	Date	Item title	
Religious rites: Hajj	Article	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/فتاوى-المرأة-في-الحج	02/07/2017	فتاوى المرأة في الحج	1
Women's rights and duties: child care	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/هذه-المرأة-مفرطة-وعليها-الكفارة	02/06/2017	هذه المرأة مفرطة وعليها الكفارة	2
Women's conduct: women's appearance	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/سن-الطفل-الذي-تحتجب-منه-المرأة	02/07/2017	سن الطفل الذي تحتجب منه المرأة	3
Family matters: divorce	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/ما-حكم-طلب-المرأة-الطلاق-من-زوجها-الهاجر-لها	02/07/2017	ما حكم طلب المرأة الطلاق من زوجها الهاجر لها	4
Women's rights and duties: Guardianship	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/هل-ولي-الأمر-ملزم-بتحجيج-المرأة	02/06/2017	هل ولي الأمر ملزم بتحجيج المرأة	5
Women's rights and duties: Guardianship	Article	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/المفتي-المطالبة-بإسقاط-الولاية-عن-المرأة-جريمة-تستهدف-المجتمع-السعودي	02/06/2017	المفتي: المطالبة بإسقاط الولاية عن المرأة جريمة تستهدف المجتمع السعودي ... مطالبات إسقاط ولاية الرجل على المرأة بالسينة التي لا خير فيها والمخالفة	6
rites: prayers	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/ما-حكم-صلاة-المرأة-للترويح-في-بيتها-و-هل-الأفضل-أن-تصليها-في-البيت-أو-في-المسجد	02/07/2017	ما حكم صلاة المرأة للترويح في بيتها، وهل الأفضل أن تصليها في البيت أو في المسجد	7
General topic	Article	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/المفتي-ينفي-فتوى-«أكل-لحم-المرأة»	02/06/2017	المفتي.. ينفي فتوى «أكل لحم المرأة»	8
General topic	Article	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/الشؤم-في-المرأة-والدار-والفرس	02/07/2017	الشؤم في المرأة والدار والفرس	9
women's rights and duties: wife duties	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/المرأة-وهي-تطبخ-في-عبادة-الله	02/06/2017	المرأة وهي تطبخ في عبادة الله	10

Women's rights and duties: traveling	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/-حکم-سفر-المرأة-بالبطائرة-من-غير-دون-محرم	02/06/2017	حكم سفر المرأة بالطائرة من غير دون محرم	11
rites: prayers	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/-حضور-المرأة-للتراويح-جانز	02/06/2017	حضور المرأة للتراويح جائز	12
women's rights and duties: child bearing	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/-ما-حكم-تناول-المرأة-حبوب-الحمل-بدون-سبب	02/07/2017	ما حكم تناول المرأة حبوب الحمل بدون سبب	13
rites: reciting Quran	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/-حكم-قراءة-القرآن-إذا-كانت-عذر-ها	02/07/2017	حكم قراءة القرآن إذا كانت المرأة في عذرها الشرعي	14
conduct: women's appearance	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/-حكم-قص-شعر-المرأة-للزينة	02/06/2017	حكم قص شعر المرأة للزينة	15
Women's rights and duties: traveling	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/-سفر-المرأة-أثناء-العدة	02/07/2017	حكم سفر المرأة أثناء العدة	16
Religious rites: observing body cleanliness	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/-حكم-دخول-المرأة-إلى-الحرم-وهي-في-عذر-ها-الشرعي	02/07/2017	حكم دخول المرأة إلى الحرم وهي في عذرها الشرعي	17
family affairs: divorce	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/-حكم-المرأة-التي-لا-يصلي-زوجها-من-حيث-الطلاق-وعدمه	07/08/2017	حكم المرأة التي لا يصلي زوجها من حيث الطلاق وعدمه	18
Rites: Hajj and Umrah	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/-حكم-لبس-المرأة-الكمامات-في-الحج-أو-العمرة	02/06/2017	حكم لبس المرأة الكمامات في الحج أو العمرة	19
family affairs: engagement rules	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/-حكم-كشف-عيوب-المرأة-أمام-الخاطب-لها	02/06/2017	حكم كشف عيوب المرأة أمام الخاطب لها	20
rites: observing body cleanliness	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/-نزول-الشيء-اليسير-بعد-اغتسال-المرأة-من-عذر-ها	02/07/2017	نزول الشيء اليسير بعد اغتسال المرأة من عذرها	21
women's conduct: leaving the house	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/-وَقَرْنَ-فِي-بُيُوتِكُنَّ	02/06/2017	(وَقَرْنَ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ)	22
Women's conduct: appearance	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/-حكم-لبس-اللون-الأحمر-بالنسبة-للنساء-الإجابة	02/07/2017	حكم لبس اللون الأحمر بالنسبة للنساء: الإجابة الأصل أن المرأة لها أن تلبس من اللباس بأي لون كان،	23

				وإنما تمنع من لبس ما يصف عورتها من الشفاف أو الضيق أو المفتوح ونحو ذلك، وأيضاً إذا كانت هذه الألوان فاتنة وهي بارزة للرجال، فإنه يمنع منها أما إذا لم تكن بارزة للرجال مع التزامها بالحشمة فإنها لا تمنع من أي لون، ولها أن تلبس ما شاءت بالضوابط السابقة مع عدم تشبهها بالرجال أو لبسها زياً يختص بالكافرات	
Women's conduct: mixing with men	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/سماحة-المفتي-لا-نخادع-أنفسنا-الاختلاط-شر-محض-ومصيبة-وبلية	02/06/2017	سماحة المفتي: لا نخادع أنفسنا.. "الاختلاط شر محض ومصيبة وبلية"	24
rites: fasting	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/حكم-تناول-الدواء-لايقاف-العادة-الشهرية-في-شهر-رمضان	02/06/2017	حكم تناول الدواء لإيقاف العادة الشهرية في شهر رمضان	25
women's rights and duties: wife treatment	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/استوصوا-بالنساء-خير	02/06/2017	استوصوا بالنساء خيراً	26
family affairs: engagement rules	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/مشروعية-إخبار-المخطوبة-بحال-الخاطب	02/07/2017	مشروعية إخبار المخطوبة بحال الخاطب	27
women's conduct: mixing with men	Article	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/المفتي-إياكم-والدخول-على-النساء	02/06/2017	المفتي : إياكم والدخول على النساء	28
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Family matters: divorce	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/ما-حكم-طلب-المرأة-الطلاق-من-زوجها-الهاجر-لها	02/07/2017	ما حكم طلب المرأة الطلاق من زوجها الهاجر لها	4
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Women's rights and duties: Guardianship	Article	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/المفتي-المطالبة-بإسقاط-الولاية-عن-المرأة-جريمة-تستهدف-المجتمع-السعودي	02/06/2017	المفتي: المطالبة بإسقاط الولاية عن المرأة جريمة تستهدف المجتمع السعودي ... مطالبات إسقاط ولاية الرجل على المرأة بالسينة التي لا خير فيها والمخالفة	6
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conduct: women's appearance	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/حكم-قص-شعر-المرأة-للزينة	02/06/2017	حكم قص شعر المرأة للزينة	15
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Women's conduct: appearance	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/-حكم-لبس-اللون-الأحمر-بالنسبة-للنساء	02/07/2017	حكم لبس اللون الأحمر بالنسبة للنساء: الإجابة الأصل أن المرأة لها أن تلبس من اللباس بأي لون كان، وإنما تمنع من لبس ما يصف عورتها من الشفاف أو الضيق أو المفتوح ونحو ذلك، وأيضا إذا كانت هذه الألوان فاتنة وهي بارزة للرجال، فإنه يمنع منها أما إذا لم تكن بارزة للرجال مع التزامها بالحشمة فإنها لا تمنع من أي لون، ولها أن تلبس ما شاءت بالضوابط السابقة مع عدم تشبهها بالرجال أو لبسها زيا يختص بالكافرات	23
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Women's conduct: mixing with men	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/ما-تركت-بعدي-فتنة-أضر-على-الرجال-من-النساء	02/06/2017	(ما تركت بعدي فتنة أضر على الرجال من النساء)	29
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Women's rights and duties: wife treatment	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/طلب-الطلاق-من-الزوج-لتقصيره-في-النفقة-وإتهام-الدين-بالتقصير	02/07/2017	طلب الطلاق من الزوج لتقصيره في النفقة	32
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women's rights and duties: working	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/منع-الزوجة-من-الذهاب-إلى-أهلها-والعمل	02/07/2017	منع الزوجة من الذهاب إلى أهلها والعمل	39

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Women's conduct: mixing	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/حكم-العلاقة-بين-الجنسين	02/07/2017	حكم العلاقة بين الجنسين	42
Women's conduct: lowering the gaze	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/التوجيه-من-هذه-الآية-الكريمة-قل-للمؤمنين-يغضوا-من-أبصارهم-ويحفظوا-فروجهم-ذلك-أزكى-لهم-إن-الله-خبير-بما-يصنعون	02/07/2017	التوجيه من هذه الآية الكريمة (قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ بَعْضُوا مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِمْ وَيَحْفَظُوا فُرُوجَهُمْ ذَلِكَ أَزْكَى لَهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ)	43
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Rites: Hajj	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/أمر-الناس-أن-يكون-آخر-عهدهم-بالبیت-إلا-أنه-رخص-للحائض-والنفساء	02/06/2017	امرأة أدت مناسك الحج في يوم رمي الجمرة الكبرى، وقد حاضت؛ فما حكم طواف الإفاضة والوداع بالنسبة لها؟	45
Women's conduct: women's appearance	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/وضع-الحناء-في-اليدین-والرجلين-للرجال	02/06/2017	الحناء تضع المرأة في يديها من باب الزينة والتجمل به وضع أيضاً في رأسها، لكن وضع الرجال له إن كان لحاجة العمل لأن هذا يعمل حداداً أو نجاراً أو نحو ذلك يضطر إلى فعل الحناء يساعد يديه في تحمل هذه الأشياء فلا شيء عليه، لأن هذا من باب الوقاية أما إن وضعه من باب التزين وتشبه بالنساء فهذا لا يجوز.	46
family affairs: divorce	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/الطلاق-مرتين-ثم-إمساك-بمعروف-أو-تسريح-بإحسان	02/07/2017	الطلاق مرتين ثم إمساك بمعروف أو تسريح بإحسان.	47
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Family affairs: divorce	Fatwa	https://mufti.af.org.sa/ar/content/طلب-الزوجه-الخلع-بدون-سبب	02/07/2017	طلب الزوجة الخلع بدون سبب	53
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Women's rights and duties: driving	Announcement	https://twitter.com/ssa_at/status/1010797856012292098	24/06/2018	هيئة كبار العلماء اتخذت ولادة الأمر - أيدهم الله- قرار السماح للمرأة بقيادة السيارة؛ بناء على ما رأوه من المصالح الراجحة في هذا الموضوع، وبعد أن أخذوا برأي أغلبية أعضاء #هيئة كبار العلماء الذين أفادوا بأن الأصل الإباحة. والذي نوصي به الجميع تقوى الله، ثم التقيد بالأنظمة والتعليمات،	106