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About the Author

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Executive Summary

This paper is an overview of the women's campaign against the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia and a window into the new landscape of media activism. The dynamics and developments of the "I Am My Own Guardian" campaign are a testimony to the new energy in women's activism in the kingdom, which led up to the recently issued royal decree to allow women to drive. It also provides a fascinating snapshot of state-society relations at this time of generational transition.

Over the course of 2016-17, the I Am My Own Guardian campaign was unprecedented in its ability to influence and mobilize varied and ever-growing groups of constituents, including a new generation of young women who were not previously politically active. Social media was crucial to this success, as it helped to expand activists' networks as well as strengthen their organization and disseminate their messages. As a result of this expansion, new faces gained visibility and were able to develop into the campaign's prominent and leading activists.

The emergence of new narratives and perspectives led to tensions over the leadership and central identity or "face" of the campaign. A second factor animating debates within the campaign was the rise of an assertive nationalism in the kingdom. This "Saudi First" type of populism informed contentious debates over the role of Saudi women living abroad, and that of foreign media, contributing to a cycle of nationalist backlash and defiant assertions of belonging. The economic context of impending austerity in Saudi Arabia also affected the campaign, as disparities in economic class divided participants and questions of privilege led to intense disagreements. The broader context of Saudi Vision 2030, with its emphasis on economic citizenship and participation, further encouraged and informed debates on gendered economic privilege.

The campaign to end the male guardianship system has demanded legal representation from the state, specifically in the form of full citizenship and governmental responsiveness to their demands as citizens, but it has also contained appeals for social recognition and economic redistribution. In this way, the campaign has both reflected and exploited the current political environment, defined by the Yemen war, with its emphasis on shared sacrifice and an assertive Saudi national identity, and the Vision 2030 plan, with its emphasis on economic participation and individual responsibility. At the same time, the state's new "*hazm*" or "decisive" nationalism and its Vision 2030 plan have also set limits for the campaign's success. Defectors from the campaign have often branded it as unpatriotic and harmful to Saudi unity during a difficult reform process.

The most significant change achieved by the campaign has been a government order issued on April 17 ending the requirement for a male guardian's approval for women to access government services. This should in most circumstances allow women to study, access health care, and work in the public sector without a male guardian's consent.

Still, it is the informal consequences of the campaign that may prove far more significant. The I Am My Own Guardian campaign has brought before the Saudi public questions and concerns of social recognition, resource redistribution, and political participation. Strong feminist

activist networks have formed and lively mobilization efforts and internal debates continue. This is an unprecedented step forward for Saudi feminism and will surely leave its imprint on the political landscape of women's rights in Saudi Arabia.

Introduction

In July 2016, Saudi women launched the "I Am My Own Guardian" campaign to end the guardianship system in Saudi Arabia. The campaign's launch was timed to coincide with that of the Human Rights Watch "Boxed In" report on Saudi women's lived experiences of the guardianship system.¹ Some leading activists sought to build upon its release with demands communicated via a hashtag and media outreach campaign. However, the campaign quickly expanded and has lasted for over a year.

This paper introduces the campaign, and analyzes what it demonstrates about the current state of Saudi development and social activism. Critical to this analysis is the ascension to the throne of King Salman bin Abdulaziz and the elevation of his son, Mohammed bin Salman, to crown prince. This has brought significant changes both at home and abroad, with the initiation of the Saudi Vision 2030 economic plan² and the military intervention in Yemen.³ These decisions have brought about a new sense of national identity and means of engaging with citizens. By taking advantage of this new social and political context, the campaign has enabled long-lasting activist networks to solidify and energize previously inactive constituencies of Saudi women. It has also provided a powerful place for feminist discourse as reflected in social media engagements by Saudi women activists.

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This confluence of women's activism and government transformation has resulted in some concrete achievements. A governmental order issued on April 17 partially restricted the guardianship system throughout state agencies and began to address the problem of women's transportation through the Ministry of Labor and Social Development. The issuance of a royal decree permitting women's driving on September 26 and various changes to laws concerning women's universities on October 1 and 2 indicate that Saudi feminist activism is bearing fruit, despite numerous obstacles.

In exploring the campaign over the course of 2016-17, this paper will first consider the brief history of activism for Saudi women's rights. It will then take up the issue of women's guardianship and the pervasive system of male authority in Saudi Arabia, which requires male consent for women to undertake fundamental activities such as marriage, work, and travel. The analysis of the campaign to repeal the male guardianship system will consider debates over ownership of the campaign, economic disparities and privileges, and tensions concerning

¹ Human Rights Watch, [Boxed In: Women and Saudi Arabia's Male Guardianship System](#) (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2016).

² ["Vision 2030,"](#) Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016.

³ Mark Mazzetti and David Kirkpatrick, ["Saudi Arabia Leads Air Assault in Yemen,"](#) *The New York Times*, March 25, 2015.

engagement of Saudis abroad and foreign media. What ensues is not only a recounting of a campaign for Saudi women's rights, but also a snapshot of the state of Saudi society and its concerns, internal negotiations, and progress in a time of rapid transformation in the kingdom's internal governance and global standing.

A Brief History of Saudi Women's Activism

Saudi women have been important to the kingdom's ideology since its founding, as state legitimacy and national identity were grounded in their protection and control. Still, up until the 1960s, women remained mostly invisible to the state as strictly "pious" religious subjects. Eventually, as oil revenue improved state capability, and the imperative of competing with Arab nationalism and the appeal of Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt mounted, Saudi women became the objects of state policy as well. A royal decree was issued calling for women to be educated, yet gender segregation was also newly codified in a separate employment law. Saudi women's activism emerged out of these advances and developed in stages.

1970s-80s: Intellectual Activism and Emergence of "Islamist Feminists"

By the 1970s, the proliferation of women-only education institutions nurtured a nascent political activism among Saudi women.⁴ The efforts to bring more Saudi nationals into the workplace due to the *tafra*, or oil boom, encouraged the formation of Saudi intelligentsia and opened up new spaces for their activities. Initially this played out in mostly academic and intellectual circles, and in media.

In the 1980s, the Saudi state was faced with new challenges. Regionally, the Islamic Revolution in Iran challenged the credibility of Saudi Islamism and the monarchy. Domestically, the seizure of the grand mosque in Mecca in 1979 by a movement questioning certain aspects of the state's modernization project brought the crisis home.⁵ Responding to these challenges, the Saudi state decided to enhance its religiosity, increasing state resources for the religious establishment and aligning itself with a new generation of socially active Saudi Islamists known as the *Sahwa*.⁶ The implication for Saudi women of this state strategy was a weakening of their position in intellectual spaces.

This *Sahwa* movement is crucial to note here because it produced and disseminated cultural tropes about Saudi women that would reappear in societal debates for years to come. These were later evoked by liberal-leaning Saudi feminist activists in their critiques of conservatives, since these tropes grew less accepted with the changing societal context. The most prominent of these are: Saudi women are privileged queens who need not leave the home as they

⁴ Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 17-20. It is important to note that there are a few instances of women's political activities prior to the 1970s, though adequate sources for such are scarce and were not readily available at the time of producing this paper.

⁵ Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix, "Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman Al-[Ain] Utaybi Revisited," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 1 (2007): 107.

⁶ Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 34.

receive the protection and care of religiously minded Saudi men; and Saudi women are like unwrapped candies and must remain covered lest they spoil or be pursued by others desiring their sweetness.

At the same time, employment of women in educational and religious spaces continued to increase. The 1980s-90s marked the start of the post-ta'afa period, and lower oil prices meant the acceleration of Saudization as a state policy. During this era, Islamist feminists emerged in the form of elite "celebrity" women preachers. These women were shaped by the Sahwa, but also maintained their own agency in female spaces and formulated their own Islamic feminist critiques. These critiques depicted Saudi society as being corrupted by Westernization and the presence of expatriate women. This was contrasted with the "rightful" Islamic religion and its positive relationship to women. These Islamist feminist critiques appeared in books, op-eds, as well as in lectures or meetings in educational and religious institutions.

1990s-2000s: The Gulf War Driving Campaign and Riyadh Spring

The political activism of Saudi women peaked in the 1990s, amid the Gulf War and a suspension of "politics as usual." The now famous driving campaign of November 1990 was the very first example of Saudi women activism reaching beyond intellectual spaces and posing a more overt, organized protest in the streets. A group of 47 Saudi women, predominantly academics and doctors, who had benefited from the Saudization policy and built their network within the aforementioned spaces, took the place of their drivers and circled in a group of 13 cars in protest of the Saudi policy forbidding women from driving.⁷

These women's networks and their ideas would provide continuity and support for an emerging generation of activists.

The Saudi government briefly detained the women and required them and their male guardians to sign pledges that the women would never drive again. The women's passports were confiscated. Many of them lost their jobs, and though many were reinstated two years later, they suffered discrimination in the workplace. Additionally, they were also heavily denounced in public. In an infamous, widely-disseminated religious poster, the women's (and their husbands') names, ages, and telephone numbers were all listed along with the inscription: "These are the names of the whores who are backed by communists and secularists [husbands]. Do as you see fit!"⁸

This experience served as a powerful deterrent to further liberal feminist actions. Instead, women from both the Islamist and liberal-leaning camps focused on community-based efforts and new forms of networking. For instance, the Sunday Women's Group started in 1994 would later initiate the Baladi campaign for women's inclusion in local elections, and would promote and participate in the women's driving campaigns in the 2000s.⁹ These women's networks and their ideas would provide continuity and support for an emerging generation of activists.

⁷ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 291.

⁸ "Saudi Women Reunite To Remember Driving Protest," *NPR*, December 16, 2008.

⁹ "Interview Dr. Hatoon al-Fassi," *PBS Frontline*, February 8, 2005; Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, "Women and Elections in Saudi Arabia," YouTube video, 1:22:22, Posted December 22, 2015.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States and the domestic terrorism in Saudi Arabia that followed set off structural changes with important implications for Saudi women's activism. A mix of repression and internal restructuring began shifting the Saudi state from the Islamism of the Sahwa era to a new form of nationhood. The state's counterterrorism and repression of Islamist-leaning individuals in the 2000s resulted in mass arrests and the emergence of a new grievance group. Yet it also opened up space for a new campaign of reformers and petitioners. Thus three new arenas for women's activism emerged in the first decade of the new millennium: reformist movements and their petitions; the political prisoners' movement; and the beginnings of new online communities emerging via blogs, forums, and circulated emails.

Calls for political reform proliferated throughout this period, which came to be known as the Riyadh Spring. Petitions were circulated with demands ranging from an elected Shura Council and provincial assemblies, to a constitutional monarchy.¹⁰ All of the petitions tended to include a critique of the religious establishment and demands for freedom of expression and political organization, while some also included demands for a larger role for women in public life. Often, the petitions also argued that such increased participation would serve as an antidote to the political violence of this period. Many women signed these petitions and were included in their stated political projects, although Saudi men felt the brunt of the subsequent crackdowns.

These shifting politics led to the first protest for political prisoners on July 16, 2007. Around 14 Saudi women, along with a few of their children, protested in front of the prison in Buraidah. According to Human Rights Watch, the protesters were calling for "the speedy trial of their relatives."¹¹ There had been rumors that their relatives were being tortured, and the protesters wanted to regain contact with them and provide them with attorneys.

During this period, Saudi feminist activists started the new Association for Protecting and Defending Women's Rights.¹² Saudi women's feminism was also very prevalent in less overtly political outlets, such as novels.¹³ Activists also started to look to the new space created by the Internet. One example of how they used it is the prominent blogging campaign led by a Saudi woman in defense of the blogger Fouad al-Farhan, who had been arrested for supporting political reformists in 2007.¹⁴

¹⁰ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists: The Struggle over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 34.

¹¹ "Precarious Justice: Arbitrary Detention and Unfair Trials in the Deficient Criminal Justice System of Saudi Arabia," *Human Rights Watch* 20, no. 3 (2008): 56.

¹² Founded by Wajeha al-Huwaider, Fawzia al- Ayouni, and Ebtihal Mubarak. This was preceded by a one-woman march in 2006, as well as a one-woman video campaign for women's driving on Women's International Day, both of which were carried out by Wajeha al-Huwaider.

¹³ Saddeka Arebi, *Women and Words in Saudi Arabia: Politics of Literary Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Women in Search of Themselves" in *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Most prominently by Ebtihal Mubarak.

2000s: Women's Activism Moves Online

The 2011 Arab Spring and its aftermath witnessed a rise in activists' use of technology. Saudi women activists capitalized on the opportunity and adopted the rights-based rhetoric prevalent on such platforms. They did this by organizing online protests through hashtags, making YouTube videos that called for driving protests, and posting numerous tweets daily in support of women's rights. As a result, there was a proliferation of campaigns during the 2000s.

Some campaigns focused on women's right to drive, such as the Women2Drive campaign of the Right2Dignity movement of 2011-12 and the October 26 driving campaign in 2013-14. The Women2Drive campaign grew out of the actions of Saudi activist Manal al-Sharif. In early May 2011 she released a YouTube video calling on women to start driving their cars on June 17, 2011. To encourage mobilization of other women, she later released a second video of herself driving, filmed by veteran feminist activist Wajeha al-Huwaider. Despite Sharif's detention on May 30, around 60 women still drove on June 17 and defiantly posted the event online.

The Women2Drive campaign continued in mid-2011, subsumed under the larger Right2Dignity movement promoting Saudi women's rights in general. It lasted until late 2012 when it was replaced with another campaign, October 26 Driving, which used social media to encourage Saudi women to drive on periodic, set dates over a series of months.

Other campaigns focused on women's right to vote and participate as candidates in municipal elections. The Baladi campaign began in 2004 ahead of the first municipal elections in 2005. In 2009, the campaign began again under the same name led by Hatoon al-Fassi and Fozia al-Hani, demanding women's participation in the municipal elections of 2011.¹⁵ It gained prominence during the Arab Spring period and inspired similar campaigns such as the Saudi Women's Revolution in 2011. The Saudi Women's Revolution was a smaller Facebook campaign of women demanding the right to register and vote in municipal elections.

To the activists' surprise, on September 26, 2011, the Saudi government announced that women would be appointed to the Shura Council and allowed to vote and run in the 2015 municipal elections.¹⁶ The Baladi campaign welcomed this policy change, and organized training sessions for women participating in elections.¹⁷ However, the Ministry of Interior closed down these workshops just as they were about to start in preparation for the elections.

To the activists' surprise, on September 26, 2011, the Saudi government announced that women would be appointed to the Shura Council and allowed to vote and run in the 2015 municipal elections.

¹⁵ Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, "[Women and Elections in Saudi Arabia](#)," YouTube video, 1:22:22, Posted December 22, 2015.

¹⁶ Martin Chulov, "[Saudi Women to be Given Right to Vote and Stand for Election in Four Years](#)," *The Guardian*, September 25, 2011.

¹⁷ "[First Saudi Women Register to Vote](#)," *Al Jazeera*, August 20, 2015.

The political prisoners' movement continued, buoyed by the new resources of social media. Saudi women activists began the Facebook page "Prisoners Until When?" and created the Twitter account "e3teqal," or "detained."¹⁸ They were supported online by Saudi women identified as "*huquqiyat*," or "political rights activists," who were not necessarily Islamist-leaning but tended to see this political prisoners' campaign as crucial to their larger political reform demands.

In mid-2013, Saudi Arabia's passage of the anti-terrorism law and the updated anti-cybercrime law, combined with the monthlong arrest of activists Loujain al-Hathloul and Maysaa al-Amoudi for attempting to drive across the border from the United Arab Emirates, suppressed the campaign's momentum. This continued into 2015, reflecting domestic uncertainties, such as the death of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz and the Saudi military intervention in Yemen.

The Launch of the I Am My Own Guardian Campaign

On July 17, 2016, Human Rights Watch released a report on the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia.¹⁹ "Boxed In" was the product of a one-year collaborative effort between the human rights organization and Saudi women activists. A Twitter campaign was also launched under the hashtags #TogetherToEndMaleGuardianship and #معاً لإنهاء ولاية الرجل على المرأة# to promote this report and the budding campaign against the male guardianship system. Saudi women activists also participated in media outreach, appearing on CNN and BBC, and penning analysis for Foreign Affairs.²⁰

However, after only a week, the campaign took its own turn. Rather than remaining under the influence of a few known activists, including Loujain al-Hathloul and Hala Aldosari, it morphed into a much broader campaign that was able to mobilize diverse groups of women and men alike. This was rhetorically marked by the change in hashtags to #StopEnslavingSaudiWomen and #سعوديات نطالب بإسقاط الولاية# with an added number at the end of the hashtag marking each day of the campaign.

The campaign, sustained by social media, proved to be unprecedented in its influence and longevity. To understand why this was the case requires greater background on the legal guardianship system itself and previous efforts to change it, as well as an exploration of the political context.

The Guardianship System and the Movement against It

Saudi Arabia's male guardianship system is a legal system under which women cannot marry, travel, work, access health care, or study without approval from a *wali al-amr*, or guardian. Her guardian is typically either her husband or closest male relative, such as father, brother,

¹⁸ David Ottaway, "[Saudi Arabia in the Shadow of the Arab Revolt](#)," *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, Summer 2011.

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, [Boxed In: Women and Saudi Arabia's Male Guardianship System](#) (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2016).

²⁰ Hala Aldosari, "[Guardians of the Gender Gap](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, August 10, 2016.

or son. Other restrictive laws exist as derivative rules of this guardianship system, such as the ban on women's driving or institutional obstacles to women's decision making regarding their children's schooling, health, travel, and the like.

Saudi feminists have long objected to this and demanded the lifting of such restrictions on their status as citizens. These demands started increasing in 2011, becoming prominent on Facebook and Twitter,²¹ expanding to other public spaces through the work of Saudi artist-activist Saffaa in 2012,²² and as part of a Jeddah forum on women's rights in the family that was covered in local newspapers in 2013.²³ In 2014 these sentiments culminated in a prominent, organized effort with a petition initiated by activists from the October 26 campaign, signed by 25 women, and presented to then-King Abdullah.

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The 2016 campaign posed a more expansive objection to the guardianship system than previous campaigns. As exemplified in the Human Rights Watch report "Boxed In," it aimed to emphasize a "deeper dive" into the male guardianship system, with an emphasis on its "day to day impacts."²⁴ This focus on the everyday experiences of women under the state's rules and institutions that enforced the guardianship system turned the emphasis from the informal forces of Islam, society, and culture to focus squarely on formal aspects of governmental restrictions and reforms.²⁵ This was a crucial difference in approach as it recognized and popularized an understanding of how the latter fuels the former.

By tackling guardianship head-on in this manner, the campaigners were demanding full citizenship for women from the Saudi state. This left no room for past state dismissals such as the reliance on Saudi Arabia's "exceptional" interpretation of Islam or custom, or demanding patience with society's development.

Context for the Campaign: The Hazm Moment and the New Nationalism

The "hazm movement moment" roughly coincided with the ascension to the throne of King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Saudi Arabia's entry into the war in Yemen.²⁶ The war operation, named "Asifat al-Hazm," or "Decisive Storm," represented a break from the typically reactive Saudi foreign policy, and forged a new national image as more proactive, militaristic, and "decisive." The action earned the king the unofficial title of "King of Hazm," and decisiveness became the buzzword of the new regime.

²¹ "Twitter: Campaign to Lift Guardianship Stirs Debate," *AlBawaba*, June 2, 2013.

²² Saffaa, "I Am My Own Guardian: Saudi Arabia's Male Guardianship Laws," *Muftah*, November 14, 2012.

²³ "Jeddah: Forum on Inheritance Demands Abolishing Guardianship System," *Akhbaar24*, May 31, 2013.

²⁴ The Real News, "2016 Summit on Saudi Arabia: Women in Saudi Arabia," YouTube video, 41:08, Posted March 5, 2016.

²⁵ For instance, although the government criminalized domestic abuse in 2013, a male guardian can have claims dismissed by simply filing a counterclaim of *uqooq*, or disobedience.

²⁶ Mark Mazzetti and David Kirkpatrick, "Saudi Arabia Leads Air Assault in Yemen," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2015.

Initially, these developments were met with apprehension by most Saudi feminist activists. In addition to this more militaristic “decisiveness,” they anticipated the new king would “decisively” side with more religious elements within the royal family²⁷ and state bureaucracy. Nonetheless, this “hazm moment” did provide the opportunity for activists to pursue negotiations on Saudi women’s citizenship and how women fit within this new nationalism.

This opportunity followed Saudi Arabia’s release of an extensive new policy of self-reliance and economic reform: the Vision 2030 plan.²⁸ The plan described a “progressive” image for Saudi Arabia’s future that relies on its youth and includes entertainment and tourism, both domestic and international.²⁹ More important than the plan itself was the ethos behind it, which was promoted by the new Saudi state, mostly by then-Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. To overcome resistance to fewer financial subsidies and the potential for higher taxes, the plan is often promoted with high levels of populism and notions of participation: Namely, Saudis can be participants in the country’s fate through developing its economy. In this way, this new nationalism and the economic plan’s potential hardships are reframed as for the benefit of all Saudi society.

This combination of the Vision 2030 framing of economic citizenship and the new hazm or nationalist citizenship proved very useful for Saudi feminists and their campaign against the male guardianship system. The activists publicly seized on the numerous Vision 2030-related government initiatives and laws, particularly those relating to citizenship and civil affairs, and new roles for Saudi women. Activists disseminated announcements of policy changes alongside the phrase “*ma had dara ankom*,” or “no one’s heard of you,” a direct quote from critics who dismissed the campaign as having no effect. By placing it alongside social policy changes, the activists were asserting that their collective voice was in fact influential and that it ought to be so since they were promoting themselves as full, participating citizens. Other activists expressed disappointment in the slow or negligible results for Saudi women. For instance, one new campaigner stated: “I believe that the Vision 2030 plan didn’t include women, for it is known that women of my country are not part of the country, but [an] extension of men.”³⁰

Analyzing the I Am My Own Guardian Campaign

Beyond political context, careful and thorough analysis of this campaign is necessary to see how its use of social media tools brought in a wide variety of actors, with varying motivations and degrees of participation. A closer look at their nuanced discussions highlights how elements of the political context and the opportunity space it provided also came to shape the participants and the dynamics of the campaign itself.

²⁷ Ahmed Al Omran, “[Saudi Minister’s Removal Spurs Fears among Women](#),” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 30, 2015.

²⁸ “[Vision 2030](#),” Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016.

²⁹ This stated “progressive” agenda was further promoted by accompanying symbolic state acts such as the religious police’s legal authority being greatly limited and more women were appointed to the Shura Council.

³⁰ Manahel (1994_thefreedom), Twitter post, [October 5, 2016, 12:38 am](#).

Becoming a Popular Movement: New Media Brings New Constituencies

The guardianship campaign engaged academics and Shura Council women from both liberal and Islamist viewpoints, civil rights activists, and activist women from the earlier driving campaigns. But it was unique in its ability to engage with new constituencies of women who were previously uninvolved in politics. The campaign even reached beyond Saudi Arabia's borders to women who had fled abroad and were now seeking asylum. As leading campaigner Hala Aldosari described it: "It seemed that, contrary to earlier campaigns for women for municipal participation or driving, this campaign had a life of its own."³¹

These new constituencies were potentially drawn into this campaign by the more permissive and populist political environment, as well as the campaign's broadening set of concerns. Heavy reliance on social media, especially Twitter hashtags and group chats, allowed these new subgroups to organize and obtain a high degree of visibility, contributing to the campaign's unprecedented level of mobilization.

The new generation of young women who were not previously politically active tended to develop networks and organize with the help of Twitter groups. Some of the most active women in these groups invited controversy: They held positive views on atheism and made a point of expressing their nontraditional gender and sexual orientations as part of their feminist activism. Others engaged sporadically and opportunistically, such as the Saudi women college students who created a separate hashtag for their own demands,³² including one in defense of allowing female students to join a university gym without their guardians' approval and another arguing for female students to take smart phones with cameras onto their campuses, rejecting the presumption that their irresponsible use of camera phones would result in social scandal.³³

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A network of expatriate Saudi women grew prominent during the campaign. These women abroad differed in how they spoke of their faiths and families; some boldly announced on Twitter that they had abandoned Islam and intended to remain abroad as refugees, while others expressed that they missed their families and would like to visit them but feared returning to Saudi Arabia. These women's voices grew in importance due to their candor, especially in their critique of the state, something that women within Saudi Arabia were less able or willing to do out of fear of repercussions. Their exile was often framed within the campaign as representing the extreme result of the state's failure to remove the guardianship system and grant Saudi women full legal citizenship. Their updates online of their new lives abroad drew in large

³¹ Hala Al-Dosari, "[Saudi Male-Guardianship Laws Treat Women as Second-Class Citizens](#)," *The Guardian*, October 7, 2016.

³² Loujain al-Hathloul (LoujainHathloul), Twitter post, [October 26, 2016, 11:46 pm](#).

³³ Reem Oj (reem020533), Twitter post, [October 22, 2016, 1:35 am](#).

audiences for the campaign. And discussion of their decisions to leave the country and their statuses abroad – through debates on television and via social media – became prominent touchstones for the campaign.

Debates and Dynamics of the Guardianship Campaign

A combination of these new constituencies and their unique political trajectories resulted in tensions over issues of Saudi citizenship and feminist rights. The “Saudi First” populism and citizenship rhetoric of the hazm moment led to controversies over ownership of the campaign. An increase in economic disparities and Vision 2030’s emphasis on economic participation encouraged debates on gendered economic privilege. And, finally, in the context of global scrutiny of Saudi Arabia’s religious character and a domestic turn to hazm nationalist identity, the role of foreignness in location, alliances, and media in the campaign led to a mix of external backlash and defiant assertions of belonging.

Debates over Ownership of the Campaign

That the campaign had brought in a new, younger generation as well as other new constituencies inevitably led to struggles over the central identity or “face” of the campaign, with a strong backlash against anyone who appeared to be aiming to speak for it.

One example concerned a woman who gained some activist notoriety within the campaign when she was featured in Arab media as “the first Saudi woman to travel without a male guardian” by winning a case in court. While she was initially embraced by activists, some later accused her of putting her own publicity before that of the movement, like a disruptive celebrity climbing atop their activism.³⁴

Because the campaign coincided with themes of citizenship, activists were more resistant to those claiming leadership.

While such tensions over ownership affected previous Saudi women’s campaigns, this time the context was different. Because the campaign coincided with themes of citizenship, activists were more resistant to those claiming leadership. It was no one’s campaign and everyone’s campaign; any claims otherwise would not be welcomed. This was evident in how the activists no longer referred to themselves from this point on, and instead spoke of the campaign strictly in terms of being an open, group effort of all Saudi women.

However, there was a flipside to this dynamic – a more “Saudi First” type of populism that made it harder for some to look beyond nationality in their feminist activism. The catalyst for this debate was a critique posed by an expatriate Saudi woman who questioned whether the campaign was feminist at all, since it tended to sideline non-Saudi women, including “*mawaleed*” (those without Saudi nationality but who are born and grow up in Saudi Arabia).³⁵

³⁴ Folathey (zoostox), Twitter post, [August 17, 2016, 12:02 pm](#); Meriam al-Otaibi (MERIAM_al3TIBI), Twitter post, [August 20, 2016, 12:20 pm](#).

³⁵ Hind Suliman (HindSuliman), Twitter post, [April 6, 2017, 11:03 pm](#); Hind Suliman (HindSuliman), Twitter post, [April 24, 2017, 9:44 am](#).

She also claimed it sidelined Saudi and non-Saudi black women working in the kingdom. The liberal-leaning, newly active groups tended to dismiss this as the philosophical preoccupation of a privileged student abroad and not serving of the needs of Saudi women. Some even made remarks such as, "abeed [slaves] have no place in our campaign."³⁶ Others reasoned, "if maids don't like it here, unlike Saudi women, they at least have the freedom to leave and go back home." On the other hand, left-leaning civil rights activists tended to welcome such critique and argued that it was important and necessary, and identified it as promoting "intersectional feminism" that needed to gain influence within the Saudi women's campaign against guardianship.

Debates over Economic Disparities and Privilege

Debates focusing on issues of economic privilege were particularly intense within the campaign and can be attributed to numerous factors. On the one hand, it was likely symptomatic of the current times in Saudi Arabia, as disparities in economic class and privilege have been heightening due to lower oil prices, austerity measures, and the drain of the Yemen war on the Saudi economy. In this way, some of these debates against the economically privileged resemble a gendered version of sentiments against "the 1 percent" as popularized by the Occupy Movement. To a lesser extent, the context of Vision 2030's emphasis on economic citizenship and its participatory nature also encourages similarly themed demands and debates on gendered economic privilege.

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These debates manifested in "shame lists," which were a tactic most unique to this campaign. Within these lists,³⁷

activists identified opponents and perceived opponents based on their views of the campaign specifically or the male guardianship system in general. They were then disseminated in master lists by activists using a select few accounts that focused on such, and then repeated in countless independent tweets by readers of these lists and fierce supporters of the campaign.

Previously, particularly during the driving campaigns, many supporters reserved this level of critique for religious figures. Even then, it was never done in the organized fashion of shame lists or with a focus on nonreligious, female figures. It is in this sense that a focus on class and suspicions of the socially privileged grew in prominence within this campaign.

Many public debates also ensued between campaigners and so-called "privileged" Saudi men. Many women activists wryly noted the public sympathy and support provided for a man whose video of himself crying over the confiscation of his car went viral, taking issue with how "*qahar al-rejal*," or "the frustration of men," was widely deemed as a most dire state in need of immediate help, whereas similar videos posted by Saudi women could not garner comparable supportive reactions.³⁸

³⁶ Huda (huda_saudi87), Twitter post, [May 14, 2017, 9:11 am](#).

³⁷ Unknown (l_mu001), Twitter post, [September 9, 2016, 1:09 am](#).

³⁸ Our Community (KSASociety), Twitter post, [October 3, 2016, 12:53 pm](#).

At other times, Saudi women pointed out men's economic benefit gained at the expense of Saudi women due to the ban on women driving. A law requiring the Saudization of ride-sharing companies Uber and Careem³⁹ was seen as evidence of devaluing women by both society and the state.⁴⁰ One supporter phrased it this way: "A man is fired from his job because his car broke, this is a grave crisis! But if a woman is denied a job in the first place because of the ban on driving, that's fine and she's exaggerating her crisis."⁴¹

Overall, these examples left many Saudi women campaigners questioning their supposed role in national efforts toward economic citizenship and development when its participatory nature seemed to be reserved for privileged Saudi women and men. At the same time, the campaign and its context nonetheless offered them the rhetorical tools to pose strong challenges against rising economic disparities and issues of class privilege within Saudi society.

Mediating Claims of Foreignness and Declaring Saudi-ness of Participants

In an atmosphere of rising nationalism, activists in the guardianship campaign had to defend themselves against charges of disloyalty to the state. Questions were raised – from outside and sometimes inside the campaign – about their foreign alliances, presence abroad, and dealings with foreign media, prompting defiant assertions of belonging. These debates over belonging were exacerbated by mounting global criticism and scrutiny of Saudi Arabia over its religious character and policies.

A prime example was The New York Times minidocumentary "Ladies First,"⁴² in which the reporter Mona El-Naggar covered Saudi women's participation in the 2015 municipal elections. She followed up by requesting input for a future article, soliciting Saudi women's responses⁴³ to the question in Arabic "How Has Your Life as a Saudi Woman Changed?" This marked the first substantial interest of international media in the campaign beyond articles that passively reported the actions of campaigners.

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While the Human Rights Watch report represented a successful international engagement by Saudi activists, this New York Times interaction with women proved to be much more controversial. That the activists had not initiated this media engagement likely cemented its negative reception from some in Saudi Arabia and its use against the campaign. Two further factors contributed to this incident receiving a generally mixed⁴⁴ response: the

³⁹ Khalil Hanware, "Employment Curbs for Ride-Hailing Services," *Arab News*, October 5, 2016.

⁴⁰ Mad (MAD__RY), Twitter post, [October 4, 2016, 6:45 pm](#).

⁴¹ Unknown (AL_Faa), Twitter post, [October 4, 2016, 6:48 pm](#).

⁴² Mona El-Naggar and Adam Bolt, "Ladies First: Saudi Arabia's Female Candidates," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2016.

⁴³ New York Times World (nytimesworld), Twitter post, [October 24, 2016, 6:40 am](#).

⁴⁴ Omar bin Abdulaziz (oamaz7), Twitter post, [October 25, 2016, 7:17 pm](#).

coincidence of the passage by the U.S. Congress of the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act and the rerelease of the highly critical and controversial "Saudi Uncovered" documentary⁴⁵ on Netflix, which made the average Saudi citizen more sensitive to outside critique.

These conditions provided ammunition to campaign critics,⁴⁶ who demanded Saudis remain patriotic and counter Orientalist representations of Saudi Arabia and its women. The malign intent of foreign media was popularized in amateur films denouncing Western attacks on the kingdom.⁴⁷ Additionally, a Saudi lawyer close to the state warned women that participation in The New York Times story could have legal consequences, such as being accused of corroborating with international sources against Saudi Arabia.⁴⁸ Most campaigners viewed this as an attempt to silence Saudi women

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and dismissed such concern.⁴⁹ They also pointed to how various Saudi officials have used outside media, and thus it made sense for the same to be an option for Saudi women.⁵⁰ Ultimately, despite this controversy, The New York Times received over 6,000 contributions from Saudi women for the follow-up article, "I Live In A Lie: Saudi Women Speak Up."⁵¹

Government Response to the Campaign

While it is difficult to prove a direct correlation between the women's activism and government actions, numerous laws have been issued throughout the campaign that improve Saudi women's lives. These include the expansion of employment opportunities and a notable acceleration in the appointment of women to official positions, including to the premier representative, though unelected, body in the kingdom, the Shura Council. Additionally, Saudi identification is now mandatory for all women, and may serve to enhance the ability of women to represent themselves in court.

⁴⁵ This documentary tended to liken Saudi Arabia to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and was even too hyperbolic for the outspoken activist Loujain al-Hathloul. Unfortunately, it also misframed her interview in it; she issued a statement and rejected the documentary's tone and her allocated "victim" status within it as it did not accurately understand Saudi feminism and simply placed it as more a token or scapegoat for global debates on Wahhabism and arms deals.

⁴⁶ Maysar (myasarjabr), Twitter post, [October 14, 2016, 10:54 pm](#).

⁴⁷ The video "A Response to the Western Attacks Against Saudi Arabia" released by Abdullah al-Kharif, a Saudi student filmmaker, was retweeted by nearly 10,000 users and viewed by many more; Abdullah al-Kharif (AbdullahK5), Twitter post, [October 22, 2016, 1:03 pm](#).

⁴⁸ Abdulrahman Allahim (allahim), Twitter post, [October 24, 2016, 6:59](#).

⁴⁹ Alanoud Altamimi (nbaa2t), Twitter post, [October 25, 2016, 12:22 am](#); Reem Oj (reem020533), Twitter post, [October 28, 2016, 1:46 pm](#); Mashahed (mashahed123), Twitter post, [October 24, 2016, 10:06 pm](#).

⁵⁰ Bandar al-Mogtrb (iijjt), Twitter post, [October 25, 2016, 7:06 am](#).

⁵¹ Mona El-Naggar, "[I Live in a Lie: Saudi Women Speak Up](#)," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2016.

The most significant advancement directly linked to the concerns of the guardianship campaign has been a government order issued on April 17,⁵² which instructs government agencies to no longer require a male guardian's approval for women to access government services "unless existing regulations require it." The order also dictated that after a three-month review period all government agencies would be required to implement the order and submit a list of any existing regulations that require a guardian's approval. Most likely this will restrict a women's ability to travel abroad, obtain a passport, or marry. Additionally, the order requires government agencies to facilitate easier transportation for Saudi working women, and the Ministry of Labor and Social Development to require employers to provide transportation.

The government's concern with women's mobility became clear with the historic September 26 royal decree stating that women will be able to drive in Saudi Arabia starting in June 2018.⁵³ The new Saudi ambassador to Washington, Prince Khalid bin Salman, clarified the royal decree, adding that Saudi women will not be required to have a legal guardian's approval to obtain a driver's license. On the same day, Fatima Baeshen of the Arabia Foundation was appointed as the first female spokeswoman of the Saudi Embassy in Washington, DC.⁵⁴ This was followed by the Council of Senior Scholars issuing a statement that the majority of its members welcomed the decision allowing women to drive.⁵⁵

Initially, the campaigners hailed this as a great success – an improvement in their everyday lives, and validation of their activism. One woman stated: "These were the demands of Saudi activists that you called traitors and used the worst forms of opposition against them. I hope the rest of the rights follow."⁵⁶ Others celebrated the potential for progress, with another woman tweeting: "For the first time in my whole life I feel a sense of patriotism after the King heard us. The best is yet to come, this is our country. Not everything is for men, we're going to live here [too] and achieve everything."⁵⁷ On September 29, a follow-up royal order was issued that required the Ministry of Interior to draft a law criminalizing harassment, a deterrent against those who might threaten Saudi women who intend to drive in the future.⁵⁸

Still, activists did not take the decree as a fait accompli, and got to work establishing means of monitoring implementation and enforcing compliance with the April 17 order.

⁵² "Saudi Arabia: King Issues Decree Loosening Some Guardianship Regulations, but Women Remain Under Control of Men in Most Areas," *Association for Women's Rights in Development*, May 10, 2017.

⁵³ "Saudi Arabia: Right to Drive is a Long Overdue Step Forward for Women," *Amnesty International*, September 27, 2017.

⁵⁴ "First Spokeswoman Appointed at Saudi Embassy in Washington," *Al Arabiya English*, September 27, 2017.

⁵⁵ Their juridical reasoning for this shift in stance includes: that women's driving represents a benefit to the country; that this benefit outweighs the harm of it remaining banned; and the Islamic principle that, in principle, everything is permissible. By September 30, the Council of Senior Scholars's previous fatwa against women's driving was deleted from its website. Interestingly, in subsequent media interviews, it denied there ever was a fatwa issued by the Council for Senior Scholars against women driving.

⁵⁶ Munera (mune90a), Twitter post, [September 28, 2017, 3:09 pm](#).

⁵⁷ Anen (Anen024), Twitter post, [September 29, 2017, 3:54 pm](#).

⁵⁸ Rodolfo C. Estimo Jr. and Aisha Fareed, "Saudi Society Welcomes New Law Criminalizing Sexual Harassment," *Arab News*, September 29, 2017.

Still, activists did not take the decree as a *fait accompli*, and got to work establishing means of monitoring implementation and enforcing compliance with the April 17 order. They started the hashtag "We Await the Empowerment of Women after the Order's Implementation," to count down the three-month review period and hold the state agencies accountable to this deadline of implementation. A separate Twitter account was created to crowdsource and follow up on any examples of noncompliance from government officials and produce minireports⁵⁹ listing types of noncompliance found and agencies responsible. Another initiative, "Know Your Rights," provides a definitive, feminist legal voice on the legal obstacles women will face as the order is implemented.

Limitations of the Campaign

Recent advances are cause for celebration by Saudi women, especially those involved in the campaigns to press for greater freedoms. Yet some of the political trends that provided an opening for campaigners – the *hazm* nationalism and the Vision 2030 reorganization of state-society responsibilities – may set limitations on women's activism moving forward.

The contours of a new relationship between these movements and the state can be discerned in the commentary that followed the decree permitting women to drive. A debate on Twitter between Amani al-Ajlan, a prominent Saudi social media figure who is currently on state scholarship in Germany, and a leading women's activist, Loujain al-Hathloul, over the role of activists and the apportioning of credit for the advances made by women is informative in this regard.

The discussion began as a disagreement over the contribution of women activists to gender progress in Saudi Arabia. Ajlan took a skeptical position: "This decree was a natural result of us receiving education, working, entering the Shura Council, and much more that your activism had nothing to do with."⁶⁰ Hathloul replied: "Behind everything you mentioned there was a form of activism. Just because you're not aware of them, doesn't mean they weren't there."

Ajlan then posted a series of tweets arguing that activism only delays progress because Hathloul's activities were "traitorous acts against the state and a riling up of public opinion."⁶¹ She claimed that she saw its effects while conducting fieldwork on a government-affiliated project, and that Hathloul personally "caused a delay in women receiving their rights"⁶² when society was "almost ready in 2013."⁶³ Ajlan proceeded to discuss the dangers of activism and the impediment it poses to progress, a veiled evocation of the current *hazm* nationalist direction of the country. One commentator said, "If, with every new decree, we attribute it to a certain group, then we are solidifying the concept of 'al-huzbeyah' (i.e. party politics) and I think that is against the state's interest, which prefers a sophisticated (i.e. politically neutral) society."⁶⁴ Ajlan retweeted this with a comment for her followers to read: "This is the true

⁵⁹ No Male Guardians (NoMaleGuardians), Twitter post, [May 8, 2017, 3:42 am](#).

⁶⁰ Amani al-Ajlan (AmaniAA), Twitter post, [September 29, 2017, 6:44 am](#).

⁶¹ Amani al-Ajlan (AmaniAA), Twitter post, [September 29, 2017, 6:48 am](#).

⁶² Amani al-Ajlan (AmaniAA), Twitter post, [September 29, 2017, 6:50 am](#).

⁶³ Amani al-Ajlan (AmaniAA), Twitter post, [September 29, 2017, 7:09 am](#).

⁶⁴ Khaled al-Sad (khalidsad20), Twitter post, [September 29, 2017, 7:31 am](#).

danger that we must watch out for. If we've successfully gotten rid of al-Ikhwan now, then the next danger is what is being created in the name of 'activism,'"⁶⁵ an apparent reference to the current state campaign rolling back the influence of, and at times arresting, Muslim Brotherhood supporters.

The exchange reflects the use by some proponents within society of a fiercer *hazm* nationalism and vision for the country that is free of public engagement or agitation, in exchange for positive state decrees. In this view, activist groups like those that coalesced during the guardianship campaign, are subverting their idea of the nation. The limitation this use of *hazm* nationalism poses will likely be a central concern campaigners will face in the future.

Some have wondered whether the state holds these same limiting assumptions about the dangers of "activists." Amid the issuance of the royal decree for women's driving, reports emerged that prominent activists received calls from the state warning them against publicly commenting, whether positively or negatively.⁶⁶ Additionally, days before the decree was issued, three prominent Islamist women were taken in for questioning and required to sign a pledge that they would not comment negatively on the women's driving decree. While these women were at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, what they had in common was that they were significant voices beyond the state.

Conclusion: Where Does the Campaign's Significance Lie?

The I Am My Own Guardian campaign is arguably the most significant recent example of feminist activism in Saudi Arabia. The broader significance of this campaign is thought to be its resetting of the agenda of Saudi women's rights activists, first and foremost, to the removal of the guardianship system. This has been reflected in domestic discourse surrounding the campaign, such as the article by prominent Saudi columnist Iman al-Quwaifly "When Does A Campaign Against the Male Guardianship System Succeed in Saudi Arabia?"⁶⁷ In the article, she argues that while previous campaigns focused on symptoms, such as bureaucratic restrictions in family law or the ban on women's driving, the guardianship campaign redefined the problem as primarily a political one, concerned with the change of the female citizen-state relationship, rather than the role of women within society or family. In other words, she praises Saudi feminist activism's shift of focus from "social recognition" to "political representation."

However, the details and dynamics of this campaign show that this misunderstands the campaign's true significance. First, the campaign ought to be understood as connected to and a partial continuation of previous campaigns and feminist efforts and networks, rather than a break in 26 years of abstaining from any focus on political representation. In this way, it is better understood as a product or outgrowth of such campaigns. In fact, previous campaigns have often shifted between social recognition to political representation, and back

⁶⁵ Amani al-Ajlan (AmaniAA), Twitter post, [September 29, 2017, 8:09 am](#).

⁶⁶ Margherita Stancati (margheritamvs), Twitter post, [October 1, 2017, 9:45 am](#); Sam Samuel, "A Saudi Woman's 'Mixed Feelings' about Winning the Right to Drive," *The Atlantic*, September 27, 2017.

⁶⁷ Iman al-Quwaifly, "When Will the Anti-Guardianship Campaign Succeed in Saudi Arabia?," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, September 8, 2016.

again. Second, while the campaign did in fact focus on political representation in the form of seeking the removal of the male guardianship system and emphasizing new definitions of Saudi citizenship, it also focused on social recognition and economic redistribution in various forms. As such, the campaign has a far more complex relationship to previous ones and is energetically expansive in its focus rather than simply demanding a legal change to the Saudi women-state relationship.

Signs of the campaign's lasting significance have already begun to emerge. Saudi feminists have begun to put their newfound constituents' alliances and confidence to use by producing forums for feminist knowledge production, such as the news site Al-Amal News. Such initiatives contribute to a lasting, lively Saudi feminist discourse, long after episodes of mobilization within the campaign.

Another instance demonstrating the campaign's significance concerns the detention of the prominent activist Meriam al-Otaibi on April 19, just after the government order was issued. Her arrest was initiated by a formal charge made by her guardian, which was reinforced by the state when it arrested her, as a result of which she was subsequently fired from her job. The case touched on all the campaign's main points: social recognition, economic redistribution, and political representation. Campaign activists reacted by incorporating her particular case into the general feminist themes of the campaign. They utilized social media outreach and networks to reach a female lawyer willing to take her case. Following her release 104 days

later,⁶⁸ Otaibi got a new job through the help of another prominent activist.⁶⁹ This all played out online and its conclusion was lauded publicly by the campaign as a triumph of feminist alliances and activism over patriarchal restrictions

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from the home, state, and private sector. In a broader sense, what this case also represents is the strong significance of this campaign and the feminist networks it has produced, as well as their ability to a degree to work collectively to ameliorate negative repercussions from the state and society. While this isn't always successful, such an example gives hope to Saudi women that, together, they might create a better future for themselves.

Through this campaign, Saudi feminists have formed a large, strong collective that continues to make demands, particularly during a time of transition and transformation in Saudi Arabia. These have included social recognition, resource redistribution, and political representation for Saudi women. Strong feminist activist networks have formed and lively mobilization efforts continue. Internal debates also rage on and develop a lively Saudi feminist discourse. This will surely have a lasting effect on the political landscape of women's rights in Saudi Arabia and women's place in its transforming future.

⁶⁸ "Maryam al-Otaibi: Saudi Anti-Guardianship Campaigner Freed from Detention," *BBC News*, July 30, 2017.

⁶⁹ Meriam al-Otaibi (MERIAM_AL3TEEBE), Twitter post, [August 20, 2017, 1:33 am](#).

