

One Step Into Modernity

Saudi Arabia gives women license to drive.

by Theodore Dalrymple



I happened to be near the Saudi border, in a small country in the Gulf, when the historic announcement was made that women would henceforth be issued drivers' licenses in Saudi Arabia. The friends with whom I had been staying, and who had themselves worked in Saudi Arabia, at first assumed that the announcement was a joke, or some kind of destabilizing provocation by foreign intelligence agencies.

But no, it turned out to be true. Does this mean that the past denial of licenses to women has been, in principle, wrong all along? Is the about-face the result of Crown Prince Salman's philosophical enlightenment, or a product of economic necessity? (Perhaps economic necessity can be the mother of philosophical enlightenment.)

In any case, Saudi Arabia's golden age is over. The price of

oil is relatively low and not likely to rise very much. The kingdom's foreign currency reserves are falling, in a country where nearly everything must be imported; meantime, the Saudi population is growing fast. Sixty percent of Saudis are under 30. Middle-class families can no longer support themselves with one salary: as in the West, they now need two. In the circumstances, it is madness to import labor to perform services that Saudis can easily perform for themselves.

Good news for some is usually bad news for others: if Saudi women can rejoice that they will now be permitted to drive themselves, what need will there be for the tens of thousands of Indian drivers who have long chauffeured them wherever they went (always with a father's, husband's, or brother's permission, of course)? The drivers can be sent home, to the great benefit of the Saudi balance of payments—for everyone knows that the Indians remit as much of their money home as possible. But for the Indians it will be, arguably, a disaster.

Slowly, Saudi Arabia is being dragged into Western-style modernity. This might well upset the two-century-old balance between the clerical and relatively secular powers in the desert kingdom. Clerical power is like pregnancy: it is difficult to have only a little of it. Tocqueville said that the most dangerous moment for authoritarian regimes was not when they were at their most repressive but when they begin to reform.

Saudi Arabia has but one cinema, which exclusively shows educational documentaries, and these only between prescribed prayer times. Unsurprisingly for a country whose economy is intimately bound to the internal combustion engine, and whose restrictive culture prohibits any "free mixing" of the sexes, Saudi youth entertain themselves by driving. Unmarried Saudi men drive their four-wheel-drive vehicles or Mercedes coupes at top speed through the desert—"drifting," and frequently crashing, as can be seen in the YouTube videos that they

gleefully post.

Considering the preeminence of driving in Saudi youth culture, giving women license to drive could lead to major changes in how the sexes interact and court. How will the emirs keep their daughters penned in seclusion, once they have seen the dashboard lights?

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