

## **Contextualization of Saudi International Students' Experience in Facing the Challenge of Moving to Mixed Gender Environments**

**Dr. Ahmed Ali Alhazmi**

JazanUniversity, Saudi Arabia

**A/Professor BereniceNyland**

RMIT University, Australia

### **Abstract**

*This paper is part of a larger study that investigated the experiences of international students from Saudi Arabia. One of the major challenges these students faced was moving from a gender segregated environment to mixed gender environments. Gender segregation is a defining element of Saudi political and religious life. We explore gender segregation as a topic that is increasingly debated within Saudi society as a balance between a modernizing state and traditional/conservative Islamic practices is sought. For some there is also a perceived threat from western ideas as the Saudi population engages with the global community through international education and digital technology. In this article we provide context for the development of the practice of gender segregation by giving the historical background and identifying the major discourses surrounding the practice. We argue that in a context where Wahhabi ideology is dominant in both religious, political and cultural spheres practices, however recently acquired, are a powerful influence on the formation of a Saudi individual and on internal and external relationships within the culture and with other cultures.*

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia, gender segregated society, Wahhabism, identity

### **Introduction**

This paper is part of a larger study that investigated the experiences of international students from Saudi Arabia. One of the challenges these students faced was moving from a gender segregated environment to mixed gender environments. Gender segregation is a defining element of Saudi political and religious life. Wagemakers (2012) says that in Saudi Arabia the position of women is “the litmus test of Saudi Arabia’s status as an Islamic society” (p. 15). Given the significance of this issue we explore gender segregation as a topic that is increasingly debated within Saudi society as a balance between a modernizing state and traditional/conservative Islamic practices is sought. For some there is also a perceived threat from western ideas as the Saudi population engages with the global community through international education and digital technology. In this article we provide context for the development of the practice of gender segregation by giving the historical background and identifying the major discourses surrounding the practice. We argue that in a context where Wahhabism is dominant in religious and political contexts change will be driven by those in power. The international student interviewees in the original study (Alhazmi, 2012) were part of the King Abdullah scholarship scheme, were cognizant of their position as ambassadors for their country and sometimes conflicted between their Saudi identity and experiences in gender mixed societies. Strict gender segregation has become a topic of public debate in Saudi Arabia and there is a need to engage in informed and philosophical discussion to establish an agenda for debate. This paper aims to inform discussions by providing context for the prevailing custom of gender segregation.

In the last two decades, Saudi Arabia has been one of the most quickly developing countries in the world as it was only established in 1932 and the population was still largely tribal and nomadic until the 1960s. The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, has lead the country in reform with education in general and higher education in particular, receiving special attention. During the reign of King Abdullah the number of universities has increased threefold.

A major initiative occurred in 2005 when the king issued a royal decree for the largest scholarship program in modern history. The King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) has now been extended to 2020. This program has been a landmark in the history of higher education in Saudi Arabia.

125,000 students, males and females, have been encouraged every year, to take their tertiary education abroad, with full sponsorship from the Ministry of Higher Education. This scholarship program was devised in order to bring about effective reform in the country (eg. Abouammoh 2009; Margin-son et al. 2011; Clary and Karlin 2011; Mazi and Abouammoh 2009), particularly in educational institutions.

As stated by Alhazmi and Nyland (2010) the effectiveness of scholarship program will, in the end, rely heavily on how the group of returning international students, dubbed 'reformers', have changed and what knowledge, skills and attitudes they bring back from their international experience. Some changes are subtle and some unexpected, so it is a complex task to examine and evaluate the influence of international study and the role such activity can play in the Saudi government's plans for economic and educational reform. There is also the potential that the influence of international education will lead to social change within Saudi Arabia.

In an extended project that examined the transitioning experience from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment encountered by Saudi international students the effect on cultural identity was a focus (Alhazmi, 2012). The investigation also aimed to track how such an experience could affect the participants. This paper aims to provide a socio/cultural/historical and contextual frame to the experience of moving between a segregated gender society, to a mixed gender society and then returning.

The endeavour here is to highlight how gender segregation contributes to the society of Saudi Arabia (Doumato, 1992). The assumption underlying the discussion rests upon the argument that gender segregation in Saudi Arabia has been driven socially through cultural and religious discourses, and politically through legislation and politics; therefore, it has actively contributed to shaping most aspects of the Saudi macro and micro social context. To provide an insight into the practice of gender segregation a brief background about Saudi Arabia is presented and gender segregation, as a defining part of the context, discussed.

The following discussion does not analyse or evaluate the history or social practices of Saudi Arabia but is offered as a clarification of an existing phenomenon that has a profound influence on students studying abroad.

### ***Background: History and Socio Cultural Identity of Saudi Arabia***

Contemporary Saudi Arabia occupies around 2.24 million square kilometres. It is surrounded by seven Arab countries: on the east, it is bordered by the Arabian Gulf and the states of Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. In the north, it is bordered by the states of Kuwait, Iraq, and Jordan, and in the south by the state of Yemen. The Red Sea is in the west, which is shared by Egypt and Sudan. Thus, the country is in the heart of the Middle East and the Arab countries. Saudi Arabia is one of a few countries that did not experience direct colonisation.

Internally, the state is divided into 13 administrative provinces as follows: first is the middle region with two administrative provinces, Riyadh and Qasim. The middle region is considered the birthplace of the state, as all three Saudi states were established and first started from there. The region also has the highest population density, and the capital city is Riyadh, the most sophisticated and largest city in the region and the country. The Western Region comprises the two holy places, Makkah and Madinah, which are two provinces. The fourth province is the Eastern Region, which is the largest area; but most of it is desert and thus part of the Empty Quarter. The north region comprises four administrative provinces: Tabouk, Hail, Al-Jawf, and Northern Borders. The southern region comprises four administrative provinces: Jazan, Najran, Baha, and Asir.

According to the Census of Population and Housing in 2010, the total population of the country was 28,376,355, of whom 19,405,685 were Saudi citizens. The population growth rate was 2.9%, and the population density was 14 persons per square kilometre (Central Department of Statistics & Information, 2011). The population of Saudi Arabia is relatively very young with almost half of all Saudis under the age of 19 (Ministry of Economy and Planning of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (MEP), 2010).

Before the discovery of oil, Saudi Arabia was a poor, traditionally tribal society; hence, people are still gathered in tribes to some extent. Mainly Bedouin tribes (nomadic tribes) lived in the middle of Saudi Arabia. However, the tribes become more stable towards the borders of the state. The Western Region (known historically as Hejaz and currently as the Western Region) is mixed between tribal and non-tribal communities because of migration to the two Islamic cities Makkah and Madinah, for religious or trading activity. This migration activity has occurred ever since the existence of the two holy mosques.

Saudi Arabians are not, therefore, a single ethnic group. The name Saudi Arabia applies to a relatively new state occupying most of the Arabian Peninsula. The official name of the country is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The country is sometimes referred to as 'The Land of the Two Holy Mosques' in reference to Al-Masjid al-Haram (in Makkah), and Al-Masjid al-Nabawi (in Madinah).

The official title of the king became 'Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques' as a replacement for 'His Majesty' in order to reflect the religious identity of the state. The Saudi flag is green, and written on it is the statement of faith in Islam (There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah), with a sword beneath. The state coat of arms consists of crossed swords and a palm tree, which is a common tree in Saudi Arabia. A literal translation of the Saudi national anthem (Broberg, 2002) is as follows:

'Onward toward the Glory and the Height'  
Hasten the glory and supremacy!  
Glorify the creator of the heavens  
And raise the green, fluttering flag,  
Carrying the emblem of light!  
Repeat (the words): Allah is the greatest!  
O my country,  
My country, may you always live?  
The glory of all Muslims!  
Long live the King,  
For the flag and the country!

This official information has been provided to reflect the official identity of the state and to clearly identify the relationship between the intertwined elements of religion and monarchy. Religion and politics are merged together in a complex mixture that is inseparable. The power of politics and the power of religion separately can affect any society in varying degrees and can influence the nature of societal changes and transformation. However, in Saudi Arabia, religion and politics are joint forces, are very powerful and have both heavily contributed to reshaping the identity of the society. Individuals are socialised within the culture, internalise these social experiences in the process of developing a sense of identity, although each will reinvent their experience with individual differences depending on personality and circumstance.

### ***A Social and Historic Overview***

Highlighting some events from the past is necessary for understanding the current Saudi Arabian society and culture. This is especially true if one considers that before the establishment of the current Saudi Arabia state, in 1932, there was no such entity as Saudi Arabian society or Saudi Arabian culture. The history of Saudi Arabia indicates that the contemporary Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (1932–present) came from two political and religious movements called metaphorically the 'first Saudi state' (1744–1818), and the 'second Saudi state' (1824–1891).

The first movement refers to the time when Muhammad Ibn Saud (the father of the royal family in current Saudi Arabia and the ruler of Diriyah, which is a small city in Riyadh province) and Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahab (a religious scholar, and the father of the grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia) joined forces to establish a community based on Islamic principles called *Ummah al-Islam*. Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahab (the founder of Wahhabism) believed that the people of the Arab Peninsula had lost the right path of Islam and that it was the duty of a religious scholar to initiate reform.

Aside from his definition of the right and wrong paths, which is not the focus of this paper, Ibn Abd al-Wahab began calling for a revival based on the doctrine that the community must return to pure Islam as practiced by earlier generations of Muslims. He rejected the fads and innovations in faith and worship known in Islamic literature as Bid'ah. An Islamic revival to correct the beliefs and practices of Islam was started. This call became known as Wahhabism.

Muhammad Ibn Saud, as a ruler of Diriyah, provided Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahab with protection and gave his full support to the new call. The movement started in 1744, when both Muhammad Ibn Abd al -Wahab and Muhammad Ibn Saud took an oath to call for and protect the new reform of Islam in the Arab peninsula. They and their families successfully gained followers and established many allies among the tribes in the Arab peninsula. At that time, the Arab peninsula belonged politically to the Ottoman state, or as it is called in the Islamic literature, the Ottoman Islamic Caliphate.

The Ottoman state was watching this new movement cautiously, which it considered to be rebellion, and military campaigns were waged until the movement was controlled in 1818 by execution of the leader of Diriyah Abdullah Ibn Saud (grandson of the founder) and the imprisonment of most of the Muhammad Ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahab families (Kostiner, 1993; Long, 1997; Wynbrandt, 2004).

The second Saudi state refers to the second attempt of the Ibn Saud family to regain sovereignty in Diriyah, to return to alliances with the tribes the Ottoman State had disrupted. From 1840 to 1891, the Ibn Saud family managed to return to Diriyah and to re-establish alliances with surrounding tribes and leaders. Then, because of leadership conflicts within the Ibn Saud family, they became weak and another tribe gained the sovereignty (Kostiner, 1993; Long, 1997; Wynbrandt, 2004).

These two movements paved and smoothed the way for a third attempt at establishing a state and resulted in contemporary Saudi Arabia. In 1919 Abdul-Aziz Al Saud (the great grandson of Ibn Saudi) returned from exile with a strong determination to re-establish the sovereignty of Riyadh. He successfully captured Riyadh and then attempted to unite the tribes around the area of Najd and based his on a revival of Wahhabism, which already had many followers in Najd. The followers of Wahhabism, who, for Abdul-Aziz constituted a strong military force, allowed him to spread his sovereignty over the peninsula. After 13 years Abdul-Aziz Al Saud declared a new state, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with himself proclaimed as the king. Such a recent and tumultuous history is an important background for an understanding of the Saudi social, cultural, and political context.

The concept of state was not applicable to the first two forms of Saudi Arabia, that is, the first state and second states, as they were tribal based on a 'chieftaincy structure' (Kostiner, 1993, pp. 4-5), which was common in the peninsula (Kostiner, 1993). The state's institutional structures and the unity of the society were not formed until contemporary Saudi Arabia was established in 1932.

The first Saudi states witnessed the birth of a new Islamic revival in the Arabic peninsula known in the political and historical literature as 'Wahhabism'. It should be acknowledged that the labels *Wahhabi* and *Wahhabism* are sometimes considered uncomplimentary, as they are names given by 'the enemies' (Al-Hefdhy, 1994, p. 18). Instead, some people use such labels as *Muslim*, *Al-Salafiah*, *ahl al-tawhid* or *almuwahhidun* (monotheism) (for more detail, see Al-Hefdhy, 1994; Lacroix, 2011). However, the term *Wahhabism* is used in this study to be consistent with the literature.

The Wahhabi revival turned into religious-political theory around which contemporary Saudi Arabia revolves (Otterbeck, 2012). The kingdom with all its official institutions is based on Wahhabi doctrine. Wahhabism spread over the Arab peninsula and was followed by many people, particularly the Bedouins (Kostiner, 1985; Nevo, 1998). These people joined the movement, in the third attempt, as Talamith Al Dawah al Islahyah (pupils of the reform call) and Ikhwan Najd (brotherhood of Najd), who served as military officers for King Abdul-Aziz, the founder of contemporary Saudi Arabia, as well as preachers of the Wahhabi revival around the peninsula (Al-Hefdhy, 1994; Commins, 2006; Ochsenwald, 1981; Otterbeck, 2012)

Therefore, when Al-Hefdhy (1994), examined the role of Wahhabism in the development of education and particularly of attitudes about women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, he stated that:

[t]he story of the [contemporary Saudi] union is the story of the Ikhwan movement, another term used for the Wahhabis in the modern history of Saudi Arabia. The Ikhwan ... are those Bedouins who accepted the fundamentals of orthodox Islam... as preached by Muhammad Ibn Abd [al-Wahab] during the middle of the eighteenth century. (p. 25)

Similarly, Hoveyda (2002) stated:

Without the Wahhabi doctrine, the Saudis would not have succeeded in their drive to dominate the whole peninsula. The alliance their ancestor Muhammad Ibn Saud struck with Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahab was, fact, tantamount to a Faustian pact' (p. 495).

Thus, understanding Wahhabism is vital in recognising Saudi Arabian social identity, as well as understanding the segregation of the genders in Saudi Arabia because the current gender segregation practice in Saudi Arabia has been 'cultured' within the medium of Wahhabi religious and political ideological discourse.

To illustrate, the first author's grandmother told him that when she was a child 80 years ago, she remembers males and females working in agriculture together without any physical segregation. They interacted without the women covering their faces. One of the participants in this original research project also reported that his grandfathers and -mothers told him similar stories. The first author remembers, just 20 years ago, his mother sitting in the same room with his uncles, which is now not acceptable. She was listening to music, which she now believes is prohibited.

The change has happened quickly in people's daily lives. Gender segregation was promoted and imposed by Wahhabi ideology, which has dominated the state institutions (Otterbeck, 2012; Yamani, 2004). According to Yamani, the cultural identity transformation was accomplished through three phases, particularly in the western part of Saudi Arabia in Hijaz, which at that time was more similar to an urban community. The first period came after the 'unification' of the society under one state, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in 1932. The second phase came after the discovery of oil and huge revenues from the oil influenced the growth of the country in the 1950s. The third period was in the 1980s, when the oil price dropped; this phase also witnessed an appearance of internal and external religious revivals that either competed with Wahhabism or were influenced by it (see also Lacroix&Holoch, 2011; Otterbeck, 2012). Within all three phases Wahhabism was the major factor driving social change and transformation of Saudi society.

The ideology of Wahhabism is the cornerstone and the essential key to understanding Saudi Arabia as the sociocultural, historical context of the Saudi student. Wahhabism is a complex ideology that was subjected to and influenced by particular interpretations of Islamic teachings, Arabic culture, and political conditions. However, it must be recognised also that Saudi Arabia comprises many tribes and religious schools, which respond to Wahhabism ideology in different ways and to different extents.

### **Key Social and Political Features of Wahhabism**

A feature of Saudi society is the role that religion plays in forming social identity. Wahhabism has been promoted in Saudi Arabia as the right interpretation of Islam and the reform of the correct faith. It has come to be seen moral code applicable to all in Saudi Arabia (Otterbeck, 2012). This moral status has been reached through the influence of three elements: the command to obey those in authority, cultivation of a Saudi Arabian community, and censorship in society.

#### **'Obey Those in Authority among you' – The First Element**

From a Wahhabi perspective and in a general sense, the religious scholars (*Ulama*) are considered community rulers who have the authority to give guidance in the form of teachings for Muslims, who must obey them. This idea comes from the Quran, particularly from Ayah (verse) 59 in Surat An-Nisa (The Women), in which Allah said,

*يا أيها الذين آمنوا أطيعوا الله وأطيعوا الرسول وأولي الأمر منكم فإن تنازعتم في شئء فردوه إلى الله والرسول إن كنتم تؤمنون بالله واليوم الآخر ذلك خير وأحسن تأويلاً.*

'O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best [way] and best in result.'

The term, those in authority among you, is interpreted, by the Wahhabi, as referring to both political and religious leaders. Religion and politics are indistinguishable in Wahhabi ideology (Farsy, 2004). Religious scholars, also called Mufti, generate legal opinions (fatwa) which significantly contribute to political and social activities, as well as to individual actions (Commins, 2006; Otterbeck, 2012). The Mufti, therefore, possess a great authority and have a strong alliance with the king (Al-Atawneh, 2011; Al-Fahad, 2004; Commins, 2006; Farsy, 2004; Otterbeck, 2012). According to Al-Hefdhy (1994), Wahhabi religious scholars have considerable influence in all aspects of Saudi lives, and their presence is felt in the education, legal life, and social life of the Kingdom. Wahhabi doctrine states that obeying the king's order (which, it is supposed, does not interfere with the clear order of Allah) is an obligation for all Muslims. This obligation has its power from Allah and his order of prophets. Therefore, people of Saudi Arabia must obey the king as long as he is not an obvious infidel and as long as he allows the people to pray. Breaking such a pledge or revolt against the leader is considered a major religious sin (Al-Hefdhy, 1994).

Accordingly, it could be argued that Saudi Arabia as a state is a 'theo-monarchy' (Al-Atawneh, 2009, p. 733), an integration of a theocracy and a monarchy. Al-Atawneh also asserted that '[t]he fusion of religion and politics is clearly recognised and acknowledged by Wahhabi scholars, who believe that religion and state are inseparable' (p. 733). Both *Ulama* (religious scholars) and the royal family as rulers are 'those in authority among you'. Thus, obeying them is religiously essential because total union and interrelation between religion and politics is the correct way of life.

### **Cultivation of a Saudi Arabian Community – The Second Element**

Throughout the intertwined relationship between Wahhabi religious scholars and the Saudi kings, the power of religion and politics has formed a joint force which has heavily contributed to cultivating the Saudi society and defining its identity based on religious values and political principles (Nevo, 1998). In other words, Saudi Arabia has promoted its national identity by means of Wahhabism in order to develop a united society. According to Nevo (1998), the contemporary Saudi state has made 'efforts to cultivate Wahhabism both as a state religion and as an essential attribute of Saudi national identity' (p. 34).

Wahhabism promotes Islam not only as a religion for individuals but also as a faith which touches every aspect of individual, social, private, and public life (Al-Atawneh, 2009, 2011; Al-Hefdhy, 1994; Commins, 2006). It is 'a comprehensive system for governing everything public, social and political and Islamic law is a complete moral code that prescribes for every eventuality, including governance' (Al-Atawneh, 2009, p. 733). Thus, Wahhabism is an ideology that forms the structure of social and political institutions. Al-Hefdhy (1994) has identified Wahhabi ideology as being embedded in the following institutions and activities; the judicial system, Islamic law which influences all social and economic activities, law enforcement through a religious police body, theological education at all levels, Islamic research, the education of girls, the operation of the Mosques, religious jurisprudence and international proselytising.

### **Censorship of Social Activity– The Third Element**

One of the most powerful means of forming the Saudi social identity is the censorship ensuring that public and private activity will adhere to the religious values of Wahhabism. Different procedures have been adopted in order to create a strong censorship over the society (Otterbeck, 2012; Yehia, 2007): For example, banning certain books, newspapers, and TV shows (Yehia, 2007).

One of the most effective means of maintaining censorship is what in Saudi Arabia is called AL- Hay'ah, referred to in the Western media as religious police. In the early 1980s, this group formed a Commission, chaired by the King himself, that they officially named the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV). This commission is directly linked to the King, who is the prime minister. According to the official website of CPVPV (2011), their main tasks are as follows:

- Guiding people and urging them to virtue
- Working to prevent people from committing taboos and vice
- Working to prevent bad customs, traditions, and religious innovation
- Getting people to perform the duties of Islam
- Ensure that this country appears as an appropriate model of the Islamic world

These aims directly serve the commission police who aim to uphold official Wahhabi political theory of the social that is built on the premise that individuals are quick to err if not controlled by moral and legal codes pointing in the right direction.' (p. 343). In practice, individual behaviour, views, hair, clothing, symbols in public, mixing between genders – all these acts must be prohibited, and this group of police must be responsible for maintaining these restrictions (Otterbeck, 2012; Yehia, 2007).

The other means of censorship is gender segregation. Otterbeck (2012) argued that the most effective means for social control is gender segregation. It has become part of the culture in Saudi Arabia since the contemporary ' Saudi state has, through laws and regulations, spread the Wahhabi conception of segregation in the society' (p. 343). However, such censorship activity has become increasingly difficult due to the revolution of technology (Otterbeck, 2008).

These three key features of Wahhabi ideology; obedience to those in authority, the development of the Saudi community and censorship promote gender segregation in contemporary Saudi Arabia.

This claim does not ignore the fact that the root of gender segregation has previously existed in the Arab cultures and, in particular, among some of the Bedouin tribes. However, observing the development of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia leads to a valid argument which considers that the practice of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia today is a new phenomenon developed from Wahhabi ideology and power, and from the cultural and original Islamic role of gender Relationships. In other words, Wahhabi religious, political, and economic power creates the current face of gender relation roles, which has taken the form of gender segregation.

### **The Influence of Wahhabi Ideology on Gender Segregation in Saudi Arabia**

In Saudi Arabia, gender segregation is evident in almost every public and private institution. Educational sectors, including schools and universities, and most places of entertainment, as well as parks, forbid the mixing of the genders (AlMunajjed, 1997; Mayer, 2000). For example, a single-sex school is the only available kind of school in Saudi Arabia (including private, public, general, and religious schools); the situation is the same in universities and colleges, except for the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), which was established for international graduate-level research by King Abdullah. This is an elite university with a majority of international students attending. The university has been criticised by some Wahhabi scholars because of its co-educational system. Medical schools and institutions allow for a certain level of mixing because of the shortage in female doctors and nurses. Most restaurants also have two sections: one for men and one for families (where each family is seated in a separate, partitioned area). Some restaurants cater for men only; none cater for women only as there are no female waiters. The phenomenon of gender segregation is central to most people's social, educational, and political activities.

Gender segregation, as currently practiced in Saudi Arabia is a new phenomenon, but it has its root in Arabic traditions. Arabs most likely have a very traditional view on the role of the gender in society, believing a man is responsible for working outside of the home while a woman takes responsibility for inside the home. Even prior to the appearance of Islam, the Arabic tribes held these views about females, which had a significant influence on the role of women. As mentioned in the Quran, some Arab tribes considered that having a female child was shameful and/or a cause for shame. For example, in Ayah (verses) 58-59 (Surat An-Nahl16:) Allah said:

يتوارى من القوم من سوء ما ينشر به أيمسكه على هون أم يدسه في التراب ألا ساء ما ( 58 ) وإذا بشر أحدهم بالأنثى ظل وجهه مسودا وهو كظيم يحكمون

'And when the news of (the birth of) a female (child) is brought to any of them, his face becomes dark, and he is filled with inward grief! He hides himself from the people because of the evil of that whereof he has been informed. Shall he keep her with dishonour or bury her in the earth? Certainly, evil is their decision.

Thus, it could be argued religiously that such a worldview has nothing to do with Islamic principles (Abu-Ali & Reisen, 1999; AlMunajjed, 1997; Fanjar 1987; Zant 2002); it was, in fact, structured on a traditional historical view of gender roles that existed several hundreds of years before Islam. Such a traditional worldview often creates a masculine world in which gender separation is prominent, there are quite different roles for the sexes (Marcus, 2005), and authority and domination are vested in the men (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2002).

The Arab society, including the new Saudi Arabian society, is traditionally divided by men into two separate worlds: the public world and the private world. The public world is the area of business and political activity, which is the man's domain (AlMunajjed, 1997). Therefore, economic, political, and religious activity is associated with the male. Women belong exclusively to the private domain. This space is associated with the home, kinsmen or family members, family life, intimate relationships, and gardens. The private world is usually considered as a retreat and a sanctuary that a man should keep safe and secure (Deaver, 1980, p. 32). Therefore, Arab people are usually very sensitive to what belongs to the public and what belongs to the private domains (AlMunajjed, 1997).

Another concept that has developed from the notion of 'sanctuary' is the concept of 'ird' (عرض). Many Arabs and Saudis would consider that the concept of ird (عرض) has been most responsible for the practice of gender separation. The concept is best described as associated with personal honour. 'Ird' refers to family honour and particularly to a woman's chastity. The term does not appear in the Quran, but it existed among the pre-Islamic Arabs and has been mentioned in Hadith (the prophet's speeches). Patai (1983) has stated that the concept of ird appears to have a secular value rather than a religious one. According to Baki (2004), Saudis are more sensitive to ird than to anything else.

Soffan (1980) also confirmed that ird is a very sensitive aspect of Arab life when he stated that in Arab societies 'woman is the repository of moral deeds in her family, thus she can destroy the honour of the family. She carries her family honour with her even after marriage and she continues to represent her family through modesty' (p. 18).

The Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic values has been influenced by this traditional view. Thus, it is well known that ird is considered as the fourth of the five hierarchies that Allah commanded Muslims to protect, which are religion, self, mind, ird, and wealth. However, other Muslim schools argue that such Islamic resources as the Quran and the Hadith, as well as previous historical practices, indicate that the phenomenon of gender segregation did not exist in the past as an Islamic order (Abu-Shuqqah, 1999; Fanjar 1987; Zant 2002). The Quran and other Islamic teachings clearly indicate that a woman has a right to education as does a man; she also has the right to work as long as her work does not harm herself or her family (AlMunajjed, 1997). In Islamic history, in the centuries prior to the Wahhabi revival, women not only mixed with men in mosques but also played significant roles in society (Abu-Shuqqah, 1999; Fanjar 1987; Zant 2002).

Wahhabi scholars maintain that gender segregation is an Islamic teaching because Islam encourages chastity and virtue, and the importance of respecting a person's ird. For Wahhabi scholars, this implies gender separation; the importance of protecting ird has led them to slide into a belief that gender separation comes from basic Islamic teaching (AlMunajjed, 1997; Baki, 2004; Fanjar, 1997; Patai, 1983; Zant, 2002). As a result, most Saudi citizens believe that gender segregation is a religious order from Allah (God) and his prophet (Mohammed – Peace be upon him). Consequently, they also believe that the mixing of genders is a sinful practice. Many examples can be given to illustrate how the clerics of the Wahhabi revival view any gender issue (Al-Ashaikh, 2009; IbnBaz, 2010). According to Achoui (2006), gender segregation, and the associated values to such practices, appears not to have changed and little desire is noticed for such change as gender segregation is based on entrenched by fundamental tribal values, and powered and sanctioned institutionally by Wahhabism and the state.

For instance, in a press release from Alarabiya.net (2010), a famous Saudi cleric, Shaikh Abdul-Rahman al-Barrak, backed gender segregation with a 'fatwa'. The cleric said that mixing genders in the workplace or in education 'as advocated by modernisers' is prohibited because it allows 'sight of what is forbidden, and forbidden talk between men and women'. In addition, Alarabiya.net (2010) cited him as saying;

Whoever allows this mixing ... allows forbidden things, and whoever allows them is an infidel and this means defection from Islam ... Either he retracts or he must be killed ... because he disavows and does not observe the Shariah.

This religious idea has interacted dialectically with the Arabic traditional culture of ird (which does not promote directly the practice of gender segregation). Therefore, the current Saudi society has been structured to keep *religious and cultural ird* within strictly defined limits that lessen the possibility of losing it because it is associated with the sanctity of women. Thus, many restrictions were imposed on women because the tribe and family honour is connected strongly to ird. A woman would lose her ird if she committed adultery or even attempted to do so; and if the ird is lost, it cannot be regained even after many generations. As a result, there are many restrictions on Saudi women in society (for example, females are not supposed to drive or travel alone without a guardian, which would be a close relative male like father, brother, son, or, of course, husband).

It is worth noting that, in practice, in Saudi Arabia today, a loss of ird is associated only with female – and not male – chastity. It has been argued that this perception of ird has led to women being considered erotic creations (Jawhari, 2007) and it also provides a sexualised depiction of women who live in mixed-gender environments. An understanding of these issues is vital to comprehending the situation of Saudi students, both male and female, when they come to study in countries such as the USA, the UK and Australia where there is no gender segregation.

The above picture of gender segregation has been taken from the most observable and dominant image of the context. This image, however, is not stable and change is occurring because of a number of interrelated factors especially those related to political and socioeconomic domains (Achoui, 2006; Al-Hefdhy, 1994; Baki, 2004; Clary & Karlin, 2011; Nevo, 1998; Otterbeck, 2012).



### **Concluding Discussion**

In relation to gender segregation, Saudi Arabia is experiencing active debates about reform, especially since the terrorist attack in Riyadh in 2003. Soon after the attack, the King issued a Royal Decree to the Centre for National Dialogue, known as the King Abdulaziz Centre for National Dialogue to encourage more dialogue between all sectors and classes of Saudi society. Since King Abdullah was crowned in 2005 both the status of women and the education of women have been prominent topics of discussion for reform (Meijer, 2010). New communication technology has also enhanced the changing trend, adding a socially based orientation to political reforms. Hamdan (2005) argues that 'satellite dishes and more recently, internet access, have allowed Saudi society to view others not only in Western and European nations but in neighbouring Arabic countries' (p. 56). Although social media is heavily subsidised Saudis are among the most enthusiastic users in the world.

There are different positions, the conservatives who are against reform and liberals who support it (Meijer, 2010). The debate between these two parties is taking place in the media. One of the major debates between them concerns gender desegregation which is beginning to occur in locations like KAUST and of course for the large numbers of international students, male and female, studying abroad.

The conservatives among the Wahhabi scholars who represent the religious establishment and its associations, such as the CPVPV, consider KAUST corrupted because men and women are mixed and there has even been a video spread through social media of male and female students dancing together. This has created considerable consternation.

The conservatives accuse liberals of Westernising society and corrupting values (Meijer, 2010). On the other hand, the liberals who supported the reform were in favour of institutions like KAUST as being an important step towards reforming the education system and giving women equal opportunity to participate and contribute in society and in the job market. They accuse conservatives of being against progress, and of using their influence on people for their own agenda (Meijer, 2010). The establishment of the King Abdullah International Scholarship Programme has been one of the largest subjects of this debate.

In conclusion we return to the point made at the beginning and throughout this paper and that is that the political, social, religious and moral power in Saudi Arabia lies in the hands of the Monarchy and the followers of Wahhabism, but even in these groups there are changes. The major liberalising activities have come directly from the Monarchy and these are the KAUST and the international scholarship program, KASP. Of these the KASP is likely to have the greatest impact with a large number of the Saudi youth going abroad each year to study in gender mixed societies. This will inevitably have an impact. The media are conducting the main discussions on change while actions still lie with those with political and religious power. Saudi Arabia has a diverse population and there is evidence of change from above. Such a combination makes this a dynamic society.

### **References**

- Al-Ashaikh, A. (Producer). (2009). Grand Mufti's fatwa on mixing sex in education. Retrieved 10 May 2010 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCxWTHA15nU>
- Abouammoh, A. M. (2009). The role of education: Trends of reforms and EU-GCC understanding. Riyadh: Center for Higher Education Research and Studies (CHERS). Retrieved from <http://faculty.ksu.edu.sa/abouammoh/Reports%20and%20papers%20in%20HE/Forms/AllItems.aspx>
- Abu-Ali, A., & Reisen, C. (1999). Gender role identity among adolescent Muslim girls living in the US. *Current Psychology*, 18(2), 185–192.
- Abu-Shuqqah. (1999). *Tahrir al-marahfi'asr al-risalah: dirasah an al-marahjamiyah li-nusus al-Quran al-karimwa-sahihay al-Bukhariwa-Muslim*. [Women's liberation in the era of the Prophet's message: A study on women collected the texts of the Holy Quran and Saheeh Al-Bukhari and Muslim] (Vols. 3-4). Al-Kuwayt: Dar Alqalam.
- Achoui, M. M. (2006). The Saudi society: Tradition and change. In J. Georgas, J. W. Berry, F. J. R. Van de Vijver, C. Kagitcibasi, & Y. H. Poortinga (Eds.), *Families across cultures: A 30-nation psychological study* (pp. 435–441). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. 246
- Alarabiya.net (2010). Saudi cleric backs gender segregation with fatwa. Retrieved February 28, 2011, from <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/02/24/101355.html>

- Al-Ashaikh, A. (Producer). (2009). Grand Mufti's fatwa on mixing sex in education. Retrieved 10 May 2010 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCxWTHA15nU>
- Al-Atawneh
- Al-Atawneh, M. (2009). Is Saudi Arabia a theocracy? Religion and governance in contemporary Saudi Arabia. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 45(5), 721–737.
- Al-Atawneh, M. (2011). Wahhabi legal theory as reflected in modern official Saudi fatwas: ijihad, taqlid, sources, and methodology. *Islamic Law and Society*, 18, 3(4), 327–355.
- Al-Fahad, A. H. (2004). From exclusivism to accommodation: Doctrinal and legal evolution of Wahhabism. *New York University Law Review*, 79(2), 485, 487–498.
- Alhazmi, A., & Nyland, B. (2013). The Saudi Arabian international student experience: from agender-segregated society to studying in a mixed-gender environment. *Compare: A Journal Of Comparative & International Education*, 43(3), 346-365.
- Al-Hefdhhy, Y. S. (1994). The role of the ulama (Islamic Scholars) in establishing an Islamic education system for women in Saudi Arabia (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL. 247
- AlMunajjed, M. (1997). *Women in Saudi Arabia today*. London, England: Palgrave- Macmillan.
- Al-Nassar, F. (1982). *Saudi Arabian educational mission to the United States: Assessing perceptions of student satisfaction with services rendered* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK.
- Baki, R. (2004). Gender-segregated education in Saudi Arabia: Its impact on social norms and the Saudi Labor market. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 12(28). Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/183>
- Broberg, C. (2002). *Saudi Arabia in pictures*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publications.
- Central Department Of Statistics & Information, 2011
- Central Department Of Statistics & Information. (2011). Preliminary results of Census of Population and Housing in 2010. Retrieved September 12, 2012, from <http://www.cdsi.gov.sa/english/index.php> 253
- Clary, C., & Karlin, M. E. (2011). Saudi Arabia's reform gamble. *Survival*, 53(5), 15–20.
- Commins, D. (2006). *The Wahhabi mission and Saudi Arabia*. London, England: I. B. Tauris.
- CPVPV (2011). Commission of the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice Retrieved May 17, 2011, from <https://www.pv.gov.sa/AboutAuthority/Pages/WhoWeAre.aspx>. [Arabic]
- Deaver, Sherri. (1980). The contemporary Saudi woman. In E. Bourguignon (Ed.), *A world of women: Anthropological studies of women in the societies of the world* (pp. 19–42). New York, NY: Praeger.
- Doumato, E. (1992). Gender, monarchy, and national identity in Saudi Arabia. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 19(1), 31–47.
- Fanjar, A. (1987). *Mixing gender in religion, history, and sociology*. Cairo, Egypt: al-Haya h al-Mi r ah al-mmahlil-Kit b.
- Farsy, F. (2004). *Modernity and tradition: The Saudi equation*. Hampshire, England: Panarc International. 257
- Hamdan A. Women and education in Saudi Arabia Challenges and Achievements. *IntEduc J*.2002;6:42–64.
- Hoveyda, F. (2002). Saudi Arabia: Friend or Foe? *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 24(6), 491–504. Retrieved June 11, 2012, from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10803920216383>
- IbnBaz. (2000). *Majmufatawawa-maqalatmutanawwiah* [Variety of edicts and articles]. In M. I. S. Shuwayir (Ed.) Available from <http://www.binbaz.org.sa/book/m007.pdf> [Arabic ] 262
- IbnBaz. (2010). *Al-Ikhtlat fi Adderasah* [Mixing sex for study]. Retrieved June 15, 2010, from <http://www.binbaz.org.sa/mat/8287> [Arabic ]
- Kabasakal&Bodur
- Kabasakal, H., & Bodur, M. (2002). Arabic cluster: A bridge between East and West. *Journal of World Business*, 37(1), 40–54.
- Kostiner, J. (1985). On instruments and their designers: The Ikhwan of Najd and the emergence of the Saudi state. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 21(2), 298–323.
- Kostiner, J. (1993). *The making of Saudi Arabia, 1916–1936: From chieftaincy to monarchical state*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Lacroix, S., & Holoch, G. (2011). *Awakening Islam: The politics of religious dissent in contemporary Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Long, D. E. (1997). *The kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- Marcus, A. (2005). User interface design and culture. In N. Aykin (Ed.), *Usability and internationalization of information technology* (pp. 51–78). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Marginson, S., Kaur, S., Sawir, E., & Al-Mubarak, A. A. S. (2011). National and global challenges to higher education in Saudi Arabia: Current development and future strategies. In S. Marginson, S. Kaur, & E. Sawir (Eds.), *Higher education in the Asia-Pacific* (Vol. 36, pp. 413–30). Netherlands: Springer.
- Mayer, A. (2000). Benign apartheid: How gender apartheid has been rationalized. *UCLA Journal of International Law and Foreign Affairs*, 5, 237–338.
- Mazi, A. A., & Abouammoh, A. M. (2009). Development of higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Trends and strategies. Proceedings from Global Higher Education Forum GHEF09, 13–16 December 2009, Penang-Malaysia. Retrieved from <http://faculty.ksu.edu.sa/abouammoh/Reports%20and%20papers%20in%20HE/Development%20of%20higher%20education%20at%20KSA,%20%20GHEF2009%20.pdf>
- Meijer, R. (2010). Reform in Saudi Arabia: The gender-segregation debate. *Middle East Policy*, 17(4), 80–100. 268
- Moffett, D. (2006). A phenomenological study of international students in a Florida University Ph. D. Program. Online Submission, Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Florida Education Research Association (FERA), Jacksonville, FL, November.
- Nevo, J. (1998). Religion and national identity in Saudi Arabia. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 34(3), 34–53.
- Ochsenwald, W. (1981). Saudi Arabia and the Islamic revival. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 271–286.
- Otterbeck, J. (2008). Battling over the public sphere: Islamic reactions to the music of today. *Contemporary Islam*, 2(3), 211–228. doi: 10.1007/s11562-008-0062-y
- Otterbeck, J. (2012). Wahhabi ideology of social control versus a new publicness in Saudi Arabia. *Contemporary Islam*, 6(3), 341–353. doi: 10.1007/s11562-012-0223-x
- Patai, R. (1983). *The Arab mind*. New York, NY: Scribner.
- Shehry, A. (1989). An investigation of the financial and academic problems perceived by Saudi graduate students while they are studying in the United States (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR.
- Soffan, L. (1980). *The women of the United Arab Emirates*. New York, NY: Harper & Row
- Wagemakers, J. (2012). Arguing for change under benevolent oppression: Intellectual trends and debates in Saudi Arabia. In Meijer, R. & Aarts, P. (Eds.) (2012). *Saudi Arabia: between conservatism, accommodation and reform*. The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations.
- Wynbrandt, J. (2004). *A brief history of Saudi Arabia*. New York, NY: Facts On File.
- Yamani, M. (2004). *Cradle of Islam: The Hijaz and the quest for an Arabian identity*. London, England: IB Tauris.
- Yehia, H. A. (2007). Translation, culture, and censorship in Saudi Arabia (1988–2006) and Iraq (1979–2005) (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA.
- Zant, M. (2002). *is at al-sufurwa-al-niqab: wa-ikhtilatwa-infis al al-Jinsayninda al-Arab (Story unveiling and the veil: and the mixing of the sexes and the separation to the Arabs)*. Cairo Dar al-Bustani li-l-nasr wa-al-tawzi.