Saudi Feminism:
Exploring Saudi Activists’ Agency Amidst Authoritarianism

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Dedication

I dedicate this to my mother, who taught me how to walk,
and continues to do so to this day.

I dedicate this to my father, who told me to walk ahead of him,
when I was always walking steps behind him.

I dedicate this to my sister, Noelle, who taught me to hold my head up as I walk,
in any direction I see fit. You’re my whole, entire heart.

I dedicate this to my husband, Sultan, who chose me on July 17, 2016 –
even after the first thing I said to him in person was to walk slower, beside me,
rather than in front of me.

Not only do you walk beside me… you’ve danced the Tango with me, too.

I love you – forever, ever, ever.

And, most importantly, to God, for giving me the will to run,
even when my knees tremble.

The best is yet to come. The race has just begun.
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Abstract of Thesis

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In the Arab World, women are portrayed as being trapped by religion and society on the one hand, or as being tools of legitimation for authoritarian states on the other hand. Such an understanding is even more prevalent of Saudi Arabia, where a lack of democracy and a perceived abundance of traditionalism have led to an assumed absence of feminist movements altogether, especially their positing women’s political agency. As such, the aim of this thesis will be to problematize this assumption of structural pervasiveness and showcase where and how Saudi female activists do, in fact, posit political agency. It will consider Saudi women as situated within a feminist activist framework, inspired by social movement theory, particularly Zakia Salime’s concept of “movement moments”. It will also show how the recent period of the Arab Spring and the rise of social media in Saudi Arabia meant that Saudi feminist activists and movements became highly visible. Not only this, but that Saudi women’s activism was mutually influenced by other political movements not commonly associated with such. In doing so, it will also challenge the dichotomies of Saudi women’s activism versus political activism, Saudi women activists versus Islamist activists and Saudi men. It will also be carried out in a way that problematizes the concept of ‘Saudi feminists’ or ‘Saudi women activists’ itself, by considering activists of broad ideological, geographic, and religious backgrounds in Saudi Arabia.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

On June 17, 2011, a Saudi woman named Maha al-Qahtani drove her car in Riyadh as part of the ‘Women2Drive’ campaign during the Arab Spring. She drove once, and then again. On her second drive, which lasted for 45 minutes, al-Qahtani was stopped and given a traffic ticket. She was the first woman in Saudi Arabia to ever receive a traffic ticket, despite their being a de facto ban on women’s driving in Saudi Arabia. She was also accompanied by her husband, Mohammed al-Qahtani, on this drive. Her husband was a human rights activist and co-founder of an unlicensed organization for civil and political rights called HASM that was founded as part of a reformist movement towards constitutional monarchism.

This event is puzzling for two reasons. The first is that Maha al-Qahtani chose to drive despite the fact that a Saudi woman, Manal al-Sharif, was detained in May 2011 for doing the same. The second is that she did so with Mohammed al-Qahtani accompanying her, despite his being a well-known rights activist and therefore an apparent challenge to the state. Why would Maha choose this time and tactic, knowing that she, too, might very likely be perceived as challenging the state? This does not seem to be the act of a woman oppressed by religion and society. Nor the choice of a legitimizer of the state, an attempt at patriarchic bargaining with the state, or even a diversion from political reform. Yet, she is still demanding a gender-specific issue denied her in Saudi Arabia. According to the
most prominent scholars on Saudi women, such characteristics are dichotomous, in that women activists rely on the state for services rather than challenge it meaningfully and do not go beyond gender-based issues into political issues, which are also held as dichotomous.

In this way, it is clear, particularly in light of the most recent literature on Saudi feminism, that the importance of this example and these questions surrounding it is that it illustrates how it is not explainable by the prevalent understanding of Arab women as trapped by religion and society on the one hand, or as tools of legitimation for authoritarian states on the other hand. This understanding is even more prevalent in the context of Saudi Arabia, in particular, where a lack of democracy and a perceived abundance of traditionalism have led to an absence of feminist movements altogether, especially the potential of their positing women’s political agency. Nonetheless, this is not a surprising assumption, given the pervasive state structure in which women and feminist issues often do hold a central role as part of the state’s gendered framing of the nation. Therefore, the assumption is not unequivocally rejected in this thesis.

Instead, the aim of this thesis will be to problematize this assumption of structural pervasiveness and showcase where Saudi female activists do, in fact, posit political agency, particularly using the concept of “movement moments”, that incorporate historical, cultural, and political, contingencies and signify “turning points” in nonlinear, interdependent, and possibly contradictory, trajectories. In doing so, it will also challenge the dichotomies of Saudi women’s activism versus political activism, Saudi women
activists versus Islamist activists and Saudi men. It will also be carried out in a way that
problematicizes the concept of ‘Saudi feminists’ or ‘Saudi women activists’ itself by
considering activists of broad ideological, geographic, and religious backgrounds in
Saudi Arabia. This is intentional, to illustrate that political agency is not defined here
based on a particular group and its standards, but rather is evidenced as a product of the
sum of these women’s actions. This will necessitate analyzing the contemporary context
of Saudi feminist movements and their interactions and intersections with other
movements. It will also consider, in particular, the recent period of the Arab Spring and
the rise of social media in Saudi Arabia that have problematicized this assumption of their
absence, as Saudi women activists and movements became highly visible.

This brings up the limitations or scope of this thesis. Namely, that it will not be
concerned with exploring other forms of agency, other than political agency. Not because
the political sphere holds higher value or that ‘true’ agency can only be found in public,
but simply because other forms of agency have been extensively considered in Amelie Le
Renard’s work. Additionally, because a focus on political agency is where the gap in
literature on Saudi women exists, or, in the cases where it seems to be hinted at, is
mischaracterized.

The central research question posed in this thesis is this: given that the agency of Saudi
feminist movements has held an unclear status as trapped by religion and society on the
one hand, or as tools of legitimation for authoritarian states on the other hand, do Saudi
women activists display any political agency at all? How and in what empowering and
creative ways have they tried to posit such agency? Under what conditions was this possible?

As previously reviewed, the literature on Saudi women offers answers to such questions along the following lines: either literature that finds that Saudi women’s agency does not exist due to structural constraints, namely, embedded cultural or social and religious restrictions. Or, contrarily, literature that considers varying limited agencies that manifest within and against these structures. The former stance includes statist answers that hold Saudi feminism as only a function of the benevolent top-down, state feminism, with Saudi women’s agency from below as absent. Although Saudi society or culture and religion are structural restrictions on women's agency, the Saudi state, represented by the royal family, is the only agent able to act in such a way that can recognize, empower, and protect Saudi women. It also includes answers that women’s agency is absent due to structural constraints characterized with no distinction between society, religion, and the state structural constraints, or that the state, though theoretically distinct, is ultimately forced to consistently “give in” to the overpowering or legitimizing religious and social structures that translate into an absence of Saudi women’s agency, whether political or otherwise.

The latter stance in the literature is more sympathetic in that it might highlight Saudi feminist agency, but ultimately designates it as either present in the private realm which can extend to the public realm in some ways, or in agency performed as ‘everyday’ feminisms, but not political. Or, as inescapably a function of the state as either a
legitimizer of the state, intrinsically falling into interacting with the state as a service-provider through patriarchic bargaining, or even trapped in the role of being a distracting topic of debate instead of more ‘serious’ matters of political reform movements. This thesis will work to respond to the last of these positions, which is arguably the strongest of these arguments, and in doing so it will also indirectly counter the weaker positions within the literature as well.

As such, the **significance** of this response is that it will add to scholarly literature on Saudi Arabia in that it will consider Saudi women situated within a feminist activist framework, inspired by social movement theory, particularly the concept of “movement moments” as posed by Zakia Salime. The **objectives** of this will also include countering the tendency to consider Saudi feminists from within the limiting secular versus religious approach to Arab feminist movements that is not always reflective of the interactions and exchanges that occur between the two. Another main objective of this thesis is that it will do its best to incorporate Saudi men and non-liberal Saudi women’s roles and contributions as well, both highly underexplored aspects of Saudi feminist networks and movements.

The **organization** of this thesis will begin by first reviewing the literature on Saudi feminism and its activism. It will consider how Saudi feminism has been represented in such literature in relation to the state, religion and society, as well as in its focus on Saudi women’s agency and activism and social movements. It will then consider the methodology utilized to conduct this thesis, namely, the research design and questions,
paradigms and assumptions, sources of data and procedures for its collection, followed by
the chosen data analysis strategies. Following this, the thesis will turn to “seeing
structure” through providing a historical background of the structural context in which
Saudi women’s activism is situated. This will be in order to see how it has emerged, what
led up to it, and how it is located in the periods under consideration in this work, namely,
the Arab Spring period. Finally, this will lead to the core of this thesis where “seeing
agency” will be presented in the context of the Arab Spring.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Due to the lack of studies on Saudi feminism, this literature review will also draw on literature on Saudi Arabia itself, or Saudi Studies, that also maintain a particular focus on Saudi women, manifestations of their agency, and gender relations in the country. As the findings of this literature review show, periodical and thematic trends emerged in the scholarship on Saudi Arabia. Such trends offer two main answers to the aforementioned questions regarding the political agency of women in Saudi Arabia. The first answer suggests that Saudi women’s agency does not exist due to structural constraints, namely, embedded cultural or social and religious restrictions. Contrarily, the second answer considers varying limited agencies that manifest within and against these structures. In this chapter, I consider both these answers and their variances as presented in the literature, as well as briefly consider their limitations. Finally, this literature review concludes by linking these works to the present research question. It will also highlight those works that prove most significant in understanding the subject of Saudi feminism, women’s activism in particular, and most contributive towards placing such activism in the political, namely: Madawi al-Rasheed’s *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia* and Amelie Le Renard’s *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power and Reform in Saudi Arabia*. 
Saudi Women as Passive Agents, bound by Restrictive Social and Religious Structures

In considering the question of Saudi women’s political agency, this first trend in the literature offers the answer that Saudi women lack any political agency. This is due to the patriarchal aspects of Saudi society or culture and religion, which bind women and prevent them from engaging as active agents in both the private and public realms. In addition to offering this answer, this argument takes on two variations within the literature.

The first variation is statist. It maintains that, although Saudi society or culture and religion are structural restrictions on women's agency, the Saudi state, represented by the royal family, is the only agent able to act in such a way that can recognize, empower, and protect Saudi women. In this variation, what may be considered an instance of women’s agency is counted as merely an example of the state’s choice of structural privileging against the constraints of religion and society. As such, this variation determines Saudi women’s political agency as only possible through the state.

The second variation finds the state as equally responsible for an absence of women’s political agency and that Saudi women’s political agency is not possible at all. It does so by either finding no distinction between society, religion, and the state. Instead, it considers them as all equally patriarchal and one in the same restrictive structure, thus
resulting in no possible instances of women’s agency. However, in instances of this variation in the literature that appear to maintain a distinction between such, it deems it practically irrelevant since the state is forced to consistently “give in”, as a form of survival, and support such religious and social structures that translate into an absence of Saudi women’s agency, whether political or otherwise.

An example of the first variation in the literature, i.e. the statist approach, can be found in the *Legal and Political Reforms in Saudi Arabia*, written by Joseph Kechichian, who is a political scientist, CEO of Kechichian & Associates, LLC, and Senior Fellow at King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. Kechichian starts this work by acknowledging the turbulent state of Saudi Studies in affirming that “even among seasoned academics, it was open season on everything Saudi”, as, “from angry officials to a bewildered and weary population, from ill-informed media personalities to biased think tank analysts and an assortment of instant experts who mushroomed in the aftermath of the tragic attacks of September 2001, everyone reached more or less the verdict that Saudi Arabia was guilty on the following counts: religious fundamentalism and intolerance, abetting terrorists and, worst of all, generating and spreading anti-Americanism” (Kechichian 2013: 16). Kechichian then asks, “can Riyadh be exonerated, or – for that matter – does it deserve to be?” (Kechichian 2013: 16). As a scholar focused on studies of succession, power, and reformative governance, the tone here seems to indicate a prejudiced affirmative response.
Particularly indicative of such is Kechichian’s description of his evidence and sources as being “[an] accumulated value of contacts established during the past few decades that ensured renewed access to familiar representatives of the Saudi intelligentsia and government officials… which facilitated this research effort” (Kechichian 2013: 17). This is the value of Kechichian’s work, as his emphasis on extensive visits, “insider” official and royal sources, and anonymous “off the record” interviews (Kechichian 2013: 17) offers much novelty in its providing essentially confirmed state-perspectives.

However, with regard to the political agency of Saudi women, this statist approach reduces anything related to Saudi women to historical moments of state-initiated reforms, state-defined rights for women, and state-sanctioned, subordinated instances of Saudi women’s public visibility and activism. In this way, the main, and perhaps the only, sources of feminist political actions and gendered dialogues deemed relevant by Kechichian is within state-initiated “National Dialogue” fora, state-appointed officials of the judiciary, and the internal debates played out in royal family dynamics in relation to women’s issues (Kechichian 2013: 17).

This can be seen in how, while further discussing the “status of women” in Saudi Arabia, Kechichian describes the “several bizarre cases” and “serious problems within the segregated society” of Saudi Arabia as cause for “why King Abdullah wished to introduce dramatic reforms into the system” (Kechichian 2013: 44). Here, he firmly places the state, and particularly the personality of its head official, in a positive light and in association with progressive reform, as contrasted to its opposite “society” with its
numerous problems and unprogressive characteristic of segregation. In instances where Kechichian did locate “culprits” of unmodern or unprogressive and anti-reformists tendencies, it was strictly allocated to the judicial and religious establishment. These institutional culprits were held up not as parts of the state apparatus, rather, only insofar as they held “radical clergymen” with “behavior [that] was nothing short of arrogant” that engaged in “periodic feuds” with the monarch (Kechichian 2013: 44). In this way, the culprit of Saudi women’s lack of agency was only the nature of society itself and the attitude problem of its shaykhs. Whereas “on the question of women, however, Abdullah meant what he said and what he did”, thus establishing Kechichian’s knowledge of the sincere, progressive intent of the state in contrast to its restrictive counterparts. As such, in considering structural restrictions as “how women were treated in society” and how “progress on this front crawled”, Kechician maintained, “it was rather obvious where Abdallah stood” (Kechichian 2013: 44). Saudi women’s agency and feminist actions, whether by women or men, are noticeably absent from this characterization, where Saudi feminism is reflected most dominantly in the “mobilized” Palace, as such a description would indicate Palace-initiated acts of activism (Kechichian 2013: 44).

A central illustration of this vision of state-centric Saudi feminism is Kechichian’s discussion of a fatwa issued by Shaykh Abdul Rahman bin Nasir al-Barrak. In this fatwa, the shaykh advocated strict segregation of the sexes in stating that anyone: “condoning the mixing of the sexes in the workplace or in the educational arena should be killed” and that, “anyone who accepts that his daughter, sister, or wife, works with men or attends mixed-gender schooling cares little about his honor and this is a type of pimping”
This “extremist fatwa” was contrasted with a comment from Foreign Minister Prince Sa’ud al-Faysal, which Kechichian praises as “certainly an accurate assessment”, that states: “I think the trend for reform is set, and there is no looking back. Clerics who every now and then come with statements in the opposite direction are releasing frustration rather than believing that they can stop the trend and turn back the clock” (Kechichian 2013: 45). Furthermore, it was also contrasted with the sentiments of King Abdullah himself in stating, “the king was furious” (Kechichian 2013: 44) and that “the level-headed and immensely forward-looking Abdullah was not amused by Shaykh al-Barrak’s fatwah” and in an approving tone accounts how the King ordered the Shaykh’s website to be taken down for a while. Kechichian continues on in portraying the progressive King as pushing against such societal forces in stating that the reason for this fatwa was due to the state-centric “progressive” feminist acts of restructuring within the country. Kechichian then lists examples of such acts such as the inauguration of King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), the first mixed university, the dismissal of a cleric who demanded to vet the curriculum of this university, as well as the appointment of Nora al-Fayiz as the first female deputy cabinet minister of education, and a photo-op with 40 women in the city of Najran for the National Dialogue Forum of April 8-10, 2010.

Aside from this, Kechichian evokes Saudi female voices in two, albeit limited, ways. First, he focuses on female approval from within the royal family in the form of a princess’s statement: “In the words of an Al Saud princess who related the monarch’s furious reaction, ‘this was the level of material (referring to the al-Barrak fatwa) that our
ruler has to deal with, which is why change occurs at a crawl in this country’” (Kechichian 2013: 45). Second, he includes female approval of the state from outside the royal family. In reaction to the King’s photo-op, he mentions Maha Muneef and Manal Faysal Al-Sharif, who stated “such photographs indicated women were being recognized as partners in the progress of the nation” by the state (Kechichian 2013: 46). Then, in reaction to the King’s rejection of al-Barrak’s fatwa, such as that of Hassah Hilal’s poem which deemed the Shayk “a savage, resentful, barbaric, blinded man” (Kechichian 2013: 47-48). What is highlighted in both of these ways is that Saudi feminists, particularly women, are represented in his narrative as bound by structural restrictions and can act only insofar as in reaction to and in alignment with state-centric feminism from above. This is understanding is affirmed in how Kechichian concludes his discussion of the state’s feminist agency and lack thereof for Saudi women: “controversies aside, it was also clear that the Al Saud were anxious to engage in healthy debates to educate their growing population, instead of contemplating an erosion of such influences” (Kichechian 2013: 54).

This divide between religious and social on the one hand, and Saudi state on the other hand, is nonexistent in the second variant of the position that considers Saudi women unable to posit political agency. This is because it is influenced by Orientalist tropes and trappings which do not allow for any differentiating between the Saudi state, Islam, and society, or any feminist contestation therein. Instead, analysis is reduced to the understanding that Wahhabism as a religious ideology shapes state and society and fuels
structures which misogynistically exclude any potential of Saudi women’s agency
whether political or otherwise.

A prime example of this is Simon Ross Valentine’s *Forces and Fanaticism: Wahabism in
Saudi Arabia and Beyond*. In this work, Simon Ross Valentine uses impressionistic
methodologies of research. Influenced by his being a scholar of religion and having
taught English in Saudi Arabia for three years, Valentine comes to the conclusion that
Saudi Arabia is “superstitious, if not medieval in outlook” and “appears to be dominated
and controlled by men; with women invisible, clad from head to foot in long black robes,
walking submissively and usually silently behind their husbands” (Valentine 2015: 1).
Valentine goes on to explain that, “there are considerable similarities between
Wahhabism as practiced in Saudi Arabia and the beliefs and practices of ISIS” (Valentine
2015: 254).

In discussing political and legal rights of Saudi women and the need for reform,
Valentine dismisses the fact that, although “critics of the Saudi system say such changes
are too slow, or often more symbolic than substantive”, he argues that, “such reforms are
to be welcomed” (Valentine 2015: 10). Such a welcome to openings in restrictive
structures is necessary, he finds, given that “opposition to reform is strong” and “the
denial of legal and political rights to women is largely due to the misogynistic views
prevalent amongst Saudi men generally” (Valentine 2015: 125).
Evidence for such misogynistic stances are predominantly anecdotal and rely on the opinions of Valentine’s male students in his English class, utilizing it as a sort of case study and informal poll of opinions, albeit with questionable representativeness. For instance, Valentine describes his dismay at a class he gave at the Institute of Public Administration in Jeddah in spring of 2012, as his students, aged eighteen to twenty-five, stated that they were against women’s driving out of fear they (i.e. woman) would not be capable of doing so or that it would obstruct her wearing her abaya and niqab (Valentine 2015: 118). In another case, he observes, while deemphasizing that this was a state-initiated move, that “Saudi men go to extraordinary lengths to control their wives’ movements, especially concerning foreign travel” which served as the explanation of the Saudi Passport Directorate initiating an “electronic tagging system for Saudi women” in 2012, which Valentine explained as called “Relax, we’ll track your wife down”. This is incorrect for the simple fact that no such name was given officially, but rather, it was given sarcastically in media that, at the time, ogled at the “bizarre” state of Saudi Arabia (Valentine 2015: 115-116).

The characterization of the second case is useful to point out the Orientalist bias of works like Valentine’s in this trend of the literature on Saudi feminism. For instance, this bias is apparent in that it does not take into account the fact that, in response to both international and domestic rejection, this measure was changed in 2014, rather than, as Valentine assumes, widely welcomed within Saudi society. Additionally, it does not include the fact that the electronic tagging was also implemented against all members on a given Saudi family card, indicating it was likely a political measure of state
surveillance, rather than simply aimed at Saudi women due to the inherently misogynic natures of Saudi men that make society or the state. As such, it does not recognize any distinction among structural factors affecting women’s agency between the state, the religious and the social, which does not explain such instances where the state is the most structurally pervasive against women’s agency.

Furthermore, it does not include the fact that this measure was first brought to the Saudi public’s attention by the ‘Women2Drive’ leading activist at the time: Manal al-Sharif (Jamjoon 2012). In this way, Saudi women’s agency is also held as always absent, even when this does not seem to be the case. Such an omission is also consistent with how Saudi feminist acts and voices are described in other instances in the text as absent. Specifically, they are typically only evoked to either garner pity at their status as ‘oppressed women’ without agency, or to show delight in their rejection of being “confined by religious and traditional ties” in exceptional cases (Valentine 2015: 107). One exceptional case that Valentine highlights is Rajaa Al-Sanea, who is framed as an enlightened Saudi woman who moved to Chicago, fleeing the Wahhabi state, and wrote an infamous novel titled “Riyadh Girls”. Valentine clearly favors the novel as it is about Saudi women who similarly aim to break the constraints that bind them and “find freedom and love in their travels abroad” (Valentine 2015: 107).

Sprinkling bolded Arabic words throughout the text, Valentine attempts to bolster such an understanding of the complexity of Saudi women’s agency by assuming intimate “Arabic knowledge” and claims to be what can be considered a sort of “parachute
academic” on Saudi Arabia, characteristic of most Orientalist approaches. He firmly asserts this in the following statement: “as a participant observer of Saudi culture, living and working in the desert kingdom for almost three years, meeting and talking to Saudis from all walks of life (including women), I gained an informed impression of the role of women in Saudi society” (Valentine 2015: 101). Such an “informed impression” meant his impression of the Orientalist trope of women as oppressed and a reductionist understanding of their agency as absent due to “[the] one thing that came over strongly was the Wahhabi belief that females, to be ‘righteous women’, should be ‘devoutly obedient to their husbands… [And how] Saudi men maintain that they are merely ‘protecting’ women, when to all intents and purposes they control if not dominate them” (Valentine 2015: 101).

Despite such efforts, the text is also riddled with detectable inaccuracies, symptomatic of the times in which it was written. Specifically, in the last few years there has been a lowered threshold for works critical of Saudi Arabia and its Wahhabism and a growing intellectual momentum of its association and synonymous status with ISIS. A small example of such is that Valentine’s use of “ikhtilat” is inaccurately translated as “strict form of gender segregation”, to emphasize the supposed ISIS-like strictness of Saudi society, when it simply means the state of mixing of women and men. Moreover, his use of “Purdah” and “Namus” are reflective of his previous studies on South Asia and the Ahmaddiya Jama’at reformist group of 19th century India, rather than reflective of knowledge of terms used to describe practices in Saudi Arabia. The book also states that “at present women living in Saudi Arabia have no right to vote” (Valentine 2012: 124),
which is not the case when the book was published. Similarly, Valentine claimed that a Saudi woman named “Amina bint Saleem bin Saleem Naseer” was beheaded for sorcery in 2012, although upon further research no such woman with this name exists, except in the single source he cited which amounts to an “alternative news source” that specializes in conspiracy, UFOs, and the like (Valentine 2015: 202).

In evaluating the significance of this work, Jorg Matthias Determann, a specialist on the historiography of Saudi Arabia, generously reviews Valentine’s efforts as offering insight on “Wahhabism’s relationship with women”, but that “readers hoping for a deeper understanding of Islam in Saudi Arabia might be disappointed by Valentine’s confirmation of stereotypes of Wahhabism as intolerant, aggressive, and coercive. Yet, although *Forces and Fanaticism* is not original in its main argument, it still gives a thoughtful and comprehensive overview of Wahhabi Islam and its influence in public life in Saudi Arabia. The author’s mix of analyses and anecdotes makes for an interesting and easy read… He gives an authentic sense of the fear of God and the authorities, the treatment of women, and the apparent love for the late King Abdullah among many people in the Kingdom” (Determann 2016: 161).

Finally, an example will now be considered from the second variation within the literature that holds the religious and social forces to be strong enough to not only restrict Saudi feminists, but to also serve as appealing tools of the state and thus render any distinctions between restrictive structures as functionally irrelevant given the ultimately restrictive effect on women’s political agency.
A main example of this is *On Saudi Arabia: Its People, Past, Religion, Fault Lines, and Future*, the recent work of Karen Elliott House, a prominent journalist of 30 years and former editor of the Wall Street Journal. Rather than portraying Saudi women and their feminist acts or agency along Orientalist lines, House portrays the issue of Saudi feminism as a site of cultural and religious struggles between the state, society, and its multiple opposing forces of traditionalism and modernism. Although her account is not void of outright Orientalism, such as her declaration that “I surely didn’t ever dream of any place as distant or exotic as Saudi Arabia” (House 2012: 38), the theoretical connection House maintains with her Orientalist counterparts is relatively subtle. This subtlety takes the form of portrayals of the status of Saudi women and their agency that are Otherizing, Western-centric, and hold a liberal feminist bias. To illustrate this further, it is useful to provide an examination of how such biases and portrayals played out in her work’s analysis of Saudi feminism.

At the outset of her work, House declares that characterizes the foundational structural elements of Saudi Arabia: “Saudi vividly demonstrates Karl Marx’s axiom that religion is the ‘opium’ of the people” (House 2012: 13), as she explains, “the combined effect of Al Saud survival skills, vast oil riches, and the religious requirement of obedience all add up to a largely somnolent and passive Saudi populace” (House 2012: 30-31). She concludes that, in terms of Saudis’ agency, “both tradition and religion have made most Saudis accustomed to dependence, to being reactive not proactive, to accepting, not questioning, to being obedient, not challenging, to being provided for rather than being responsible for
their own futures (House 2012: 65). This is so much so that, “Saudi Arabia thus is less a unified nation-state than a collection of tribes, regions, and Islamic factions that coexist in mutual suspicious and fear” (House 2012: 68).

While this resembles a commonly Orientalist association between religion, “desert wealth”, and passivity, it is also indicative of House’s liberal bias against “pre-modern” modes of identification such as religion. For this reason, she attempts to explain the effect of this opium in stating, “if Westerners love individualism, most Saudis are literally frightened at the mere thought of being different” (House 2012: 31), where the liberal value of individualism is held in contrast to Saudis and its lack thereof is a marker of a lack of modernity. This bias is also clear in how she locates the forces of social change in a “modern” group, namely, the Saudi youth (House 2012: 32), who she likens them to the symbolic “Western hero” Ronal Reagan and his demand to “tear down this wall” (House 2012: 60) which she states resembles the youth’s growing rejection of social walls due to their contact with the outside “Western” world through the modern technologies of internet, communications and social media, and travel (House 2012: 41, 60).

In the case of Saudi feminism, this can also be seen particularly clearly in her analysis of such and the struggles over its definition and shape in Saudi Arabia. Saudi feminism, in short, is subsumed by a structural constraints characterized “not a war between the sexes, but rather a proxy war between modernizers and conservatives over what sort of Saudi Arabia both sexes will inhibit and over the role and relevance of the omnipresent religious establishment in Saudi society” (House 2012: 72).
For instance, the first Saudi female voice considered in her work is the example of “Lulu” who is “invisible” in her abaya (House 2012: 32), with belief that “doing Allah’s will is Lulu’s consuming focus”, and, upon being asked about “if she wants her daughters to have opportunities she did not have” she answers that she wishes her daughters to live a life like hers that rejects “modernism”, and and “illustrates the deep and genuine commitment of a majority of Saudis to their religion” (House 2012: 34). This Islamist or illiberal Saudi woman’s stance is used to show her lack of agency, religiously-based “false consciousness”, and opposition to Saudi feminism. House frames the dilemma as such: “this is the challenge for the kingdom: how to accommodate those citizens who want more freedom to change and those, like Lulu and her family, who truly see change as a road to hell” (House 2012: 39).

It is for this reason that House claims “a child born in Saudi Arabia enters a harsh and divided society” (House 2012: 57), where Saudi women must face the fact that, according to House, although they are “the thin wedge of change”, it is also true that “fortunately for men, Allah is distant, but unfortunately for women, men are omnipresent” (House 2012: 73). And, because of this, she finds women’s agency, much less their political agency, as ultimately not present: “[although] the sharp edge of the female wedge has been planted, the sheer density of religion and tradition in Saudi culture means the society remains largely resistant” (House 2012: 99).
This is in tension with how House shows admiration for what could arguably be understood as examples of Saudi women’s political. Specifically, House expresses how she admires Arab youths of other Arab Spring countries that lead most activist efforts and that “ironically”, in Saudi Arabia, “women, not youth, had the temerity to confront authority” (House 2012: 72). Following this, she lists a series of feminist acts outside the state, mostly occurring during the Arab Spring, such as their engaging in “drive-ins” and holding protests outside the Interior Minister for their imprisoned male family members (House 2012: 72), as well as feminist acts within the state, such as women within the Saudi Human Rights Commission (House 2012: 90) and the women working alongside Princess Adelah in the National Family Safety Program (House 2012: 93).

However, the fact that House does not find Saudi women’s agency as present, even in these instances where it might seem so, even in the public realm, is soon clear. This lack of recognition of Saudi women’s agency is evidenced in how House still ultimately takes on a noticeably dismissive, modernist tone of disapproval in considering such manifestations of Saudi feminism. As a result, House’s liberal and modern biases seems to lead to a position that it is “easy to exaggerate the significance of these small public protests” (House 2012: 73) because of the pervasiveness of structural forces, namely, the fact that “the overwhelming majority of women are totally subjugated by religion, tradition, and family” (House 2012: 73) and seemingly disqualifies these examples as not evidences of feminist acts or Saudi women’s political agency.
For instance, House observes “thoroughly modern” Jeddah businesswomen, purporting feminist statements regarding “greater change”, yet this agency is immediately brought into question given that, “even these modern Saudi women wear abayas, cover their hair with a scarf, and excuse themselves in the middle of meetings to comply with the call to prayer (House 2012: 74). This example is supported with “their conservative female opponents”, namely, the stance of a ‘daiyah’, or female religious leader, that “feels sorry for modernizers who have strayed”, and yet shares their religious veiling to which House admits, “even after several hours of conversation, it remains disconcerting to converse with a disembodied voice, and I find myself straining to make eye contact through her black veil but to no avail” (House 2012: 75). In this way, she seemingly maintains that Saudi women’s agency, even in its challenges, is lacking due to its restriction by the religious and social.

This is further evidenced by the way in which House understands the multiple Saudi female voices on feminism. While it is noticeable that she acknowledges varied feminist positions to be present, which might appear to be her allocating a level of agency to Saudi women, House still precedes examples of such with the following dismissive descriptive: “how diverse and divided are Saudi women beneath their public uniform of black, which makes all of them, regardless of are or physique, resemble flying cows” (House 2012: 80). Moreover, in characterizing Saudi women and the question of their possible agency through the state, House argues that: Norah al-Fayez, the first female deputy minister of education, still reflects “a sign of how slowly things change” in that she is “always careful to block the camera atop her computer so [her coworkers] don’t see her” during
video conferences used to communicate with her male counterparts at work (House 2012: 91). It is as though House disappointedly argues: Saudi feminism, of the “real”, i.e. non-Islamist and modern or liberal kind, is still not the “bra-burning Western feminis[m]” it ought to be, but it’ll have to do.

Despite this, the value of House’s work lies in her variety of local sources, whether male or female, official or unofficial, rich or poor. Additionally, for the case of Saudi feminism, she aptly notes the fact of her invaluable access as a woman to women’s sources and perspectives, despite how she may have ultimately portrayed them. This is often missing in similar works, as House observes: “only a woman can explore all aspects of the intensifying battle over women’s status, including, most important, the views of women” in Saudi Arabia (House 2012: 78).

**Saudi Women as having Limited Agency**

Such Orientalist and modernist studies of Saudi feminism and portrayals of Saudi women have not stood without response. Various works, most notably by Saudi academics, can be seen as engaging such knowledge produced around Saudi feminism. A noticeable theme among these works is that, on the one hand, their critique is of Orientalist and modernist accounts, but, on the other, this response is often executed along modernist lines. For instance, such works tend to focus on the study of elite, educated, and “modern” Saudi women. In doing so, these works are an exercise in “engaging the gaze”,

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and are carried out along criteria set by Orientalist imaginaries of Saudi women, modernity, and development. In a broader sense, such efforts reflect how “the involvement of Arab women in the study of other women in their societies parallels the period of cultural and political awakening that occurred throughout the region following World War II. This was a period of national struggle for independence, of mounting demands for decolonization, and of calls for serious attempts at development” and, among academics in particular, a postcolonial sense of “the role of scientific knowledge in reproducing structures of social inequality” which only increased following the Naksah of 1967 (Al-Torki and El-Solh 1988: 2).

It is in this context that the first work on Saudi women by a Saudi woman was produced, namely: Soraya al-Torki’s *Women in Saudi Arabia: Ideology and Behavior Among the Elite* (1986). While al-Torki explains that her choice of focusing on the urban elite of Jeddah was that, as an anthropologist, she sought to combat how “anthropologists, whether working in their own society or in another, have traditionally studies people whose status is below their own”, such as they “commoners, the poor, the marginal”, which left studies of urban elite women and their families a “rare” endeavor (Al-Torki 1988: 49-50). Still, al-Torki admits that, sdeing to ultimately modernist motivations, that: “In retrospect, I believe that my choice to focus on urban society was partly a reaction to the stereotypical view of Saudi Arabia as a society of nomads and oil wells” and that “scholars avoided its study in favor of the nomad and the camel” (Al-Torki 1988: 50).
In either case, Al-Torki’s work is a prime example of early attempts to highlight Saudi women’s agency. In this work, al-Torki first problematizes the aforementioned trends in the literature which hold religion and culture as static structural constraints against women. Instead, she argues that Saudi feminism occurs mainly within the private realm through contentious negotiations and ideational shifts, where ideology is “a system of belief which serves the individual for the mental reconstruction of the real world” (Al-Torki 1986: 149). She locates Saudi women’s agency in social matters of importance as well as their use of religious concepts for their advantage.

For instance, al-Torki does this by examining women’s agency in “the social world of women” as a space that acts as compensative of social isolation and insecurity, as such spaces facilitate seeking information and news and the strengthening of social ties of kinship and friendship. She highlights how the security of women is improving with younger generations due to their “departures from traditional behavior”, which she gauges as the women being more interested in spending time with their husbands, concerned with educating their children, and less concerned with social visits due to the availability of new technologies as sources of community news instead (Al-Torki 1986: 120). She explains that such departures are facilitated by “legitimized by a redefinition of the key concept of ‘ayb” (Al-Torki 1986: 120). And, while the social structure is still present and ultimately not transgressed by these women, “they are working within the range of the acceptable, but at the same time they seem to be expanding the range of the permissible” (Al-Torki 1986: 120). In this way, she locates women’s agency within such
private realms in the fact that “these women are pursuing strategies which enhance their autonomy within the limits of the possible” (Al-Torki 1986: 121).

Another example of this is how al-Torki holds women’s agency as apparent in the case of marriage. While marriage has economic and political alliances most readily for men, whereas for women they hold power in their “broker” position of such alliances. Additionally, she cites how this agency is changing in the example of younger generations of women. This change is located as how younger women are also positing agency in their making marriage-related demands, such as rejecting parental choices of a spouse, their asserting control over their ‘mahr’ or dowry, as well as demanding neolocal residence as a requirement in a marriage contract (Al-Torki 1986: 145-146). She argues this is facilitated through an adaptation of ‘social individuality’ with Islamic teachings and against the social concept of ‘ghadab’, i.e. ideology of social relationships most closely understood as disapproval (Al-Torki 1986: 146). She finds this in a linking between individuality and the Islamic requirement that the woman agree to a marriage prospect and determines that this “gives her a degree of control over her life that her mother never had and may not even have sought” (Al-Torki 1986: 146).

Aside from this, it is in this example that al-Torki highlights a level of political agency for Saudi women, possible only through the private realm, rather than the public realm. This is because, al-Torki argues, marriage is more accurately understood to represent not only family bonding among groups, but also a bonding with the aim of augmenting symbolic and marital capital, expand commercial ventures, and can have “political
consequences” in the form of access to political influencers through marriage and thus women gain considerable agency through their positions as “brokers” of such (Al-Torki 1986: 144-145).

Saudi women’s position as brokers of such social arrangements with politically consequential importance is supported by their social seclusion and access to the women’s “social world” which means women are responsible for arranging marriages and hold sole access to information and creators of spaces for meetings necessary for carrying out such marital alliances and relationships. As such, al-Torki crucially characterizes this as ultimately meaning their having “impact in the larger community” since “marriage bonds have consequences for the society at large” (Al-Torki 1986: 145). In a more exceptional case of Saudi women’s political agency, she highlights that exceptions exist where women of high social status, defined as royalty or great wealth, often result in her “observing men showed deference to such women, obeyed them, and sought them with pleas to facilitate a transaction with the government. These women, through their husbands, can influence events” (Al-Torki 1986: 147). This is significant as it contributes a class-based understanding of agency, which is lacking in previously reviewed works on Saudi women.

In this way, while, al-Torki recognizes that “it is clear that men control political decisions affecting the community at large; yet, women also have political power, expressed in their de facto control of domestic life, in addition to marriages that extend beyond the ‘private domain’ the women’s world” (Al-Torki 1986: 24-25). It is because of this that al-
Torki also challenges the fact that this ought to be understood as Saudi women’s agency as solely in the private realm, for, “in the case of Jiddah domestic elites, the private/public distinction sometimes used to understand gender asymmetry is not useful. The contrast between the ‘domestic’ and the outside world is not relevant to marriages that result in a network of ties combining economic, political, and social implications for men and women alike” (Al-Torki 1986: 24-25).

Thus, al-Torki’s critique is of Orientalist and modernist accounts of Saudi women can be seen in her attention to women’s agency within the private realm, as well as its extensions to the public realm. Additionally, she draws attention to how social and religious constraints can also be used to facilitate women’s agency, rather than as static structures against it. Al-Torki also holds this as true even in instances where such “ideology and is expressed in positions of economic and political power which men occupy exclusively [and] in the last analysis, their control is backed by law, supported by the political system, and guarded by the coercive power of the state”, such as the example she points to as Saudi women legally requiring a male guardian’s approval to travel (Al-Torki 1986: 147). This can be seen in how al-Torki maintains that, despite this, women’s agency is facilitated by “ambiguities and contradictions [that] exist within key concepts of the belief system” which allows women to reinterpret structural constraints, such as social concepts like ‘ayb and religious concepts like ‘dhanb which are part of elite ideology in Jiddah (150-151, 154). This is crucial to counter what al-Torki observed to be “a tendency by observers of internal developments in Saudi Arabia to stress elements of fixity in the culture and in social relations”, as well as previous trends of state-centric...
feminism and of viewing women’s agency as absent due to state structural adaptation of such forces as well. Her work “shows that such an ahistorical perspective is misleading”, which is a stance that runs counter to the previously discussed texts in this literature review. Al-Torki goes on to assert that, “although many factors of continuity have been discussed, significant change has occurred in the ideology and practice of the domestic groups under investigation” (Al-Torki 1986: 164).

However, as previously mentioned, this response is often executed along modernist lines. Specifically, this “significant change occurred in the ideology” is typically defined as holding a directional and modern characteristic. Aside from the very choice of focus on the study of elite, educated, and “modern” Saudi women, al-Torki also “engages the gaze” in her work when defining feminist contestations that evidence women’s agency. This is because such definitions are typically along criteria set by Orientalist imaginaries of Saudi women, modernity, and development.

Firstly, instances of women’s agency are typically contrasted as more or less in degree based on younger and older generations, where the younger are consistently held up as holding more agency and al-Torki suggests that “we look at these developments as stages”, “patterns”, and “evolution” (Al-Torki 1986: 152). This, in itself, is not entirely problematic if it were merely descriptive. However, it is the criteria of this “evolution” which shows al-Torki’s modernist assumptions of Saudi women’s agency and what shapes it takes. This modern criteria included male domination becoming tempered male control, women’s seclusion becoming conditional segregation, extended kinship ties
replaced with conjugal relations, women’s veiling changing to partial covering of the body, men’s claims to exclusive rationality outside the home evolving into contingent rationality for women outside the home, pre-selection of marriage partners for women becoming consensual participation in the arrangement by women, and, finally, male property control is supplanted by female management of the household budget and rights to knowledge about inheritance or even its control (Al-Torki 1986: 150-151). Similarly, although al-Torki highlights how gendered spaces facilitated women’s agency in matters like marriage, she nonetheless holds that the notion that gender segregation can be viewed as positing “models of complementarity and equality between the sexes” instead correlates this with “male dominance, on both the ideological and the behavioral levels” (Al-Torki 1986: 23).

Secondly, although al-Torki is careful to highlight feminist contentions and finds an interdependency between ideology (or social and religious constraints) and social relations, where the one shapes the other, there is still an element of inevitability to her characterization. For instance, she explains the changes in Saudi women’s agency as “development occurs over the long term, and much of it happens without conscious, deliberate planning on the part of the members of the domestic groups. But the final result is that standard meanings gain new currency. Ultimately, innovations occur largely as a result of the ability of men and women to adapt traditional and fundamental concepts to new circumstances” (157).
While the previously mentioned example of modern criteria also displays the assumed directional inevitability of al-Torki’s analysis of Saudi feminism and women’s agency, another more specific example is also useful to highlight this. For instance, one example of this is how al-Torki traces the increased degree of Saudi women’s agency as seemingly apparent through one-directional “changed” veiling practices with an inevitable end of less veiling and increased autonomy. She highlights how “old meanings of veiling and obedience have yielded to new ones without the abandonment of essential principles” (Al-Torki 1986: 154), where veiling was once in absolute manner, this “soon gave rise” to older-generation women relaxing this in front of older male servants in the home, followed by partial veiling outside the home facilitated by a fatwa which permits so in Mecca, and then the “passage of time” meant middle and younger generations would also relax veiling practices as Western-style shopping areas were established in the city and automobiles became more popular in which where middle and younger generation men often encouraged partial unveiling of women inside cars (Al-Torki 1986: 151).

This is also apparent in her attention to ideology as explanatory of constraints and opportunities for women’s agency, since it “makes prediction possible” (Al-Torki 1986: 159), indicating an assumption of a clear trajectories for Saudi feminism to be ‘found out’. Al-Torki also hints at this assumption in her conclusion that “key concepts are being modified, and one can expect that for the fourth generation [of women] the tension may grow to a direct conflict of interests” between men and women (Al-Torki 1986: 163-164).
As will be explored in the following section, such tendencies run counter to a more useful text by Amelie Le Renard. In this text, the approach adopted discredits the dominant reading of Saudi history in terms of linear progress and modernization, according to which all obstacles to women’s professional activity are the result of traditions inherited from the past” (Le Renard 2014: Loc 745). Despite this shortcoming, al-Torki is still crucial in highlighting that, rather than Saudi women falling into cultural or religious structural molds, such discourses are possibly manipulated by them in ways that facilitate their agency, mostly in the private realm but somewhat in the political realm as well.

Specifically, al-Torki explains that: “it is important to stress the malleability of the ideology of domestic groups. Groups will seek to utilize those parts of the ideology – leaving untouched other aspects of it – which can be invoked to benefit their interests. In this respect it is fitting to view the behavior of individuals in terms of their strategies, which represent efforts at reinterpreting ideological imperatives. To begin with, an understanding of human behavior that refers merely to community ideological norms will be incomplete… within the constraints of the norms, or even in using these norms, men and women alike are not pawns but are actively involved in strategies that further their own interests. Some of these strategies aim at producing ‘regular practices’ – a legitimating strategy that aims at making the egoistic interest appear to be the public interest” (Al-Torki 1986: 161). Such an approach and these highlighted strategies are particularly of interest to this research which will consider similar methods in a different context of Saudi feminism, namely, in examples showing Saudi women’s political agency in the public realm.
Saudi Women’s Personal and Semi-Political Agency

Works on Saudi Arabia that incorporate an activist-focus, such as Toby Matthiesen’s “The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent, and Sectarianism”, and particularly from a Social Movement Theory perspective, such as John Chalcraft’s “Migration and Popular Protest in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf in the 1950s and 1960s, have only recently begun to emerge. As a result, scarce such sources exist on Saudi feminism in particular. Despite this, two key texts serve as foundational attempts for producing such literature. This thesis will attempt to build on a combination of these following works: Madawi al-Rasheed’s *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia* and Amelie Le Renard’s *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia*. Both of which emphasize a focus on agency and seek to go beyond representations of Saudi feminism present in the previous trends within Saudi Studies literature, whether Statist, Orientalist, or strictly modernist or liberal, and particularly from the perspective of Saudi women from below as displaying feminisms within the political, social, and personal realms.

In countering the previous trend of which highlights a lack of Saudi women’s agency as part of “Saudi exceptionalism” and its statist feminism, Madawi al-Rasheed, a Saudi feminist historian, argues that “the Saudi state does not simply ‘act’ while women ‘react’. Saudi women are an emerging divergent constituency, an agency with their own interests, voices, and projects” which she documents in their works of literature and activism (Al-
Furthermore, rather than a benevolent or modern feminist state, al-Rasheed characterizes state-centric feminism as a manifestation of the Saudi state’s history of how, despite legal subordination of Saudi women, the representation of Saudi womanhood was central to the idea of nation and the state’s legitimation. She argues that, rather than facing structural restrictions of religion or culture, the state’s religious nationalist representation of Saudi women as “ideal” religious subjects is what structurally solidified their status as the source of “Saudi exceptionalism”. Additionally, she highlights how this also resulted in some instances of structural openings for women’s agency, though she maintains that such still remain functions of the state and legitimizers of its rule.

According to al-Rasheed’s view, this Saudi exceptionalism was a “much-celebrated” state doctrine used to define the nation as distinguished and in superior opposition to not only polities of the past, but Arab states of the present and their secular nationalism (Al-Rasheed 2013: 73). This Saudi exceptionalism was furthered by the discovery of vast oil wealth and the import of cheap labor, making the exclusion of women from the public sphere to be an “affordable luxury” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 281). This resulted in Saudi womanhood being “entangled with discourses about how precious and protected they are” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 281). Saudi women’s positioning within the nation was as members free from the “burdens” of agency within the nation, which their Saudi male counterparts and expatriate workers alike took on instead (Al-Rasheed 2013: 281).
Crucially, this meant that, in producing a “homogenous polity that imagines itself as having a unique common religious culture/sacred space, women were the cornerstone of differentiating the nation from others in its environs” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 73). In this way, despite the near public invisibility of women at the emergence and early stages of Saudi Arabia, the idea of a Saudi nation was nonetheless gendered. The formulation of the state and nation itself meant that it had its “legitimacy derived from the perpetuation of control over and exclusion of women, believed to threaten its integrity and morality” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 75). Finally, the national narrative constructed “acceptable” and “rejected” definitions of Saudi women and gender roles, where the pious Saudi woman was celebrated as the foundation of the nation, thus defining basic Saudi social order and expected state-society relations. This gendered construction of women within the nation “submerg[ed] all categories of women into an undifferentiated mass” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 75) that must be willingly pious, restrictively regulated, and perpetually publically discussed “at all levels of public discourse” in ways that indicated anxiety over their status as the signifiers of the nation (Al-Rasheed 2013: 75).

While the gendered idea of Saudi nationhood and the emphasis on women as important for nationalist projects may have begun as religiously based, al-Rasheed asserts that such formulations of structure were not static and later moved “towards a modernity” in which, again, “women became central” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 281). This necessitated that the “most masculine state… espouse its own feminization” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 294). The feminization of the Saudi state’s formulation of the nation meant “creat[ing] an ‘alternative modernity’, combining commitment to Islam with selective borrowing from
what world modernity can offer” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 282). This feminization of the Saudi nation can be seen most prominently in King Abdullah’s reign, which came at a moment of “historical crisis” of both international and domestic conflict. This moment consisted of an international War on Terror campaign, Western scrutiny of Saudi religious fundamentalism, and domestic challenges to the Saudi state and reformations of nationhood by a growing number of Saudi women.

Rather than displaying a form of state-centric feminism, the Saudi state portrayed the newly “acceptable” modern constructs of womanhood and public roles within the Saudi nation as a method of mediation of religious fundamentalism. As such, this feminization was in order to appease global pressures on the state and discourage domestic discontent and an “attempt to defend [the nation’s image] against terrorism accusations. Thus, as “the state endeavored to show a soft side by increasing the visibility of women” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 25), it also sought to restore the nation’s tarnished ethos of religious nationalism following the events of 9/11 and the numerous terrorist attacks that followed in various countries, including in Saudi Arabia itself.

Also part of state-driven War on Terror efforts was how Saudi womanhood was reformulated as the nation’s “proof of modernity” and further “acceptable” womanhoods began to emerge. Moving away from Saudi womanhood being visible strictly in forms of piety (Al-Rasheed 2013: 134), the idea of nation began to include “stories about successful businesswomen”, (Al-Rasheed 2013: 25) who often were liberal-leaning and “critical of religious restrictions on their lives” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 35). Their public
appearances were “to confirm the exceptionalism of individual women amidst a persistent alleged ‘woman problem’” as well as to demonstrate the nation’s female “agencies of enlightenment, modernity, and progress” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 25). This worked to “demystify Saudi society”, link Saudi nationhood to modernity to distance it from religious fundamentalism, and satisfy the critical post-9/11 international community. King Abdullah fueled this in his public meetings with various elite women, promoting their success stories. Also, “for the first time in [Saudi] history, photos of the king and the Crown prince surrounded by women circulated in the Saudi press; [which was] interpreted as a sign of the current leadership’s support for women” and thus increased women’s legitimacy as public members of the Saudi nation (Al-Rasheed 2013: 28). She cites a clear example of the linkage between a “modern” idea of nation and women was the “orchestrated speeches [by King Abdullah] about women” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 27). The most circulated speech being one in which he praises Saudi women’s vital role in the Shura Council specifically, and the nation generally. In the speech he states the undeniability of their importance as the nation’s “mothers, daughters, and wives”, affirming Saudi women’s gendered role as reproducers of the nation in his stating: “I am created from a woman” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 28).

Such characterizations by al-Rasheed are useful in that they contribute greatly to her problematization of previous works on state-centric Saudi feminism, her historicization of such, as well as problematizing the religious and the social as separate structural restrictions from issues of nationhood and the state. Additionally, al-Rasheed also argues further and counters modernist or liberal understandings of Saudi women’s agency by
being among the first to discuss, in a way that holds them as legitimate, examples of
Islamist Saudi women’s agency and their feminist visions and actions. This is evident in
her discussions of “critical Islamist voices” and a few examples of “female Islamist
activists” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 255, 271) that “are more involved in responding to wider
challenges that touch the lives of both men and women” in comparison to others that she
deems “are simply female voices that are an extension of the official religious
establishment” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 279).

In addition to this, al-Rasheed also counters Orientalist narratives on Saudi women’s
oppression in the form of an absence of agency by locating it in unorthodox spaces of
literatures. Al-Rasheed argues for such methods and sources of inquiry from a post-
Orientalist perspective: “women are not passive terrain on which secularizing states and
religious groups vie to gain control. Instead women often engage with these multiple
discourses in ways that may also translate into activism and not necessarily into passivity
and oppression” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 31). She highlights literary and novelist examples of
Saudi women participating in the political and in manifestations of feminism.

In doing so, she holds Islamist and non-Islamist Saudi women as positing similar
examples of women’s agency even within structural restraints. However, she does not go
as far as allocating political agency to such examples. Not only this, al-Rasheed in some
cases finds such examples are supportive, rather than subversive, of the aforementioned
restrictive structures on Saudi women. Instead, she asserts, “like other women, Saudis
engage in both resisting patriarchy and bargaining with it, whether they are liberal, Islamist, or simply un-politicized” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 28).

This can be seen in how she ultimately concludes that, “all religious activists share one common feature with their liberal counterparts: both ‘muthaqafat’ and ‘multazimat’ call upon the authoritarian state to act in their field of gender. The muthaqafat want state intervention to limit the misogyny of men and religious institutions, and grant women rights in line with international standards. The multazimat call for state intervention to contain the corrupting influence of liberal men and women and to resist foreign pressure on Saudi Arabia.” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 279).

Furthermore, although Al-Rasheed sought to highlight Saudi feminism as it developed in the writings of Saudi novelists, it was with apparent unease since she displayed a bias against the aforementioned unorthodox spaces and women’s agency in such as ultimately outside the public sphere and “marginal activities” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 176). Despite “wider issues of political, economic, and social concern that touch the lives of both men and women are alluded to in their literature”, she still concludes that they are apolitical and ultimately limited examples of feminist agency because they are “limited to the feminine subject, situated in most cases in the domestic arena, with occasional references to the workplace and the public sphere” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 209). Al-Rasheed diagnosis this as possibly out of necessity due to the fact that, according to her view, “the inability of Saudi women to organize themselves in a feminist movement, establish their own pressure group, or mobilize as women has pushed them towards finding expression in
fiction” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 176). Not only this, but she characterizes such feminist literature as “less threatening than an activist who mobilizes a community of women” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 176) and that, although deemed “immoral fiction” and on occasion been subject to “takfir fatwas”, i.e. fatwas that deem a person to be an apostate, al-Rasheed displays disapproval in that “none has been detained like [other] political and social activists who have directly called for serious political reform” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 202).

More broadly, this is because al-Rasheed finds these examples, although positing women’s agency, are nonetheless within the state’s structure and a legitimizing function of the state in that “the majority of muthaqafat in Saudi society accept the limited role that the state allows them, mainly as ‘women talking about women’. They have accepted state discourse that discusses them as a separate category in Saudi society and delivers services to them as women” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 209). In line with the previous emphasis on women bargaining with the state, in terms of political agency, al-Rasheed concludes that: “in this respect, women novelists and literary figures do not create their own agendas but are co-opted into political projects that are set up by more powerful agents in society, from individual kings and princes to media institutions, education, and dialogue forms” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 210). This, in particular, is where this thesis will attempt to explore further is how Al-Rasheed may also allocate such instances of public Saudi feminisms to a secondary status in the political realm.
Al-Rasheed also displays a tendency to consider emphasis on Saudi feminism to also indicate “the state has succeeded in putting gender issues on the agenda of most Saudis, thus diverting attention from calls for serious political reform” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 171). In this way, it appears that, for al-Rasheed, there is an uneasy tension between highlighting women’s agency but also ultimately maintains that their agency is tempered as a function of the state, as “at another level, the state is increasingly allowing gender to become a central concern debated in the public sphere”, as well as opposite of the political by the fact that “this is extremely important at a time when the state has endeavored to silence any debate about political reform. Debating gender has become a substitute for general political activism” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 153) which is precisely what delegates it to secondary status in the political realm and in contrast to, as al-Rasheed describes it, “serious” activism.

In her considering the driving campaign during the Arab Spring, for instance, al-Rasheed decides that “one again”, feminist and gender issues were “masking more serious issues related to general political reform as well as specific demands to end arbitrary detention, corruption, and unemployment and to provide welfare benefits and housing” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 291). Thus, feminist action is sometimes held as synonymous with state legitimation tools and “women’s real emancipation and equality may not be possible without serious movement towards participatory democracy in which both men and women gain the right to represent themselves and become active in formulating policy” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 292).
This is in line with al-Rasheed’s well-known activist stance, despite her position as academic, against Saudi authoritarianism, and may be a true characterization of feminism in some sense for her Saudi female counterparts within the country. However, this diagnosis gives the impression that Saudi feminism, even when practiced “from below” among these counterparts, is one-directional, where the state “allows”, “permits”, and “uses” it from above and is bound by the fact that such agencies “seems to satisfy the leadership” structure (Al-Rasheed 2013: 171-172). This does not leave much room for valuing Saudi feminisms that push back in the opposite direction and act in the meantime, before such ‘serious’ and ‘real’ changes of democracy occur.

Additionally, if we were to assume that such ‘serious’ activism is in fact the sole evidence of women’s political agency, it does not allow for or explain practices of Saudi women’s agency in the political. This is evident in how al-Rasheed mentions “women have been involved in general campaigns as signatories to political petitions calling for political participation, for example the 2004-2005 wave of petitions associated with calls for constitutional monarchy” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 209), but does not seem to focus on women’s contributions to such efforts from then on nor explain how, under such structural constraints, such practices can be explained. HASM QUOTES?

This is where al-Rasheed’s work is strengthened by its combination with the anthropologist Amelie Le Renard’s ethnographic work that is subalternist, post-structuralist, and post-colonial in approach. This combination of approaches led Le Renard to be far less willing to dismiss Saudi feminist agencies as ultimately
subordinated given a structural context of authoritarianism. Rather, she finds Saudi feminism and its various agencies even in the cases of “everyday” feminisms of Saudi women, and situates herself as part of “historical and ethnographic evidence… [that] discards the dominant reading of Saudi history in terms of linear progress and modernization, according to which all obstacles to women’s professional activity are the result of traditions inherited from the past” (Le Renard 2014: Loc 745).

This work was likely motivated by the previous Orientalist and modernist trends in Saudi studies, particularly in the case of Saudi feminism. This is evident in how Le Renard states that “my ethnographic experience of women-only spaces questioned many of my subconscious assumptions on how society should be organized. It led me to denaturalize my ideas about femininity, masculinity, and gender norms profoundly” (Le Renard 2014: Loc 11) and holds that she does not “seek to participate in the Western discourse on women’s oppression in Saudi Arabia, which I think does not help the cause, is imperialistic, and selects its victims accordingly” (Le Renard 2014: 118).

This commitment to locating Saudi female agency is also apparent in that she emphasizes “everyday feminisms”, as Le Renard highlights, as “negotiations with family members” to adopt a given lifestyle and new norms of feminist self-presentation and subjectivity (Le Renard 2014: Loc 652, 675), as well as “transformations” and “negotiations around femininity norms” in contrast to “masculinized” girls (Le Renard 2014: Loc 680). In particular, Le Renard examines Saudi feminism in the cases of five Saudi women that are “invisible in Western media accounts of Saudi women, which usually focus on women
who more clearly resemble stereotypes of emancipation” (Le Renard 2014: Loc 154).

Perhaps in further responding to both Orientalist and modernist understandings of Saudi feminism, Le Renard argues that interpretations of Saudi feminisms that emphasize “only what Saudi women lack fails to consider the specific organization of spaces, lifestyles, and gender norms produced by the particular limits placed on mobility” and its numerous transformations and negotiations. This is particularly evident in her attention to how such transformations have different trajectories as well, rather than all changing towards modern notions of womanhood or agency,

Le Renard also problematizes the concept that the main structural restrictions on Saudi feminism is that of religion and state, namely, she introduces elements such as urbanization and capitalist globalization (Le Renard 2014: Loc 154). Specifically, Le Renard argues that Saudi women struggle in their feminist acts against or for the need to conform to “a model of consumer femininity” to counter pressures of masculinizing forces of Saudi femininity (Le Renard 2014: Loc 677). Le Renard also challenges Orientalist and modernist characterizations of “gender segregation” by introducing how it, too, is not a static characterization and has been considered, at various times of Saudi history, to mark “an indicator of high status” and that, in the current context, Saudi women’s agencies presents a challenge to the public and private divide (Le Renard 2014: Loc 250). This is because they posit “different ways of experiencing the socio-spatial organization of the city” and that such segregated spaces can often act as “a space of relative freedom for women” (Le Renard 2014: Loc 714-715).
In countering al-Rasheed’s high-bar of “serious” female activism, she asserts that such feminist transformations “combines particular discourses and practices” that “signify shifting power relations and ways of governing” (Le Renard 2014: Loc 175, 195). While ceding the state’s use of developmentalist and reform discourse that targets women as legitimizers, Le Renard holds that “reform discourse promotes new narratives and imaginings of what it means to be Saudi” (Loc 222) and that “women emancipate themselves from certain constraints and project themselves in new imaginings” even if such led to their adoption of other forms of constraints and norms (Le Renard 2014: Loc 297).

More broadly, Le Renard questions state-centric feminism as well as feminism from below that is subject to one-directional influence and asserts that: “it would be difficult to identify a singular ‘gaze’ exercising an influence on the conduct of young urban women, given the complex imbrications/intertwining of multiple and heterogeneous power relations. The lifestyles adopted by young urban women are influenced by reform discourse, application of official Islamic rules, constraints imposed by families, or even private-sector initiatives. In Foucault’s definition, they constitute relations of power that intertwine, confront one another, and either converge, or, conversely, oppose one another. Various elements open or close spaces and possibilities for actin for young urban women, which contribute to fashioning their lifestyles” (Le Renard 2014: 325). In this way, Le Renard posits clearly the multi-directional nature of Saudi feminisms in that they confront, converge, and oppose discursive elements of the religious or social, the state, and economy.
In conclusion, rather than “society”, “religion”, “state”, and “Saudi women” composing static blocks of analysis, Le Renard focuses on fluid governmentalities, religious negotiations, and social transformations and how constraints on Saudi women, particularly in terms of space, order, and segregation, produces as much as it represses “sociabilities, regroupings, and identifications” along feminist lines (Le Renard 2014: 250). For the purposes of the research at hand, this method and conceptualizations are particularly useful to consider in the case of Saudi feminist activism or political agency, particularly in the context of the period during and following the Arab Spring.

A gap in this final trend of literature still exists, however, in the case of considering Saudi feminism among a growing group of feminist ‘activists’. On the one hand, it will do so against Al-Rasheed’s dichotomous conception of agency as either ‘serious’ and political, or, when posited by women, as apolitical due to its being a legitimizer of the state, an act of patriarchal bargaining, or inevitably a function of the state’s permitted it as a strategic tool of distraction from ‘real’ political activism. It will also do so pushing beyond Le Renard’s emphasis on Riyadh-centric spaces with its capitalist structural influences and engaging less wearily with what Le Renard dismisses as uninteresting Western media’s “stereotypes of emancipation”, namely, examples of Saudi women’s political agency and feminist contestations in the public realm (Le Renard 2014: Loc 154). On the other hand, this thesis will also draw on al-Rasheed’s conception of the state’s interaction with the religious and the social in relation to Saudi feminism. It will also draw on Le Renard’s emphasis on the multi-directional influences of discourses and action, as well as public
spaces and feminist displays as being “like theatrical stages, on which each woman is simultaneously actress and spectator” (Le Renard 2014: 278), but differing in its considering, particularly, what such concepts mean and look like in the context of Saudi feminist activism.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter will describe this thesis’s research design, including particular methodologies used for both data collection and data analysis. It will also offer a rationale for such choices, as well as a comprehensive description of the sources of data utilized as part of this research. Following this, it will discuss the philosophical paradigms at play within this methodology, as well as lay out the procedures and nature of how data analysis will be carried out and presented in the following chapters.

3.2. Research Design

The primary methodology of this thesis will be qualitative in approach. In terms of data collection, it will draw on the following primary tools: document gathering and review, non-participant and participant observation, and issue-oriented, structured and semi-structured interviews. In terms of data analysis, the methodology used will include the following types of analysis: critical literary and discourse analysis, and media research predominantly of the “new” social media, but also “traditional” media.
Simply put, the aim of this research design and methodology is to be able to characterize what have Saudi feminists been doing and how they, themselves, understand what they have been doing, within the timeframe of 2011 to the present, commonly identified as the periods of the Arab Spring and post-Arab Spring. Secondarily, it is to characterize what has the Saudi state been doing, largely in response to these Saudi feminists, and how do these Saudi feminists, in turn, view the Saudi state’s claims and actions.

To put it more explicitly, the central research questions that this methodology is chosen to address is the following:

- How do Saudi feminists understand their own activist claims and actions?
- What empowering and creative ways have they tried to posit such agency?
- Under what conditions were they possible?
- Have these changed over time and in relation to other movements?
- If so, what do these changes look like? How do Saudi women understand the reasons for these changes?
- How do they perceive and relate to political reformist movements, like HASM?
- How do they perceive their agency in public in relation to its political nature?

The secondary research questions that this methodology is chosen in order to address is the following:

- How do Saudi feminist activists perceive and interact with other Saudi women activists?
How do these Saudi feminists perceive the State’s role and relationship with their activist claims and actions?

How do Saudi women perceive how the Saudi state reacted to Saudi feminists’ activism?

What is the interaction between Saudi feminist activists and the Saudi state?

What shapes or causes the resultant interactions between the Saudi state and Saudi feminist activists?

### 3.3. Research Paradigms and Assumptions

The overarching methodological paradigms of this thesis will largely be feminist, interpretivist and constructivist. These paradigms were chosen based on their epistemological assumptions, with an admission that, “the stories we tell about our epistemological journeys are always interested stories and form a significant dimension of ‘politics of method’” (Naples 2013: 14). The epistemological assumptions include the following: a critical stance toward both strict positivist and disinterested anthropologist approaches toward inquiry of social actors, their movements, and broader context, a critical stance toward methods based on logical empiricism for understanding such subjects of inquiry (Schwandt 2000: 201), as well as a “rejecting the very idea of any foundational, mind-independent, and permanently fixed reality that could be grasped or even sensibly thought of without the mediation of human structuring” (Shusterman 1991,
Thus, “for virtually all postempiricist [approaches] of the human sciences, understanding is interpretation all the way down” (Schwandt 2000: 201).

The overarching paradigm which guides this thesis’s approaches and methods is a feminist perspective, meaning these approaches and methods hold an aim to focus on feminist and gendered issues, actions, experiences, and voices throughout. The motivation for this on the one hand is an underlying urge for social change, and, on the other, a desire for replacing Orientalist and reactionary anti-Orientalist accounts with those feminist accounts and concerns that most appropriately inquire into Saudi women in particular and their feminist activism since 2011. This essentially draws on the theoretical framework of standpoint theory which assumes that, “experiences produce knowledge and knowledge divorced from experience is colonizing, appropriating, and oppressive” (Fawcett & Hearn 2004: 209). This framework locates knowledge or a source of inquiry in those who experience, rather than strictly from those studying their experience. It takes their situated standpoint ‘seriously’, so to speak. While this approach which incorporates feminist standpoint theory is not complete on its own, since, alone, it would mean an assumptive epistemological privileging of experience over all else, as well as a somewhat universalist understanding of situated standpoints, I hold it as a justified choice to incorporate here given that most studies of Saudi women have been along Orientalist lines or with presumed modern or progressive assumptions in understanding their contexts.
However, it’s important to note that, as best possible, this underlying perspective’s assumptions will be considered against concerns of false universalism of ‘Saudi women’ or Saudi feminist activists, as well as with consideration of cautions against epistemic relativism. This will be accomplished mostly by also drawing on interpretivist and constructivist paradigms. For, as Thomas Schwandt notes, the interpretivist approach brings in a primary concern with gaining understanding from those involved in what is trying to be understood, as well as incorporation of the inquirer’s interpretation of such. This approach, then, “emphasize[s] that one must grasp the situation in which human actions make (or acquire) meaning in order to say one has an understanding of the particular action… In order to understand the part (the specific sentence, utterance, or act), the inquirer must grasp the whole (the complex of intentions, beliefs, and desires or the text, the institutional context, practice, form of life, language game, and so on), and vice versa” (Schwandt 2000: 193).

In doing so, the interpreter is not overcoming her own positionality, but rather, purports an acknowledgement that “to understand is always to understand differently” (Bernstein 1983: 139), rather than to find some essence of things or reality that is studied. Furthermore, this approach balances its aim of interpreting “what the things themselves say” with the epistemological position that, “what the things themselves say will be different in light of changing horizons and the different questions we learn to ask” (Bernstein 1983: 139). And, in this way, it can be concluded that this approach can only be seen as distortion in the case that, “only if we assume that a text possesses some meaning in itself that can be isolated from our prejudices” (Bernstein 1983: 139).
If one submits to such assumption, this approach proves most appropriate for inquiry since it achieves, as Geertz’s sums up: “a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring both into view simultaneously… Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole which motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another” (Geertz 1979: 239).

The constructivist approach follows closely with the interpretive methodological reasoning and epistemological assumptions. However, its added benefit is that it mediates a reliance on interpretation against explicitly different assumptions that lay out the ways in which “what the things themselves say” is constituted, namely, that: “we invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience, and we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experience” (Schwandt 2015: 36). And as a result, attention to such constructions, whether using deconstruction or genealogical methods, is crucial in this approach. Additionally, the constructivist approach also emphasizes the fact that “there is an inevitable historical and sociocultural dimension to this construction” (Schwandt 2015: 36). In other words: where constructivists see meaning as constructed, interpretivists see meaning as negotiated, this can be seen in the differences between “created, assembled” and “a matter of coming to terms” (Schwandt 2000: 195).
To a lesser extent and secondarily, my own experience will be drawn upon as well. A scholar of feminist activist research, Nancy Naples, notes the benefits and drawbacks of such a tactic as follows:

Analysis of community activism or the process of politicization can be deepened by making one’s activist experiences and standpoint visible. Activist researchers have been ambivalent about writing themselves into the narrative record. On the one hand, this strategy can lead to a more honest account of the social movement activities or activist organization in which they participated. Incorporating one’s activist experiences and positionality into the analysis can result in a deeper understanding of the political strategies chosen and the process of politicization. On the other hand, such a strategy may be viewed as an attempt to create a more ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ depiction of the field encounter, thus once again privileging the researcher’s voice over others whose lives were the subject of the inquiry (Naples 2013: 31).

Despite the aforementioned drawbacks, I find the inclusion of this approach justified in light of similar methodological considerations from previous scholars of Saudi women. For instance, the benefits can be seen in Soraya al-Torki’s Arab Women in the Field: Studying Your Own Society, as she asserts of the “outsider/insider” positioning that, in terms of the “insider” element: “working in their own society... similar benefits in knowing the culture and consequently being able to select their research agenda in a consonance with what is most expedient for the research task, and what is most feasible within the limits of what will be allowed by the subjects under investigation” (1988: 52).
and also, “being a member of the research community… led to a fairly egalitarian relationship” with those being studied (1988: 60). The main drawbacks being a heightening of “dilemmas in divulging information told in confidence” as well as “the misuse of published information by governments and power elites against the people studied” (1988: 61-62). Whereas, in also being an “outsider”, given that years abroad contributes to “distance between me and my society”, as al-Torki notes: “the advantages were that much of the culture was not so familiar that it could easily escape my notice” despite having the advantage that an “insider” has of being assumed to have more familiarity with such (1988: 55-56).

In short, the rationale for these paradigms is that the feminist perspective is important for establishing a drive for highlighting feminist issues, experiences, and voices, where standpoint theory further emphasizes the value of situated knowledge of these feminist voices. Similarly, the interpretivist approach ‘takes seriously’ what these voices express, whether their understandings of self, acts, or contexts. At the same time, it adds an assumption of the interpreter’s ability to understand these situations that produce such situated knowledge, as well as their ability to reconstruct subjective self-understandings of these actors and their actions (193). This interpretive paradigm is enhanced in activist research when it can include a nod to positionality or a participatory element as well. Furthermore, the constructivist approach adds another layer of understanding by explicitly pointing to the sources of construction for these situations as socio-historical, and emphasizes methods independent of a focus on situated knowledge ‘as is’, such as deconstructive and genealogical analysis.
3.4. Sources of Data and Data Collection Procedures

As previously stated, the types of data collection tools will include the following: document gathering and reviews, non-participant and participant observation, as well as issue-oriented, structured and semi-structured interviews.

Document gathering and review was the most basic tool of data collection. The sources of data for this procedure included documents like material from the activists when in groups, such as logos, reports, statements, online campaigns, petitions, action plans, and websites, as well as material from the activists when outside of groups, such as op-eds, published books and first-hand narratives of activism, blog posts, Twitter profiles and tweets, TV interviews, involvement in documentaries or YouTube videos and shows, as well as various forms of feminist activist art or “art activism”. Additionally, collected documents also included news reports covering Saudi feminist activism and events found relevant or influential on such activism, as well as international and national news and organizational reports related to Saudi women’s issues in general. One form of documents that will not be utilized are feminist literature, particularly novels by Saudi women, as these were predominantly produced and held more influence prior to the periods concerned in this thesis, as well as their having been analyzed extensively by Saddeka Arebi in *Women and Words in Saudi Arabia* and Madawi al-Rasheed who “rel[ies] heavily” (2013: 36) on such literature in her *A Most Masculine State*. 
The justification for this data collection tool is that, as Madawi al-Rasheed acknowledges, given “the absence of real and visible mobilization or developed civil society”, due to “denied visibility in the public sphere as agents and prevented from organizing themselves in independent civil society organizations”, analysis of such documents in addition to new spaces for Saudis such as social media has become crucial, particularly starting with the Arab Spring in 2011 (2013: 36). As the data analysis will show, such data is highly indicative and helpful for what I have set out to research. This is unique to the case of Saudi Arabia, where, prior to social media spaces like Twitter, the level of authoritarianism had led to a near absence of any broad-reaching feminist activism that reached any sort of meaningful scale in terms of political influence and public dissemination and outreach in Saudi Arabia outside of small feminist niches.

In terms of observation, the sources of observational data were composed of extensive non-participatory observation of Saudi feminist activities, namely, observing Saudi feminists’ public personas and personal choices in relation to their activism. Specifically, this was accomplished through observation of their choices of op-eds topics, TV interviews timings and topics that are shared through social media, online personas whether on Twitter, Instagram, or the like, and in some cases observing Saudi feminists’ involvement with policy-related and government initiatives. The participatory observation of Saudi feminists included a year of direct participation in some of the participants’ organizational activities. In addition to this, participatory observation was
also carried out through maintaining relationships and periodic conversations and continued networking with Saudi feminists since May 2011.

The justification for the use of observation, described by Marshall and Rossman (1989, p. 79) as “the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study”, is that it was helpful in gaining perspective on patterns of action and claims among Saudi feminists. It helped to pinpoint participants’ political perspectives, personal or philosophical values and norms, local or cultural terms and taboos, and their importance placed on past memories and priorities of present events. It also helped to facilitate monitoring of movement networks formed among activists and how they interact within and without their ideological groupings in cross-movement networks. When considering such observational data in the broader context of events which occurred throughout the timeframe under analysis, patterns of important spaces of activism were also identified, such as social media, book fairs, local universities, international conferences, and in-home meetings.

In combination with document gathering and review, observation was also crucial to achieve purposeful sampling of activists and activist groups to consider in this research as well as to carry out interviews with and formulate issue-based questions to be used in the interviews. This is because I was then able to accurately gauge choices of participants that fit the following criteria: appropriate degree of relevance or involvement in Saudi feminist activism, degree of prominence and influence in the Saudi public and state, as well as an accurate conception of their general ideological backgrounds. As a result,
issue-oriented interviews were also a source of data for this research. The participants were chosen according to loose groupings based on the following: 1) Their ideological background, understandings of feminism, or their adherence to a type of feminism. This is defined in terms of their consistent framing of their priorities of feminist demands and areas of focus, their conception of appropriate feminist activism tactics, as well as their conceptions of their activisms’ relationship to the state, religion, and culture. 2) Their apparent actual choices of “what works” in terms of feminist activism, as well as their level of cooperation or not with the Saudi state.

The resultant groupings of participants found, as a resultant of preliminary thematic data analysis, were the following: liberal feminists that prioritize rights, liberal feminists that prioritize development and market, liberal feminists as Twitter personalities or YouTube celebrities with less explicit priorities, liberal feminists abroad, Libro-Islamist or Tanwiri women that prioritize political rights, Islamist feminists that prioritize Islamic rights, Islamist feminist as online Twitter activist personalities or as on-the-ground protestors. The overwhelming majority considered were female, however male feminists were feminists also included. Additionally, the majority was Sunni, with two small groupings of Shia feminists emerging that were differentiated according to their positive or negative perception of and interaction with the Saudi state. There were also a few cases of Islamist feminists that, for various reasons, joined Daesh in Syria. Obviously, for this reason and other reasons such as practical feasibility or accessibility and participant cooperation, an activist from all of these emergent patterns of groupings were not interviewed. However, in cases when an interview with an activist from a particular grouping was not conducted,
the alternative chosen forms of data collection were utilized for analysis of and inquiry into this grouping.

It is important to note here that other scholars have contributed to formulating groups of Saudi women with feminist concerns or practices. However, none of them have considered Saudi feminist activists in particular. Previously, Soraya al-Torki in Women in Saudi Arabia: Ideology and behavior Among the Elite (1989) considered the grouping of Saudi women “elites” in Jeddah, Saddeka Arebi in Women and Words in Saudi Arabia (1994) focused on the grouping of first-generation Saudi women as literary “writers” (essayists, playwrights, short-storytellers, and poets) in the Hijaz region (specifically, Jeddah, Makkah, and Madinah).

On the other hand, Amelie Le Renard focused primarily on everyday, politically-averse Saudi “young urban women” in Riyadh, specifically students, employees, or job-seekers, and both married and not. Le Renard allocated minor attention to other groupings “women intellectuals and personalities – journalists, writers, preachers, and businesswomen who expressed themselves publicly in media and books” as well as “men who spoke about or took public initiatives on certain aspects of female modes of living or on their rights of women”. However, these additional groupings were not analyzed in themselves, but rather, as Le Renard explained: “helped me contextualize the changes that I observed” (Le Renard 2014: 18). Madawi al-Rasheed, on the other hand, does consider many of these same groups that Le Renard mentions for analysis. As a result, al-Rasheed offers the most elaborate patterned groupings of Saudi women or feminists:
Islamist and liberal educated and working elites, second-generation novelists that are also considered intellectuals or muthaqafat, third-generation young novelists that are also considered cosmopolitan celebrities, traditional Salafi daiyat or women preachers, conformist multazimat or Islamist women activists, and critical multazimat or Islamist women activists.

While different in that the majority of these groupings focused on women that were prominent mostly prior to the Arab Spring and were not necessarily engaged in activism, al-Rasheed’s designations were useful as a precedent and example of how such patterned understandings of actors might be accomplished and made useful for data collection and analysis. Some of these groupings, particularly in relation to the Islamist feminist groupings, intersect with those formulated as a result of the carried out data collection and analysis for this thesis. However, they are often with new actors, with different levels of relevance and priorities, and are still prominent during the period beginning in 2011.

3.5. Data Analysis Strategies

As previously stated, the types of data analysis used will include the following: critical literary and discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and media research predominantly of the “new” social media, but also “traditional” media. Justification for the choice of these data analysis strategies is their invaluable fit for studying activism in Saudi Arabia, where, at best, nascent forms of activism can be illuminated through these strategies. In
terms of discourse analysis, whether critical literary or narrative analysis, it is appropriate in that it can bypass the lack of traditional forms of social movement tactics and focus on “discourse [that] arise[s] from the coherence of description and evaluation of actions and events” (Frost & Elichaoff, 2013: 47) by Saudi feminist activists to produce “systems of meanings” that are “created by a combination of texts and the social practices that inform them” (Frost & Elichaof, 2013: 265). In particular, it “allows for the analysis of language, spoken or written, and images, symbols, and other media representations” of experiences or events, with an assumption that such descriptions are action-oriented, i.e. “to persuade or to argue” (Frost & Elichaof, 2013: 46). In doing so, “discourse analysis aims to understand how realities are constructed through these media, and to observe cultural and societal influences on subjective experiences” (Frost & Elichaof, 2013: 46). In the specific case of analyzing Saudi feminist activists, discourse analysis helps to “focus on questioning the questions that are asked about women’s experiences rather than on looking for answers” (Frost & Elichaof, 2013: 46). Most importantly, discourse analysis is essentially postmodernist in its epistemological assumptions as a strategy of data analysis, and thus in the context of inquiry into Saudi feminist activism, it “offers opportunity to ask new and relevant questions by reexamining and listening to the diverse women’s voices to create a rich tapestry of women’s experiences” (Frost & Elichaof, 2013: 47).

Feminist media research, on the other hand, helps in two ways. First, in analyzing the political image formation and personal identity framing that Saudi feminist activists posit online, as “feminist inquiries into social networking sites explore questions of gendered
self-representations… through this profile, they can construct a self as they wish through what they post” (McIntosh & Cuklanz, 2013: 273) as well as a focus on the rhetorical framing strategies and mobilization of Saudi feminist activists online, as “these spaces often address women’s issues in ways that other media overlook” and these sites, in particular, greatly foster observable participation (McIntosh & Cuklanz, 2013: 272) .

Second, media research of traditional media facilitates “the elucidation and elaboration of how dominant ideologies are supported through patterns of repetition and omission” (McIntosh & Cuklanz, 2013: 270) in terms of involuntary coverage of Saudi feminist activists and their chosen interactions with such media.

To further establish the appropriateness of these data analysis strategies, one can note that a similar method of data analysis was carried out by the prominent Saudi scholar Madawi al-Rasheed in her latest book titled Muted Modernists: The Struggle Over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia, which is unrelated to feminist activism and instead focused on Islamist modernist activism during the period of the Arab Spring, up until 2013 when the majority were imprisoned. In Muted Modernists, Al-Rasheed analyzed their “discourse and mobilization strategies” (Al-Rasheed 2015: 3) through a mix of discourse, literary, and narrative analysis of their textual activist sources, such as books, pamphlets, internet sources, and audio-visual and media appearances, and oral sources that included interviews with key activists and prominent supporters, as well as media research analysis of “new” social media (Al-Rasheed 2015: 24). The latter being key in understanding activism and developing a “nascent civil society” under Saudi
authoritarianism. Al-Rasheed asserts that, of all types of social media, “Twitter has become an important source for information and opinions” (Al-Rasheed 2015: 25).

Al-Rasheed characterizes her media analysis in a similar fashion to the way in which it will be carried out for this thesis: “images and statements by activists in court were circulated [on Twitter]” which she analyzed to observe their activism tactics and strategies, and states that she also “was able to track specific individuals, identify their political opinions, and interview them”, doing so in some cases through “direct messages on Twitter” when it was a more comfortable form of interview for activists (Al-Rasheed 2015: 25). Additionally, she “used Tweets as a source” when they were verifiable as accurate (Al-Rasheed 2015: 26).

This data analysis will be carried out and presented within a chronological, thematic order. The employment of discourse analysis will be used within all the chronological periods, whereas issue-oriented interviews and media research will be used primarily in the most chronologically recent periods of inquiry, i.e. those commonly referred to as the Arab Spring and post-Arab Spring. As such, this data analysis and its organization will entail tracing Saudi feminists’ claims and actions over time during and after the Arab Spring. The rationale for using a roughly chorological order as part of such a methodology is to showcase the changes in activists’ framing, whether their political images, personal identities, or rhetorical strategies used, as well as changes in their utilization and maneuvering of resources, structures, and events. This will secondarily showcase how these changes were influenced by both periodic events and discourses.
without and trends within, or in other words, their relation to the state and political, historical, or structural contexts.

This is ultimately in an effort to address the theoretical aim at stake, namely, to draw focus onto Saudi women activists’ political agency. It will also address the role of the Saudi state in shaping and constraining such agency, as well as the role of the “movement moment” and interactions and intersections with other movements, namely, HASM. Gaps in this chronology are simply incidental, due to the vast space that would be required to analyze the full chronology and a desire to thoroughly analyze a sample of such within this thesis.
Chapter 4: Seeing Structure:
Historical Background and Overview

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the question of women’s political agency here is addressed in the context of a particular authoritarian state. This state based its structural arrangements and legitimacy over time on specific conceptions of womanhood. As such, before addressing the question of political agency, it is important to show how historically the Saudi state bases its legitimacy on a specific conception of womanhood, what structures have formed as a result of this, as well as to set up for the following chapters which will discuss Saudi women’s agency in more contemporary periods. In this chapter, I will show the gendered dimension of and structural methods for the Saudi state and its responses to different legitimacy crises it faced in its history and how such is related to Saudi women in particular.

**Women and Wahhabi State Legitimacy**

This section will analyze the first stage of Saudi Arabia’s gendered nation. It will explore how, within this stage, a formulation of an “ideal” Saudi womanhood occurred. This will be shown as central to the masculine state’s gendered project of “religious nationalism” and a cornerstone of its legitimacy. This is because the “ideal” Saudi woman was a pious
Muslim woman and signified the idea of the Saudi nation’s exceptionalism, despite Saudi women’s actual public invisibility during this stage. This analysis corresponds to Nira Yuval-Davis’s claim that, “gender relations are crucial in understanding and analyzing the phenomena of nations and of nationalism” as her methodological aim of “interrelat[ing] gender relations and different dimensions of the nationalist project” (Yuval-Davis, 621).

According to Yuval-Davis, “it is the differential access of different collectives to the state that dictates the nature of the hegemonic national ethos in the society” (Yuval-Davis 1997: 622) and women, in particular, often reproduce nations biologically, culturally, and symbolically. And while Yuvul- Davis argued this reproduction often occurs in ways in which women are “hidden” in the theorizations and representations of nationhood (Yuval-Davis 1997: 623), in the context of Saudi Arabia, however, the theoretical role of women in nationhood is far from “hidden”. Instead, as Madawi al-Rasheed, a renowned feminist Saudi scholar, argues, starting from the early stages of Saudi Arabia’s nation formation: “gender relations and the status of women in Saudi Arabia became hostages to the political project of the state and its religious nationalism”; the first was by nature a contingent and evolving project, while the second was an unbounded vision, which drew on the divine and aspired to create the Kingdom of God on earth, in which women were the most visible [rather than hidden] signs” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 76).

Al-Rasheed traces this gendered idea of Saudi nationhood to the emergence of the “Wahhabi revival movement” that sought to transform Arabian society from tribal and
regional fragmentation, utilizing a unifying banner of religion and within a nation-state. This led to what she calls “religious nationalism”, which “chang[ed] the criteria according to which people belonged to community” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 72-73). This Wahhabi religious nationalism “invented an ‘ideology of order’ in an attempt to link religion and nation state. In this fusion of religion and nation, women were integrated as fundamental symbols” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 76). As a result, the state envisioned women as religious subjects without agency, their role in the nation being “at the service of the masculine religious state”. Saudi women are recognized in its legal codes and institutions strictly as the fundamental pillars of families, under the patriarchal authority of Saudi male citizens (Al-Rasheed 2013: 73). The most prominent legal manifestation of this, still present today, is the legal guardianship system established in Saudi Arabia, under which women cannot marry, travel, work, access healthcare, or study, without legal approval from a male relative. Other restrictive and discriminatory laws exist such as the ban on women’s driving.

Despite such legal subordination of Saudi women, the representation of Saudi womanhood was central to the idea of nation and the state’s legitimation because the religious nationalist representation of Saudi women as “ideal” religious subjects solidified their status as the source of “Saudi exceptionalism”. This Saudi exceptionalism was a “much-celebrated” state doctrine used to define the nation as distinguished and in superior opposition to not only polities of the past, but Arab states of the present and their secular nationalism (Al-Rasheed 2013: 73). This Saudi exceptionalism was furthered by the discovery of vast oil wealth and the import of cheap labor, making the exclusion of
women from the public sphere to be an “affordable luxury” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 281). This resulted in Saudi womanhood being “entangled with discourses about how precious and protected they are” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 281). Reflecting Sjoberg and Peet’s claim that “men and nations ‘protect’ women because that means they are ‘protecting’ the sense of state/nation” (Sjoberg & Peet 2011: 176), Saudi women’s positioning within the early Saudi nation was as members free from the “burdens” of agency within the nation, which their Saudi male counterparts and expatriate workers alike took on instead (Al-Rasheed 2013: 281).

Crucially, this meant that, in producing a “homogenous polity that imagines itself as having a unique common religious culture/sacred space, women were the cornerstone of differentiating the nation from others in its environs” (Al-Rasheed 73). This signifies the way in which the status of women is intricately connected to imaginings and ideas of nation, as “the ideal woman, therefore, [stood] among other symbols which define a national identity that is uniquely Saudi Arabian” which was nurtured in government statements, state policies and agencies, as well as in royal edicts and religious fatwas (Doumato, 33-34). In this way, despite the near public invisibility of women at the emergence and early stages of Saudi Arabia, the idea of a Saudi nation was nonetheless gendered. The formulation of the state and nation itself had its “legitimacy derived from the perpetuation of control over and exclusion of women, believed to threaten its integrity and morality” (Al-Rasheed, 75).
This national narrative constructed “acceptable” and “rejected” definitions of Saudi women and gender roles, where the pious Saudi woman was celebrated as the foundation of the nation, thus defining basic Saudi social order and expected state-society relations. This gendered construction of women within the nation “submerged all categories of women into an undifferentiated mass” (Al-Rasheed, 75) that must be willingly pious, restrictively regulated, and perpetually publically discussed “at all levels of public discourse” in ways that indicated anxiety over their status as the signifiers of the nation (Al-Rasheed, 75). As Doumato notes, this “gender ideology” surrounding Saudi women and the promotion of as “ideal” Muslim womanhood has “proven to be a dependable vehicle for the Saudi monarchy to play out the myths of national identity which underpin its legitimacy” (Abdelkarim 1999: 41). This is particularly so “during times of political instability” (Abdelkarim 1999: 45) and to stave off “disparate voices” and “negotiate between concerns about cultural erosion and the desire for change” (Abdelkarim 1999: 46). Here, it is evident that both Al-Rasheed and Doumato echo Yuval-Davis’ linkage of the religious nationalist narrative and project to women and gender relations in Saudi Arabia.

Such playing out of myths in times of political instability did not occur in an institutionalized manner until the 1960s. Prior to this period, the state was too fragile and oil had not yet been discovered. As such, resources to begin state-drive projects that utilized Saudi women, myths of their ideal womanhoods, and its reflection on the state, were not feasible. Instead, women remained for the most part invisible to the state as strictly “pious” religious subjects under the states’ newly-made religious nationalism.
The one exception to this came in 1928 with the creation of a committee that promoted commanding right and forbidding wrong in the Hijaz. It did not have an initial set goal of policing Saudi women and keeping them out of the public sphere, instead it was aimed to stave off a religiously zealous group of the Saudi army, called Ikhwan, as they were harassing pilgrims for what they perceived as un-Islamic practices and appearances (Mouline 2014: 129). From this, the committee evolved in its activities to be the “first institution” to focus on women in an effort to highlight the image of “Saudi exceptionalism” to its visiting Muslim pilgrims (Mouline 2014: 130). Still, while staving off the meddling Ikhwan meant that income from pilgrims were no longer jeopardized, this was during a period before the discovery of oil and thus the committee was limited in its resources and location and for the most part its extension to policing the “ideal” of Saudi womanhood in public “remained a futuristic project” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 60).

**Women and Developmental Legitimacy**

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Saudi state was presented with a new crisis. The rise of leftists and Arab nationalists both domestically and regionally constituted a threat to the state by making it look like a “backward” state (Vitalis 2007: 226). To counter this accusation, the Saudi state utilized its new oil revenues to enact widespread state-driven efforts for national development. In this section, I will show how women were instrumentalized and incorporated into such efforts so as to present a modern, developed face to the new Saudi nation and its monarchy. I will use the case of women education and employment as an example to show this.
In 1960, a royal decree was issued during King Saud’s reign and ushered forth by the then-chair of the Council of Ministers and later-king Faisal bin Abdulaziz. The decree announced the right of women to be educated (Al-Washmi 2009: 25). While often portrayed in official historiographies as the act of a “benevolent patriarch” seeking to ‘civilize’ his nation’s women, even in the face of opposition from the unruly objections of religious, backwards men, it was arguably a politically motivated act as the state was in contestation with nationhood and development discourses and measures prevalent in the neighboring Nasser’s Egypt, which had just overthrown a monarchical government that was not unlike Saudi Arabia’s monarch. However, in doing so, the Saudi state allocated power over women’s educational affairs to religious scholars (Al-Rasheed 2013: 39). Although it is partly true that this is often portrayed as a “concessionary move” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 39) by the Saudi state to the Department of Religious Guidance (Hamdan 2005: 44), the Saudi state was also motivated by and sought to counter Nasserist Socialist modernization through further institutionalizing and promoting its own Islamist modernization (Lacroix 2011: 17).

This was achieved through empowering defenders and signifiers of its religious nationalism, who in this cases were the recently immigrated Islamists from Egypt, Syria, and Iraq (Lacroix 2011: 17). Mana’ Al-Qattan is a significant example of this empowerment. Al-Qattan was an Egyptian member of Muslim Brotherhood. In 1953, he escaped from the oppression of Nasserist Egypt and moved to Saudi Arabia to work as a school teacher. In 1958, he became a lecturer in the newly founded Sharia college in
Riyadh. From there, he was quickly elevated to become the head of the Higher Judicial Institute where Sharia students could achieve their graduate degrees. In 1970, he and others helped to formulate the Educational Policy Document, where its Article 153 reads as following: “a girl’s education aims at giving her the correct Islamic education to enable her to be in life a successful housewife, an exemplary wife, and a good mother”\(^1\). As such, institutional control over Saudi women and girl’s education seemed an adequate measure to establish this Islamist developmental legitimacy, and this structural arrangement remained until 2002 (Hamdan 2005: 44).

Another form of the ‘ideal’ Saudi woman emerged in the form of the elite ‘Royal women’, that are portrayed as having a feminist agenda and positioned to develop their underdeveloped fellow Saudi women through various philanthropic initiatives, such as Queen Effat, wife of King Faisal (al-Rasheed 2013: 91), who also instated Dar al-Hanin in 1955 as the first private Saudi girl’s school and was the only Saudi woman to be called ‘Queen’. In contrast to this, at the height of the oil boom in the 1970s, this period marks the origin of the “image of an idle, educated [Saudi] woman, immersed in consumption and freed from the burdens of domesticity” which, “delay[ed] women assuming greater roles in society” (al-Rasheed 2013: 39). This is because the girls and women were increasingly educated but lacked opportunities of employment. This is counter to the assumption that increased women’s education will result in increased women’s employment, but is in line with understandings of reinter states as leading to less employment rates of women (Ross 2008: 107). This was so much so that the oil allowed

\(^1\) Article 153 of the Saudi Policy on Education
for the importation of Arab and Asian domestic workers as well which further led to “an
unusual situation emerged whereby elite educated but idle women had little participation
in the running of their households apart from managing a large number of servants” (Al-
Rasheed 2013: 103).

One of the reasons for the lack of women’s employment is that their male counterparts
were receiving their first-time wages and it was high enough to sufficiently meet the
needs of his family (Ross 2008: 112). Thus, most local commentaries in the 1960s, by
both men and women, did not associate education with being a step towards employment
or a career for women, instead it was a desired sign of prestige since it would acquire
them the ability to raise future men of the nation with proper ‘rujula’ (masculinity). This
was followed by commentaries in the 1970s that associated women’s education with
persevering the nation by making them more fit wives for educated Saudi men who had
increasingly married educated women from abroad (Al-Rasheed 2013: 102). The second
reason was that it was also not particularly feasible even if desired, since gendered
segregation was codified in Article 160 of the new employment law that banned mixed
workplaces. This made it illegal for women to work in the majority of workplaces of the
time, as segregated female-only spaces were not yet formulated on a wide scale (Le
Renard 2008: 614), with the exception of the proliferating educational institutions of this
period, which were the main place women gained segregated spaces to be employed in.

In taking such gendered steps, the state was again positing its modern image and
development-oriented approach through its increasing women’s inclusion in various
‘modern’ spaces, whereas policies of gendered segregation of these spaces can be understood as a measure to promote the state’s religious nationalism. Aside from such motivations, Le Renard finds “modern” reasons for such segregation that is commonly considered to persist only for religious purposes: first, she shows that such spaces and policies are only possible and remain so due to the “important precondition” of oil, since creating segregated spaces for each sex requires the expenditure of a large amount of money (Le Renard 2008: 613). Secondly, technologies such as phones, the internet, and videoconferencing have also facilitated the persistence of gendered segregation in educational and professional spaces (Le Renard 2008: 616). Thirdly, she argues that these segregated spaces did not always translate to markings of religious oppression of women, since they were gendered segregation rather than women’s segregation, where public and private spaces for women proliferated as a result, rather than the segregation resulting in only permitting men into public spaces whereas women remained in private spaces.

Women and the Religious Challenge of Legitimacy

In the 1980s, the Saudi State was faced with new kinds of challenges. Regionally, the Islamic Revolution in Iran started to question the credibility of Saudi Islamist claims. Domestically, the seizure of Mecca in 1979, and the rising of a new generation of Saudi Islamism (known as Sahwat) questioned certain aspects of the state’s modernization projects (Hegghammer & Lacroix 2007: 107). Responding to these challenges, the Saudi state decided to enhance its religiosity by allying itself with the Sahwat. This was mainly because the Sahwa group had their individual and intellectual roots in both Saudi
quietism, Salafism, and the Muslim Brotherhood (Lacroix 2011: 34) and were thus willing to be active in the social realm, while maintaining a quietism that would dictate their not posing political challenges like those who seized Mecca. The Saudi state followed suit with a symbolic nod to Islamism as well, as the official title of the king was changed from ‘His Majesty’ to ‘Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques’ in 1986.

The implication of this state choice on Saudi women was a weakening of their position in intellectual spaces. The 1970s were also marked by the growth of a relatively autonomous intelligentsia “from above” that fully included women. It gave rise to the labels and social demarcations of “muthaqqaﬂ”, “ilmaniyyun”, (Lacroix 2011: 17) and “hadathyyun” (Al-Haydar 2015: 23), i.e. intellectual, secularist, and modernizer, respectively, which were generally used interchangeably. This intellectual field and its participants was encouraged through an opening up of spaces from above in order to foster an important ally to the state, as an alternative to political participation, and more importantly, “assigning it the task of constructing a modern Saudi culture in line with the economic and social modernization the country was experiencing” which explains the intelligentsia’s focus on liberalizing society (Lacroix 2011: 18). The women participants in this class meant “a challenge to the tradition that confined them to the private sphere… the woman question achieved new prominence” (Lacroix 2011: 19). In this way, “the muthaqqaﬂ, herald of Saudi modernization, became the antithesis both of the bureaucrat and of the political activist” (Lacroix 2011: 19-20). However, in the 1980s, the Sahwat actively attacked these intellectual spaces, and aimed to impose its own views about the “ideal” Saudi women. The state enabled such by allowing them to maintain a continued
proliferation of women-related cassettes and fatwas that focused on reaffirming the “ideal” Saudi woman type as pious, modest, and the like.

This ‘Sahwa’ movement is crucial to note here because it produced and disseminated cultural tropes of Saudi women that would live on and reappear in societal debates for years to come, as well as are often evoked critically by liberal-leaning Saudi feminist activists. The most prominent of these being the following three: that Saudi women signify “exceptionalism” because unlike any other women they are privileged queens who receive the protection of religiously-minded Saudi men and need not leave the home as their needs are always met, that Saudi women are as precious as jewels, and like unwrapped candies they must remain covered lest they spoil or be subjected to outside desirers of their sweetness.

Despite such tropes, this moment also marked the emergence of Islamist feminists in the form of “celebrity” elite Islamist women preachers, as well as their increased employment in educational and religious spaces. These women were not merely acted upon by the Sahwa, but rather also maintained their own agency in female spaces and formulated their own Islamic feminist critiques. These critiques focused on society as influenced by the corrupting presence of Westernization and non-Saudi foreign expat women. They also focused on contrasting such with the ‘rightful’ Islamic religion and its positive relationship to the question of women. Most of such critiques appeared in their cultural productions of books, op-eds, and in lectures or meetings in educational and religious institutions.
This increased presence of Islamist women (alongside non-Islamist women) was further facilitated by the fact that the 1980s-1990s marked the start of the post-tafra or post-oil boom period. During this period, lower oil prices meant the adoption of Saudization as a state policy. As such, Saudi women began to replace Arab expat women, to the delight of Islamist women, as well as create incentive for a proliferation of further segregated spaces to accommodate an increasing presence of these working Saudi women, since they were less costly than hiring Saudi men. This led to high level of social mobility since there was less competition in these new women’s spaces and explains the emergence of “celebrity” Islamist women as well. Additionally, most religious settings also facilitated non-religious activities among these women, such as learning English, discussions on issues related to beauty, self-help, and simply being an occasion and space for socializing (Le Renard 2014: 136). The latter is the case because religious spaces allowed for a justified excuse to engage with others autonomously and to evade familial and marital obligations. For instance, paradoxically, the religious expectations of the Sahwa period meant that women could evade the social pressures regarding marriage by claiming their preoccupation with more important religious endeavors and their having gained power and importance in religious spaces.

Notwithstanding this more complicated picture of the Sahwa period, in the future, the memory of this period would be remembered and reproduced periodically in liberal intellectual and non-Islamist activist narratives as evidence of a real internal threat to their goals, as it shows the possibility of a “backward” time that must never be returned
to if Saudi Arabia is going to continue on its path towards modernity. This narrative would be further supported by an allocation of blame onto this Sahwa movement for encouraging young Saudis to join the Soviet-Afghan war where they either died in the fight or lived to continue careers in jihadism – despite that having been a Saudi and US initiated state policy of the time.

In stark contrast to the aforementioned Sahawi tropes of “ideal” Saudi women, and amidst the political crisis of the Gulf War and its accompanied suspension of ‘politics as usual’, the first group of 47 Saudi women conducted an organized protest for driving on November, 1990. Most of these activists were holders of PhDs, academics, and doctors who had benefited from the Saudization policy and first met and built their network from within the aforementioned spaces which that policy produced. This organized protest began with the women being taken out by their drivers, amounting to a group of 13 cars. They then stopped and had their drivers get out of their cars and took his place in protest. The Saudi government’s reaction was to detain them for a day or less. It also required them and their male guardians to sign pledges that they would never drive again.

This historical example acted as a powerful deterrent to any future Saudi feminist actions which only began to reappear in the 2000s. This incident and the response to it is often understood as yet another example of the persistent ‘triumps’ of religious authority in the face of Saudi liberal-leaning feminism in Saudi Arabia. This is particularly the case given that it seemed the Saudi state had allowed a high degree of backlash against Saudi

2 Examples of such include the writings and public interviews of Saudi feminist novelist Badryah El-Bishr and “The Sixth of November” by Saudi feminist activists Aisha Al-Mana and Hisaa Al-Shaeikh.
women to occur and thus implicitly empowered such religious actors and their authority. However, this is actually better understood as the ‘last (organized) hurrah’ by the Sahwa members of this period. This is because this event was also accompanied by similar levels of activism from the leaders of the state-adopted Sahwa movement, this time against the state and religious establishment for its allowed presence of US troops into Saudi Arabia for the Gulf War, which culminated into the ‘Buraidah uprising’. Since this meant their state-desired feature of abstaining from posing a political challenge no longer held true, the Saudi state pulled back its support of this movement and a crackdown on its members ensued, beginning in 1994.

This crackdown led to two significant outcomes. First, following their release, previous leading Sahwa members adopted quietist Islamism which would allow them to be co-opted back into the state rather than remain repressed. These later became relevant again in the 2000s when they made a reformist turn, rather than Sahwist, and began to attempt to engage in political activism again but on more inclusive or democratic grounds. Second, on the other hand, it resulted in the emergence of reactionary domestic terror attacks. Two attacks stand out as most prominent: National Guard Bombing of 1995 and the Khobar Tower Bombing in 1996. This resulted in a changed societal make-up that looked increasingly post-Sahwa. Additionally, these terrorist attacks, in turn, set off demands for political reform through various petitions and the formation of the unlicensed ‘Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights’. However, such efforts only ended in either arrest or exile. Some of these activists would remerge again in the 2000s,
and again during the Arab Spring, albeit with different ideological positions influenced by those periods, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

In terms of Saudi feminist activists, in the remaining of the 1990s, with the decline of the Sahwa period, the previously mentioned Saudization policy meant the continued influx of non-Islamist or liberal-leaning women into educational spaces. Although not quite similar to the aforementioned political organizations, community-based efforts began at this time and marked the start of Saudi feminist activists networking, of both the Islamist and liberal-leaning trends of thought. For instance, the ‘Sunday Women Group’ started in 1994 and would later include women who would continue on to symbolize the ‘old guard’ feminist activists, in addition to those who drove in November 1990. They would later promote and participate in women’s driving campaigns in the 2000s as well as women’s voting and running in municipal elections. In this way, this period led to the building of women’s networks and articulation of their ideas and desires that would later be some of the main sources of activists in the late 2000s.

**Women and the Human Right Legitimacy of the State**

After the attacks of September 11, the Saudi state was exposed to challenges from Western media and international human rights institutions. In response, a formulation of “modern” and “peaceful” Saudi womanhoods occurred. This will be shown in this section as part of a refashioned idea of nation, as part of the state’s gendered project of
“feminization”, and a cornerstone of its legitimacy following the conflict of 9/11. Also, the unacceptable “terrorist” Saudi womanhood will be examined and how its formulation is in violation of the idea of the Saudi nation.

While the gendered idea of Saudi nationhood and the emphasis on women as important for nationalist projects may have begun as religiously based, it later moved “towards a modernity” in which, again, “women became central” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 281). This necessitated that the “most masculine state… espouse its own feminization” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 294). The feminization of the Saudi state’s formulation of the nation meant “creat[ing] an ‘alternative modernity’, combining commitment to Islam with selective borrowing from what world modernity can offer” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 282). This feminization of the Saudi nation can be seen most prominently in King Abdullah’s reign, which came at a moment of “historical crisis” of both international and domestic conflict. This moment consisted of an international War on Terror campaign, Western scrutiny of Saudi religious fundamentalism, and domestic challenges to the Saudi state and reformations of nationhood by a growing number of Saudi women. This led to the Saudi state beginning an “add and stir” policy toward women in the public sphere and as a result was able to formulate a “modern” gendered idea of the Saudi nation.

The most prominent instances of such state measures was the appointment of the first female deputy minister of education in 2009 (Al-Omran 2015), followed by the “addition” of Princess Nora bint Abdulrahman University, the largest all-female university in the world, inaugurated in 2011 (Clary & Karlin 2011: 17), and the
appointment of 30 Saudi elite women to the Saudi Shura Council for the first time in 2013 (Al-Omran 2015).

Utilizing “one-dimensional views” of women as inherently peaceful (Charlesworth 2008: 357), the Saudi state portrayed the newly “acceptable” modern constructs of womanhood and public roles within the Saudi nation as a method of mediation of religious fundamentalism. As such, this feminization was in order to appease global pressures on the state, discourage domestic discontent, and disassociate the nation’s image from terrorism. Thus, as “the state endeavored to show a soft side by increasing the visibility of women” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 25), it also sought to restore the nation’s tarnished ethos of religious nationalism following the events of 9/11, and the numerous terrorist attacks that followed in various countries, including in Saudi Arabia itself. This is in line with what Sjoberg, Cooke, and Neal argued to be a “distinctive feature of terrorism in the twenty-first century [that] arose in response to 9/11: [where] many of the world’s largest states determined that terrorism could be fought against” and incorporated into national narratives and ideas of nationhood (Sjoberg, Cook, & Neal 2011: 12).

An example in which the nation was “feminized” was how Saudi women were granted gendered roles in the War on Terror efforts. As a result, Saudi women’s agency was “scripted in particular ways and [only allowed to] operate in specific sites” (Satterthwaite & Huckerby 2013: 46). Specifically, sites where it was deemed as “acceptably” serving the nation as “good” Muslim women with their “unique” ability to inculcate the pure meaning of Islam (Brown, 40). While evoking the “collective projection of a pure and
peaceful Other against which a violent male is constructed” (Charlesworth 2008: 357), the Saudi state also drew on a gendered logic of maternalism in its post-9/11 policies towards terrorism (Satterthwaite & Huckerby 2013: 37).

As part of their role as mothers, Saudi women were expected to educate children “in moderate Islam, recognizing early warning signals of radicalization, and protecting the rest of society from terror” and conflict (Al-Rasheed 2013: 25). They were made publically visible in the National Dialogue Forums on terrorism and “became the gateways to controlling the zeal of young radical men” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 25). As further part of the Saudi states’ “mixed methods… of counter- and de-radicalization” (Satterthwaite & Huckerby 2013: 40), Saudi women were also granted state-initiated “sponsorship to become preachers” (Brown 2013: 45). Additionally, the Ministry of Education provided programs centered around teaching religious tolerance for Islamist studies female teachers and Saudi women were also incorporated into the non-governmental, but state-supported, campaign titled ‘Al-Sakkinah – Tranquility Campaign’ against fundamentalism online in 2006 (Satterthwaite & Huckerby 2013: 45).

Also part of the state-driven War on Terror efforts was how Saudi womanhood was reformulated as the nation’s “proof of modernity” and further “acceptable” womanhoods began to emerge, particularly in the economic and professional fields. Moving away from Saudi womanhood being visible strictly in forms of piety (Al-Rasheed 2013: 134), the idea of nation began to include “stories about successful businesswomen”, (Al-Rasheed 2013: 25) who often were liberal-leaning and “critical of religious restrictions on their
lives” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 35). Their public appearances were “to confirm the
exceptionalism of individual women amidst a persistent alleged ‘woman problem’… [and
to demonstrate the nation’s female] agencies of enlightenment, modernity, and progress”
(Al-Rasheed 2013: 25). This worked to “demystify Saudi society”, link Saudi nationhood
to modernity to distance it from religious fundamentalism, and satisfy the critical post-
9/11 international community. King Abdullah fueled this starting in 2005 through his
public meetings with various elite women, promoting their success stories.

Also, “for the first time in [Saudi] history, photos of the king and the Crown prince
surrounded by women circulated in the Saudi press; [which was] interpreted as a sign of
the current leadership’s support for women” and thus increased women’s legitimacy as
public members of the Saudi nation (Al-Rasheed 2013: 28). A clear example of the
linkage between a “modern” idea of nation and women was the “orchestrated speeches
[by King Abdullah] about women” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 28). The most circulated speech
being one in which he praises Saudi women’s vital role in the Shura Council specifically,
and the nation generally. In this speech, he states the undeniability of their importance as
the nation’s “mothers, daughters, and wives”, affirming Saudi women’s gendered role as
reproducers of the nation in his stating: “I am created from a woman” (Al-Rasheed 2013:
28).

As the above examples show, in combination with adopting the War on Terror, a sort of
‘market feminism’ agenda was also incorporated into the state at this time. This
necessitated two things: a changed relation between the state and its women citizenry
where the state became the central facilitator of her liberation from cultural restrictions of the private realm and public restrictions faced from the religiously-included, as well as an increased restructuring of power arrangements that had been in place since the Sahwa in which women’s affairs were largely left to the religiously-inclined, in such a way that they gradually became replaced with the state. This can also be seen as motivated by the fact that: “the discourse that holds radical religious scholars responsible for the exclusion of women suited the state at a time when it was aspiring towards greater control of the religious field for the completely different purpose of fighting terrorism and the appeal of radical religious thinking” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 147). And, as a result, “as the state [embarked] on limiting the interference of religious scholars and institutions in public affairs, it has found in elite women a source of support. The interests of this group of women coincide with those of the state at this historical moment” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 147).

Such coinciding motivations and resultant processes most clearly began in 2002, when Saudi women’s education was placed under the Ministry of Education, rather than the General Presidency for Girls’ Education (Al-Rasheed 2013: 147). This first move was facilitated by the negative press that conservatives received following the international and domestic terrorist attacks, as well as an incident that shocked the Saudi public, where a fire in a girl’s school in Mecca resulted in 15 deaths and 50 injuries, because the religious police did not allow the girls to escape the school, nor the firefighters to enter in to rescue them, since they were uncovered (BBC News 2012). Following this, in 2008, efforts to increase women’s higher education were implemented through the
establishment of Princess Nura University for Girls, which would be a women-only university that would open two years later and could accommodate 40,000 students (Reuters 2008), rather than being a female division of a male university with much less resources. In the following year, in 2009, the first non-segregated university opened as well, despite objections from the religiously-inclined. In the same year, Nora al-Fayez was appointed the first female deputy minister of education (The Guardian 2009). By 2010, twenty-five percent of Saudi students on the King Abdullah scholarships to study abroad were women (Al-Arabiya 2015).

Starting in 2000, Saudi women were employed in highly visible media positions such as presenters, commentators, and panelists. Numerous businesswomen groups and forms emerged that continuously focus on women acquiring commercial licenses, gaining access to leadership positions in businesses, travelling without a guardian in order to meet business-related needs, and general further participation in the private sector for women (Al-Rasheed 2013: 142). On the one hand, the state institutionalized such efforts with its instating its own the Khadija bint Khuwaylid Business Women’s Center in 2004, named after the wife of the Prophet who was a well-known businesswoman. Most of these women feared societal backlash and found the state to be the most accommodating for their efforts (Al-Rasheed 2013: 143-144). On the other hand, most of these demands were met for these women within economic spaces under the state’s further Saudization policy, where employing women in the private sector now became increasingly necessary due to population growth, lower oil prices, and their wages being less expensive to hire than
non-Saudi women. Such state aims were explicitly relayed to the Saudi public by the then-Minister of Labor, Ghazi al-Gosaybi throughout 2004-2006.3

However, elite and upper class businesswomen were not accommodated in the same manner as middle to lower class women’s jobs who were targeted in proposals for lingerie shops being staffed only by women employees in 2005 and proposals for women working as cashiers in 2010. Because these would effect a larger segment of society, both of these proposals led to debates surrounding the requirements of gendered segregation and as to whether women-only spaces within the lingerie shops should be designated and whether women should work as cashiers at all since they would inevitably be subjected to ‘ikhtilat’ or mixing of the sexes. Furthermore, a campaign by a Saudi feminist activist, Reem Asaad, started in 2008 which called for a boycott of lingerie stores staffed by men, as well as worked with the government to train women in preparation for retail work in the hopes that they would replace these shops’ staff in the future. While these would not be resolved till the next period of King Abdullah’s reign, the state did react by issuing a royal decree that would reign in issuances of fatwas, as most objections to women’s working came in this form, and restricted acceptable fatwas to the those issued or authorized by its Higher Council of Ulama (Thompson 2014: 117).

In contrast, dissent from feminist Islamists were largely sidelined during this time as much as the religious establishment and those who were religiously-inclined, whether shaiks, lecturers, and the like. The most prominent example of this sidelining came in

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3 This can be seen in various statements issued by the Minister in archived Saudi newspapers during 2004-2006, such as Al-Sharq and Al-Awwad.
2010, when 700 female Islamists produced a petition against the Khadija bint Khuwaylid Business Women’s Center, even as it was led by the king’s daughter Princess Adelah. The objections within this petition were concerned with the center’s focus on non-segregated forms and workspaces, its negative portrayal of non-working mothers, its evading issues of sexual harassment in the workplace for women, as well as its inclusion of ‘foreign agents’, like the wife of the American ambassador, in some of its events⁴.

Similar letters and statements were also issued by smaller groups of feminist Islamists as well as prominent “celebrity” preachers (Al-Rasheed 2013: 162-163).

While it is sometimes argued that the state began to “allow” gender to become a central topic of debate during this period (Al-Rasheed 2013: 153) so as to stave off calls for political reform, it is more likely that this was a partial motivation. Furthermore, it also coincided with the fact that the venues in which Saudis were able to witness and debate such changes were increasing during this time with the internet, which initially arrived in 1999 and spread through the country starting in 2000 with an estimated 500,000 internet users that grew dramatically to 4.7 million by 2007 (Boucek 2008) and then jumped to as high as 9.8 million by 2010.

Whether Saudi women were held as peaceful mothers and educators of terrorist males, or empowered professionals and reproducers of Saudi nationhood, both gendered positionings within the idea of nation represented what Elshtain calls a “nasty historic bargain” (Charlesworth 2008: 358). This bargain consists of providing women a platform

⁴ The petition’s text is archived by Lojainiat, while originally found in archives of Al-Moslem website.
and “appeal to powerful men”, yet ultimately “undermines their [being] taken seriously as political players” in the eyes of the state (Charlesworth 2008: 358). For this reason, opposite of such ‘acceptable’ gendered roles for ‘modern’ Saudi women were the ‘unacceptable’ forms of Saudi womanhood that could not be ‘taken seriously’ or incorporated into the newly defined ‘modern’ Saudi nation. Namely, Saudi feminist activists that attempted to work outside the state or challenge it outright. This will be the focus of the subsequent chapters.

**Conclusion**

This chapter served two functions. First, it served as a historical background of state-women relations in Saudi Arabia. This background is important to understand the significance of Saudi women’s political activism that occurs later on. Second, it serves as a detailed illustration of the role of women in the legitimacy of the Saudi state. Saudi women’s agency does exist throughout these periods. However, this was not included since the aim of this chapter is to focus on ‘seeing structure’ that within which the activists under study here emerged and that also acted as historical precursor of the “movement moment” to be studied in this thesis as well.
Chapter 5: Seeing Agency I:
The Historical Roots of Saudi Feminist Political Agency

**Introduction**

The following two chapters present the culmination of data collection and analysis, the results and findings of such, as well as primary and secondary research sources and is aimed to answer the central question posed in this thesis: given that the agency of Saudi feminist movements has held an unclear status as absent or passive due to religion and society, or as inevitably mere functions of the state, whether through patriarchal bargaining or as tools of legitimacy or distractions from political reform, are Saudi feminists in possession of any such agency at all? What empowering and creative ways have they tried to posit such agency? Under what conditions was this possible?

As previously reviewed, the literature on Saudi women offers answers to such questions along the following lines: statist answers that pose Saudi feminism is only a benevolent top-down, state feminism with absent actors from below or Orientalist and modern answers that hold Saudi feminism as only a site of oppressed women subjected to religion or various fierce culture wars. Whereas more sympathetic answers might acknowledge Saudi feminist agency but ultimately designate it as being inescapably a function of the
state, whether as legitimizers or patriarchic bargainers, as well as trapped in the state’s role of being a distracting topic of debate instead of contributive to more ‘serious’ matters of political reform, which is held as dichotomous to Saudi feminism. This chapter will work to respond to the last of these answers regarding Saudi feminism and Saudi women’s political agency, which is arguably the strongest posed of these characterizations. In doing so, it will also indirectly counter the weaker answers as well.

**Analytical Framework**

The present two chapters will do so by, first, utilizing “theoretical extension” to draw on Zakia Salime’s theory of “movement moments” in her *Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights and Sharia Law in Morocco*. This is due to its applicability to the findings here concerning Saudi feminism and that it is necessary and useful in terms of its explanatory power to answer the central research question.

Zakia Salime proposes a theory of women’s movements in Morocco that has two main characteristics. The first characteristic is a focus on interdependency and fluid identifications, rather than polarization and binaries. The second characteristic is a focus on “movement moments” that incorporate historical, cultural, and political, contingencies and signify “turning points” (Salime 2011: Loc 278) in nonlinear, contradictory trajectories. While most literature views Islamist and feminist women’s movements as a story of polarized opposites, Salime aimed to problematize this view (Salime 2011: Loc
168) by exploring their “interdependent trajectories” (Salime 2011: Loc 187) and argue for studying them “relationally”, rather than comparatively (Salime 2011: Loc 187). This study would be conducted with a focus on interdependency and dialectic exchanges (Salime 2011: Loc 147) resulting in mutually influenced movements, across various “moments”. The emphasis on interdependency is in an effort to argue against social movement literature (Salime 2011: 187) that maintains reductionist binaries of women’s mobilization in the Middle East. Where Salime focused on critiquing binaries of feminism versus fundamentalism, this thesis critiques binaries and dichotomies between Saudi feminist movements and other Saudi activist movements in terms of political agency and the supposed lack thereof in Saudi feminist movements.

Additionally, the emphasis on “moments” or event-based conjunctures, in this case the Arab Spring, is to argue against social movement theory literature’s tendency to simply understand mobilization and its results as the products of structural opportunities and constraints existing outside of the movements themselves (Salime 2011: Loc 278). This is in line with emerging directions in social movement theory literature, particularly as it is applied to grassroots movements in the MENA. For instance, such trends are increasingly turning away from the classical and structural and instead adopting more nuanced approaches of “orienting devices” such as the concept of contention, as well as valuing informal and interpersonal networks as central to mobilization (Beinin 2016: 8).

In doing so, my response will fill a gap that exists on Saudi feminism and it will also move away from simply holding up ‘successful’ professional Saudi women to counter
narratives of her lack of agency, which ultimately only asserts a sort of modern ‘exceptionalism’, and instead situate her agency as part of a complex fabric of Saudi political action in the form of activism, alliances, mobilizations, and affected with “movement moments”. Furthermore, this will fill a gap in the literature where the most prominent scholars on Saudi feminism may have instead allocated instances of Saudi feminisms to a secondary status in the political realm, despite such an allocation being inaccurate or unjustified as will be shown in these following two chapters.

**Saudi Arabia in 2003-2010: The Historical Roots of Saudi Feminist’s Political Agency**

As previously explored, amidst the events of the 1990s, whether the women’s driving protest, the Sahwists ‘Buraidah uprising’, the domestic terrorist attacks, or the state repression, a growing space for women to come in contact with like-minded women they would not have contact with otherwise was underway. This firstly occurred as a result of women’s activism in itself, as their mutual experiences and interactions through activism facilitated such networks. For instance, according to activists of the November 1990 protest for women’s driving like Aisha al-Mana and Fawzia al-Bakr: “every year, nearly four dozen Saudi women get together for a reunion” (Murphy 2008) of their participation in this protest. Later, both of these activists were also involved in the ‘Women2Drive’ campaign of 2011-2012. However, al-Bakr chose not to join the ‘October 26’ campaign because “she claims that she fulfilled her role in 1990, and that this responsibility has
been passed on to the new generation” (Al-Monitor 2013).

Secondly, such networks most prominently, although not exclusively, developed in educational spaces, particularly with the state’s increased commitment to the Saudization policy due to the economic circumstances of the time. This marked the start of Saudi feminist activists networking, of both the Islamist and liberal-leaning trends of thought. One particular example of this, which is also relevant to the Arab Spring period, is the Sunday Women Group started in 1994 (Al-Fassi 2014). This group included women who would continue on to symbolize the ‘old guard’ feminist activists, in addition to those who drove in November 1990, and they would later promote and participate in women’s driving campaigns in the 2000s as well as women’s voting and running in municipal elections.

Al-Fassi, who would later be a founding member of the ‘Baladi’ campaign for women’s participation and voting in municipal elections as well as the ‘October 26’ driving campaign, explained that “the objective was to create a forum to exchange knowledge and discuss ideas” (Al-Fassi 2014: 242). Writing in 2014, she stated that the group meets on the last Sunday of every month and has around 250 core members. These women were from different backgrounds and have extended beyond being only academics to include career women, housewives, and students. The group is “leaderless” but held a board of ten women and represents “the oldest continuous group of its kind in the country” (Al-Fassi 2014: 242). In this group, the women hold a seminar with a presentation or paper presented by one of the members. Some of these topics included “violence, civil society,

Additionally, as al-Fassi describes, “the SWG became our voice, an intellectual social forum where we exchange ideas and hopes, share activism, and theorize for women’s rights in the country” (Al-Fassi 2014: 243). This led to the building of women’s networks and articulation of their ideas and desires that would later be some of the main sources of activists in the late 2000s. This is evidenced by how al-Fassi linked this group to the ‘Baladi’ campaign which began in 2004 in stating that the group “demanded women’s participation in the 2005 and 2011 municipal elections” (Al-Fassi 2014: 243).

While the aforementioned marks how one instance of activism, i.e. the driving protest of November 1990, and an increase in loose relations to form among Saudi women facilitated community-based efforts, the first prominent examples of Saudi women’s political agency began in the early 2000s. This can be seen in two instances: women joining in general political petitions and their associated political activists, as well as the issuance of their own petitions.

Three factors or roots of these examples will be covered in this section. First is the factor of activists of other trends, specifically the reformist trend, a mix of ex-Sahwists, libro-Islamists, and human rights activists. This factor is relevant because these feminist acts of contention were a product of complex networks and webs of activists of various inclinations that formed in this period. They cannot be understood as separate from such, particularly since these intersections will grow and peak during the Arab Spring, which will be discussed in the following section. Second, it will also necessitate discussing the
factor of Saudi activists’ rise in their use of new technologies, like the internet’s new advent of blogs in the mid to late 2000s. The third factor to be highlighted is the emergence of a new grievance group as result of the state’s so-called counterterrorism and repression of Islamist-leaning individuals in the 2000s. This is crucial for understanding women’s political contentions of Islamist backgrounds, but, as will be shown in the following section, it is relevant for understanding Saudi women activists of non-Islamist backgrounds as well. These factors are not neatly distinct from each other, rather, they all worked to facilitate the roots of Saudi women’s political agency that will facilitate, as will be argued, how it peaked in terms of visibility during the Arab Spring.

1) Saudi Women’s Political Agency and the 2000s Reformist Activist Movements

Although the 1990s domestic terrorism attacks were influential on Saudi society, it was the attacks of September 11, 2001 which proved most influential because it set off structural changes in the form of a mix of repression and internal restructuring by the Saudi state and a change in its definition of nationhood. This ‘from above’ reaction was further solidified by a ‘from below’ reaction which included what was called in retrospect a ‘Riyadh Spring’ and ‘petition industry’ (Al-Rasheed 2015: 34) and domestic attacks on various compounds and bombings throughout 2003 to 2004. As will be discussed below, the ‘from below’ reformist reaction were not exclusively male activist endeavors, although Saudi men felt the brunt of the subsequent crackdowns, as many women also participated and signed these petitions and were included in their stated political projects.
As Gause III argues, “taking advantage of the international spotlight”, a coalition of moderate Islamists, some affiliated with the small Saudi Muslim Brotherhood, as well as liberals, formed a coalition in January 2003 and issued a petition titled ‘A Vision for the Present and the Future of the Country’ to Crown Prince Abdullah (Haykel, Hegghammer, & Lacroix 2015: 22). This was also facilitated by the fact that many of the aforementioned activists arrested in the 1990s were again released by the late 1990s and early 2000s (ICG 2004: 7). It called for an elected Shura Council with real legislative powers, elected provincial assemblies, freedom of expression, political organization, and a larger role for women in public life. It also critiqued the religious establishment for its “central role in policing public discourse” (Haykel, Hegghammer, & Lacroix 2015: 22).

Another petition was issued by Saudi Shia which reiterated this group’s earlier petition of 1991. Following this, in September, “over three hundred Saudis, many involved in the January ‘Vision’ petition, presented a sharper call for political reform” in the form of a petition titled ‘In Defense of the Nation’ which connected the political violence in Saudi Arabia to a lack of political participation (Haykel, Hegghammer, & Lacroix 2015: 22).

In December, another petition was issued “from the same political trend”, signed by 106 Saudis, and was titled ‘Constitutional Reform First’. It called for a specific change in the political system to a constitutional monarchy, as well as freedom of expression, political organization, and elected institutions (Haykel, Hegghammer, & Lacroix 2015: 22). It also repeated the claim in the September petition which linked political violence with a lack of political opportunity and participation and “added that the country’s religious
education system also encouraged extremism” (Haykel, Hegghammer, & Lacroix 2015: 22).

What is often overlooked is that, as Gause III astutely notes, this “petition fever” of the 2000s was initially reacted to by the Crown Prince Abdullah by “publically receiv[ing] the organizers of both the January ‘Vision’ petition and the April Shia petition” (Haykel, Hegghammer, & Lacroix 2015: 22). Despite these signs of accommodation from the state, the reformists grew “frustrated with the slow pace of change” and in December 2003 heightened their demands to include a three-year process to draft and adopt a constitution. At the same time, “the regime also signaled the limits of its tolerance for calls for political reform, arresting four of the organizers of the ‘Constitutional Reform First’ petition in March 2004 who “triggered regime fears that the initial steps toward a political party were being taken” (Haykel, Hegghammer, & Lacroix 2015: 22-23). This reflected that, “though ordered by Nayef, these arrests were made possible by Abdullah’s change of direction because of his exasperation at the radicalization of Islamo-liberal demands” (Lacroix 2011: 248).

While al-Rasheed does not mention the initial meeting, Gause III cites that he obtained information of this episode from the activists themselves and can also be found in one of the activist’s memoirs titled “Prisoner 32” (Tayeb 2011). Al-Rasheed mentions that, when King Abdullah became king in 2005, he pardoned several constitutional reformers who had been imprisoned by the Interior Ministry following the circulation of reformist petitions in the 2000s. She also highlights that their release was dependent on their

Upon further analysis of these petitions, it was found that women participated in such political petitions. For instance, the Saudi Shia petition titled ‘Partners in the Nation’ of 2003 signed by around 300, included 24 women signatories (Bintjbeil 2003). Additionally, “more than 300 women” signed the December 2003 petition, which “included some [reforms] specific to women” (Aarts and Nonneman 2005: 247). At the same time in 2003, Saudi feminist activists called for a Council for Women’s Affairs to improve “the legal and social status of women in the kingdom” (Al-Jazeera 2003). This call came in the form of a petition that was signed by over 300 women, most of which were “college students, muthaqafat (intellectuals), and employees of various parts of the kingdom” (Al-Jazeera 2003).

This petition held eight demands, most notably, full recognition of women without the need of legal guardian. The petition stated that “women are in need of being granted her legitimate (shar’i) and civil right to education, employment, health care without the requirement of a guardian’s approval… including preserving her right after death to inheritance as equal to men” (Al-Jazeera 2003). It also called for required education for girls and boys, an increase in fields of study for women, an opening of fields of work without exception to women, a correcting of negative stereotypes of women through media campaigns, equal treatment of Saudi women who marry non-Saudi men and their children to Saudi men who marry non-Saudi women. Furthermore, they called for “opening doors to women in ministries and government institutions” as well as the
appointment of women in leadership positions. More importantly, and evidence of the
influence of the ‘Riyadh Spring’ on these Saudi activists, their petition also made an
unprecedented call by Saudi women for “allowing the formation of civil society
institutions, whether associations, unions, or cultural and scientific clubs… and
encouraging women to join in such” (Al-Jazeera 2003).

This is also the case of a petition issued in February 2007 that called for constitutional
monarchism and declared itself as an extension of the aforementioned ‘Vision’ petition.
This petition was titled ‘On The Path of Constitutional Monarchy, the Country of Islamic
Constitution, the Country of Justice and Shura’ and also included female signatories.
Also at this same time, Saudi feminist activists started the new Association for Protecting
and Defending Women’s Rights”, which was started by Wajeha al-Huwaider, Fawzia al-
Ayouni, and Ebtihal Mubarak. The Association had a number of leagues, each addressing
a particular issue related to Saudi women. The “first action” produced by this association
came in 2007 and was a petition signed by 1,100 women calling for “the right to drive”.
These signatures were collected by these activists “online and at shopping centers” (Gulf
News 2007). This was preceded by a one-woman march in 2006 with a sign that simply
stated “give women their rights” (Muravchik 2013), 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.

This association was announced just after news of jail sentences against Saudi reformists
Abdullah al-Hamid and Isa al-Hamid was known. They were charged for their
participation in the first protest held for political prisoners by Saudi Islamist women.

Additionally, al-Hamid was also an activist colleague of al-Ayouni’s husband, Ali al-Dumaini. He, too, was arrested in 2003 following his participation in the petitions of the early 2000s. His arrest was called ‘the case of the three reformists’, in which himself, Abdullah al-Hamid, and Matrouk al-Faleh were all arrested following their ‘Constitutional Reform First’ petition.

Sultan al-Jumairi cites how al-Dumaini recalled his wife’s involvement and support in his activist struggles for constitutional monarchy during this period, particularly when he was in jail (Al-Jumairi 2013). For instance, just as al-Ayouni had used media sources like the Agence France-Presse to spread word of the women’s driving petition, she also used it to mobilize for the case of ‘the three reformists’ arrests, including her husband’s, and highlight the injustice of it in stating, “they don’t even know what their charges are”. She was also part of a petition by the Arab Human Rights Association that called for his release in 2004 (ACHR). Additionally, in recounting his early leftist activism, al-Dumaini says that the political activism of his wife, Fawzia al-Ayouni, also included her joining him in a protest for the Palestinian Intifada, in which he asked her not to participate out of fear of repercussions from the state, to which she replied “we are not more valuable than the Palestinian women”, indicating that she was intent to continue such activism (Al-Jumairi 2013).

Interestingly, further evidences of such early linkages, between feminist activists and the political, are also apparent in al-Ayouni’s penned letter to the Saudi King. This is
significant to show the inklings or roots of interdependences between these two movements and will assist in an attempt to problematize the view of these women’s agency through activism as separate from ‘political’ activism in the remains of this thesis.

In this letter, al-Ayouni links the state’s arrest of her reformist husband to the social and religious constraints on her young daughter in school as being one in the same system. She starts this line of argument by first clarifying that she is for all religious sects’ freedom of speech, but objects to how one is favored over others by the state. She evokes the memory of the first time she saw her husband after he’d been in jail for five months and explains that the injustice he saw reminded her of the injustice women face in Saudi Arabia, specifically her own daughter at school. She hints that the culprit of such are sahwists who the state gave reign over such institutions that affect women.

Specifically, she points to “the strict and extreme” as holding most influence in podiums and institutions. She defines them as “those who exclude others’ opinions” and links the absence of freedom, i.e. political opportunity, to the emergence of domestic armed violence against Saudi society and state, and as experienced at a smaller scale by her daughter in school. Furthermore, she also claims that, “if the doors were open for freedom of expression, for forming civil society associations, Fuqah’a of other Islamic schools, moderates from the same Islamic school”, all of which were also these reformists’ demands, “then this movement (referring to ‘the strict’) would not hold the illusion that it is right nor would it be able to have such an influence on the youth because it would be exposed to other sects and movements. This, in turn, would encourage intellectual and cultural dialogue and encourage acceptances of Others and the Shaf’i
saying that ‘my opinion is right, but may hold a mistake, and the opinion of others although a mistake, might still hold a truth’.”

Such a position can also be seen among the reformists, for example, in their petition titled ‘In Defense of the Nation’. Not only did these reformists draw a causal link between violence and a lack of political participation. They also link it to the “monopoly held by ‘those who are fundamentally unable to engage in dialogue with others’” over national discourse, which Gause III understands as to mean “a not-so-veiled reference to those in the official and opposition Salafi trends who opposed more secular trends”. This, too, echoes al-Ayouni’s reasoning (Haykel, Hegghammer, & Lacroix 2015: 22). Similarly, she listed the need for structural changes at the social level to be necessary for actors like teachers, professors, and preachers to counter “the last twenty years” of cassettes, pamphlets, and the like, an indirect critique of the influence of the Sahwa on shaping Saudi women’s agency. Yet, to support this, she also quotes her reformist husband who similarly links the emergence of political violence to the monopoly of a single Fiqh understanding from one of the four Islamic schools (Al-Ayouni 2005). Furthermore, she still concluded that the state is nonetheless responsible in that it is not adhering to its international and Arab human rights treaties that assure freedom of expression. She asks: “how can injustice befall humans in their nations? How can a smile return when there is a war on free speech and the opinion of others?” (al-Ayouni 2005).

This evidences two points, the first being that there was a similar exchange of ideas and tactics between reformist and women’s activists, rather than them acting as dichotomous
ends of activism, where the former held political agency and the later did not and that is
the end of the story. And, second, it shows that social hierarchies, relationships, and
power struggles are a constraint on agency and activism in general; this is not merely a
viewpoint of women activists, but is also a function of rivalries between forces in society
as well, which authors such as al-Rasheed do not entirely account for in their
characterizations of women’s activists as bargaining with the state by focusing on the
social because “authoritarian states need women as allies against men who challenge the
state” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 21) and “women need authoritarian states more than men do”
(Al-Rasheed 2013: 279).

However, it is also prudent to note that, while reformists find such social actors to be
“fundamentally” exclusionary, al-Ayouni focuses on structural constraints in the social,
and these ‘strict’ actors in particular, with a bit more extremity. She goes a bit further in
hinting that violence may also be intrinsically symptomatic of their points of view, not
only symptomic of their monopoly over spaces of expression. This can be seen in how
she states, “while I view terrorism as complex phenomena that has numerous causes that
are intellectual, behavioral, political, and social, all mixed together with internal and
external factors as well like the war in Afghanistan and American and Israeli injustices in
both the Arab and Islamic worlds. Nonetheless, these strict and extreme actors reach the
level of terrorism in our country have had the luxury of plenty of free space”, meaning
that, these actors are inherently violent because even when they have enough free space
they still produce violence.
This trend in thought seems to also extend to other women activists of this period, specifically those of a more liberal-leaning perspective. In 2008, al-Huwaider wrote an article titled “if polygamy were part of sharia, then it would have been given to women” (Aafaq 2008). In countering calls for encouraging men in Northern Saudi Arabia to marry a second wife to combat spinsterhood, al-Huwaider faults unnatural gender segregation and the male guardian as the cause and asserted that Arab women before Islam had multiple relations with men and that it was permissible (Aafaq). Also, in a noticeably self-Orientalist manner, she frequently speaks of her feminism as a product of her studies abroad and also points to how she sent her sons to boarding school in Virginia: “I sent them there because I do not want them to grow up to be typical Saudi men” (Washington Post). Similarly, she made less than tolerant statements against the veil like “we are not criminals to hide our faces” (Hes Press 2010) and became known for stating, “spinsterhood is a thousand times better than marrying a man from this desperate East” (Al-Huwaider 2004), in which she surveys various parts of the Arab World and questions Arab men’s virility.

Even if she held the state as responsible and held politically critical stances, this approach had a noticeable effect on the nature of her activism within the Women’s Association and the degree of political agency it posited. For instance, among her campaign priorities were a series of “video campaigns” against the guardianship laws, as well as child marriage and polygamy. These campaigns were important given that they were often initiated based on cases, such as “on behalf of an 8-year-old girl who was married off to a 50-year-old man. I posted a video on YouTube against child marriages, showing little
girls and teenagers voicing their refusal to be child brides. The video was covered by local female writers, then picked up by CNN. This campaign terminated that marriage, and the little girl is free” (Al-Huwaider 2009). However, al-Huwaider, perhaps more than al-Ayouni, tended to use such hot topics and discussed them in such a way that only highlighted the social, rather than the religious, as the structural restraint of women’s agency in such situations. This was not the most tactful move, as it tends to alienate those that could be potential supporters of the campaigns. This is apparent in al-Huwaider’s admission that one fault of her early petitioning for women’s driving was that it was directed only to women, rather than reaching out for constituencies beyond that (MEMRI). Additionally, the petition asks women who are in opposition to their calls “to please keep your opinions to yourselves and do not spread your feelings of rejection and excuses between other women” (AAfaq 2007).

2) Saudi Women’s Political Agency and New Technologies of the 2000s

Many of these reformist activists were released and later arrested in 2007-2008, whether for participating in a women’s protest, to be discussed in the following section, as was the case with al-Hamid. Or, as part of the case of “Jeddah reformists” in 2007, in which 16 activists were arrested (some were later released). Their arrest came as they planned to start a human rights association through which they’d call for reform. Later, in 2009, this idea was realized through the founding of Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association. This latter case regarding the “Jeddah reformists” soon became high-profile as it included
a lengthy and tiresome 35 court sessions and due to the resultant joint sentencings issued of 228 years in jail in December 2011. This was met with wide condemnation on what was then a very active Saudi Twitter, particularly in light of the sentence being announced at the start of the Arab Spring. Individually, the reformists received various charges and sentences based on their individual oppositional activities, some were sentences to spreading incitement against the government, while seven others, such as al-Mukhtar al-Hashimi, were charged with money-laundering for their having charity for Iraqis following the war of 2003 and despite the Minister of Culture and Information having issued a public letter of appreciation for their doing so in the past and acknowledgement that it was done “in cooperation with Saudi TV on its channel 1 and 2”, i.e. the state’s channels, and in accordance with “official concern of Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz for the success of this campaign”.

This case also marked the instance in which these veteran activists were met with support from new activists that were making use of new technologies such as blogging, where previously they were limited to email. Most prominently, Fuad al-Farhan came out in support of these reformists and against the state’s attempt to associate them with terrorism or calls for violence in December 2007. Before his arrest, he emailed fellow bloggers that: “I wrote about the political prisoners here in Saudi Arabia and they think I'm running an online campaign promoting their issue” (CNN 2008). This also marked another intersection in which Ebtihal Mubarak, then-journalist at Arab News and co-founder of the association for women’s rights with Wajeha al-Huwaider and Fawzia al-

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5 According to signed document of the Ministry of Culture and Information
Ayouni, began a campaign for the release of Fuad al-Farhan and in defense of his activism in support of such constitutional monarchy reformists. In addition to bloggers like Ahmed al-Omran, she was among the main organizers for “Free Fuad al-Farhan” campaigns and key in keeping the story alive in both local and international media (Arab News 2008) until his release in April 2008 (CNN 2008).

In considering Fuad al-Farhan’s position on these constitutional reformists, one can see how such efforts was considered as connected with the Saudi women’s activism at the time. For instance, al-Farhan recounts how, during this period, these early reformists, Saud al-Mukhtar al-Hashimi in particular, were admirable as “democrats”. He went on to explain that al-Mukhtar al-Hashimi held a “progressive stance in relation to women, relative to the Islamist movement in Saudi Arabia. Women had a place [in the al-Mukhtar diwaniyya] to attend, pose questions, and join in discussion. In fact, some of those in attendance were women like Nora al-Saad and others. Men would sit and listen to women lecture them. I think this was unprecedented for the Islamist movement in Saudi Arabia” (al-Farhan 2007).

Al-Farhan’s account brings to light an overlooked example of Saudi women’s political agency, as al-Farhan explains how women were in attendance in such political forms. His mention of Nora al-Saad in particular is also telling in light of how Al-Rasheed defines al-Saad’s activism in A Most Masculine State. Al-Rasheed describes al-Saad as “dedicated to thwarting the so-called Saudi liberal project and its manifestations… criticizing the orchestrated, government-sponsored conferences and economic forums…
thwarting challenges of Western liberalism” to Islam and gender issues, at both the global or domestic levels. As a result of these positions, al-Rasheed distinguishes al-Saad from daiyat that conform to the state’s religious establishment and finds that “she has carved a space for herself as an Islamist writer and activist” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 277-278). Nonetheless, she finds her political agency as limited given that “she is not openly critical of the government” and “is simply a female voice that defends Islam but cannot in the current circumstances express overt criticism of the ruling group and its gender policies” because “the role of the state in determining gender policies is hardly explored, asserted, or criticized” Nonetheless, she remains of the multazimat trend (i.e. Islamist feminists) that “devise strategies to ‘bargain with patriarchy’ trading rights for protection” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 278). Such characterization does not seem to fit or allow for al-Saad’s intersection with Saudi political reformists efforts and movement.

3) Saudi Women’s Political Agency and the Political Prisoners of the 2000s

As Thomas Hegghammer notes, “if Saudi Arabia’s policing of its militant Islamist community had been periodically complacent or inefficient in the past, it all changed with the East Riyadh bombing. From May 2003 onward, the state devoted its full resources to combating Islamist militants” (Hegghammer 2010: 217). This meant a colossal budget increase from 8.5 to 12 billion over 2004-2006, for instance. It also meant a “total overhaul of the Saudi security establishment” (Hegghammer 2010: 217). This was followed by mass arrests by the state. It remains heavily debated whether these were blanket arrests, or if they were measured or targeted in nature.
This debate continues mainly because, independent of such arrests, domestic terrorism meant a large loss of most popular support in Saudi Arabia for organizations like al-Qaeda. For instance, the morale of the security services themselves had changed due to “the seriousness of the violence and the many casualties in police ranks”, which can be gauged as also being indicative of similar societal sentiment (Hegghammer 2010: 217). Besides this, Hegghammer rightly argued that there arose “widespread condemnation in Saudi society as a whole” following the May 2003 operation. Similarly, “the grim pictures of wounded Muslim children on front pages of Saudi newspapers turned the domestic public opinion decisively against the militants” following the bombing of November 2003 (Hegghammer 2010: 218). This is also verifiable through al-Qaeda literature dated October 2003, namely the magazine titled ‘Sawt al-Jihad’ (Hegghammer 2010: 221). Hegghammer explained that this issue highlighted a “chronic legitimacy deficit” as it stated: “the number of those who give good advice have become smaller, and the mujahedin have become stranger among family, relatives and friends; the mujahidin can rarely find helpers in doing good, and do not find support along the path except from those who God has spared” (Hegghammer 2010: 221).

While Hegghammer tends to consider such change in public opinion as a resultant of the state’s “genius” (Hegghammer 2010: 219) mix of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ counterterrorism, he nonetheless cedes that “a less savory part of the strategy to appear as non-repressive was the regime’s decision to avoid public terrorism trials. Almost a thousand people were
arrested during the campaign, yet none were tried in court until secret trials began in 2009” (Hegghammer 2010: 219).

It was both as a reaction and a product of such structural conditions that the first protest for political prisoners occurred on July 16, 2007. This protest was carried out by Saudi women and was held in front of the intelligence prison in Buraidah. The protestors were composed of around 14 Saudi women and 3 children. While not articulated explicitly in the language of protest, this was nonetheless the first protest for this cause and it was initiated by Saudi women. The protest was for “the speedy trial of their relatives”, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW 2007). It was also instigated by their desire to stand “against the sudden halt of contact between the families and their relatives for over a month, after the families heard rumors of their relatives’ torture. Aside from halting this torture, they also wanted their relatives to be able to obtain attorneys”.

What is most striking about this episode is the fact that one of the female activists, named Reema al-Juraish, was a client of Abdullah al-Hamid, the veteran reformist and later co-founder of HASM. In reading the court case against al-Hamid and his brother Isa al-Hamid, al-Juraish is cited as explaining her relationship with al-Hamid to have begun following the arrest of her husband in 2004. Her husband was arrested as part of what Human Rights Watch described as: “Saudi Arabia’s secret police (mabahith) detain[ed] without trial or access to lawyers, in many cases for several years, around 3,000 security

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6 As recounted by activists for the ‘w3i team’ archive at their website: w3iteam.wordpress.com.
7 As recounted by activists for the ‘w3i team’ archive at their website: w3iteam.wordpress.com.
8 As read in copy of al-Hamid’s court documents.
detainees suspected of sympathies with or involvement in terrorism” (HRW 2008). She explained that he facilitated her contact with himself, as the lawyer of her husband, as well as numerous other “supporters of human rights”9.

During the protest, which was the first of its kind for political prisoners and marks the initial spark of the campaign itself, she called al-Hamid but could not reach him, and thus resorted to his brother. She was then able to speak with al-Hamid who expressed that he would support protests that were peaceful methods of expression and “held no weapons”10. The protest ended in scuffles between the women activists, the security services, and the religious police.

As the arrest of five women was being attempted, in which the security forces and religious police had surrounded al-Juraish’s home, she contacted al-Hamid. Following this, he arrived at the scene and identified himself as her lawyer. Utilizing the male guardianship in an interesting way and to their advantage, al-Hamid argued that he was the rightful representative of her in the absence of her husband and that the police’s entry into al-Juraish’s home for her arrest was an unacceptable violation of private space. As a result, al-Hamid, and his brother, were arrested and charged with 6 months in jail for “inciting women to protest”, while al-Juraish and four of the women were similarly arrested. However, the women were soon released four days later without similar charges of protest11 (Al-Omran 2007).

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9 As read in copy of al-Hamid’s court documents.
10 As read in copy of al-Hamid’s court documents.
11 As recounted by activists for the ‘w3i team’ archive at their website: w3iteam.wordpress.com.
Conclusion

This chapter was the first of two chapters to consider Saudi women activists’ political agency. In this chapter, the early prominent examples and factors contributing to Saudi women’s political agency in the early 2000s were highlighted. These were defined and analyzed in this section as follows: first, Saudi women political agency and the reformist activist movements of the 2000s, second, the Saudi women’s political agency and new technologies of the 2000s, and third, Saudi women’s political agency and the political prisoners of the 2000s. Such factors were crucial to consider as contributive, historical roots for the political agency of Saudi women activists and feminist movements in the Arab Spring moment, which will be turned to extensively in the following chapter.
Chapter 6: Seeing Agency II:

Saudi Feminism’s “Arab Spring” and “HASM” Moment

**Introduction: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring in 2011-2013**

The Arab Spring first made itself known in Saudi Arabia in the form of a series of petitions that began to circle online in February 2011, all of which argued that the Arab Spring was “the context that should encourage the leadership towards implementing serious political reform” (Al-Rasheed 2015: 38).

The first petition was titled ‘The Declaration of National Reform’ and focused on political reform and a constitutional monarchy. Two others called for reform as well but shied away from using the term constitutional monarchy. One of these focused on reform that was in line with Islamic principles. The other was titled ‘Towards a State of Rights and Institutions’ that similarly focused on political reform, namely, an elected Shura Council, an end to corruption, freedom of expression and independent organizations, as well as a lifting of travel bans and release of political prisoners, but it called for separation of the office of the king and the Head of the Council of Ministry instead. This latter petition gained many signatories, over 9,000, including from former Sahwa Islamists turned reformists, and it was “the first in recent times to move beyond important
activists and reach a large number of ordinary Saudis” (Al-Rasheed 2015: 37). A final petition was issued titled ‘Demands of the Saudi Youth’, which included both political and economic demands, and gained around an unprecedented 10,000 signatures (Al-Rasheed 2015: 38). An additional Salafi petition was also issued, but it was cast as advice to the king and did not call for any particular reforms, other than offering general advice that the state ought to remember its alliance with Wahhabi intellectual roots.

These petitions gained immense exposure because of the contagion of the Arab Spring, the use of social media, and the additional help of youth supporters to the veteran activists’ efforts behind these petitions (Al-Rasheed 2015: 39). Some of these veteran activists, whether Islamists, businessmen, lawyers, or human rights activists, also tried to start an Umma Party on February 9, 2011, which issued statements in support of neighboring Arab countries that were revolting against their rulers whether in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, or Yemen. Ultimately, however, the party members were soon arrested (Al-Rasheed 2015: 40-41). In addition to this, following Hosni Mubarak’s fall in February 12, 2011, a Saudi ‘Day of Rage’ was announced online and set for March 11, 2011. Although it drew on an Islamic “symbolic battle between belief and blasphemy at the time of the Prophet Mohammed” in that it was called ‘Hunayn Revolution’ (Al-Rasheed 2015: 43), it was still indicated as inspired first and foremost by the Arab Spring.

Two days later a revolution in Bahrain began which had further contagion effect on the Eastern Province and encouraged the emergence of protests in Qatif, Awamiyya, Sayhat,
and other cities. Their initial demands were for the release of political prisoners, though among their leaders were Tawfiq al-Amer and Nimr al-Nimr, who, after calling for secession of the Province, then began to support calls for constitutional monarchy (Al-Rasheed 2015: 45). On March 7, 2011, the first Sunni protestors emerged in Riyadh, named Muhammad al-Wadani. He had posted a Youtube video in which he proclaimed “the people want the downfall of the regime” and made Arab Spring-themed demands such as democracy, human rights, and employment (Al-Rasheed 2015: 46). Al-Wadani was accompanied by a small group of protestors and they were all arrested shortly after, with the Dosrai tribe denouncing his act and publically disowning him to reaffirm their allegiance to the king (Al-Rasheed 2015: 48). Despite this, on March 11, another protestors also appeared in Riyadh named Khalid al-Juhani who was also arrested shortly thereafter, but managed to also be filmed by a BBC journalist team (Al-Rasheed 2015: 47) which produced a short feature on this ‘protest’ that went viral among Saudis.

At the same time, on March 14, the ‘Desert Shield’, a GCC military initiative made up of mostly Saudi forces, entered Bahrain to halt its February 14 revolution. This galvanized protestors of the Eastern Province even further, where women activists of Awamiyya held Zaynabiyya processions where they held candles in memory, but also in protest, of prisoners and martyrs (Al-Rasheed 2015: 45). However, similar protests also began “daily” incidents in Riyadh and later in al-Qassim (Al-Rasheed 2015: 47). The first of such was a protest in February 2011 that was made up of 40 female activists who demanded the Ministry of Interior provide their political prisoners (often relatives) with fair trials. These women were largely conservative and their engaging in public acts and
disobedience marked an Arab Spring-facilitated change in their ‘acceptable’ form of ‘womanhood’. Such regular protests, which were most noticeably dominated by female protestors, soon formulated the ‘e3teqal’ (detention) campaign. This campaign focused on disseminating their demands, asserting their peacefulness, and showing their activities in videos, tweets, posts, and the like. It lasted as an organized campaign till around 2013 and was assisted to a large degree by HASM.

A Saudi female activist named Manal al-Sharif began a campaign for women’s driving in early May 2011 online called ‘Teach Me How to Drive so I Can Protect Myself’, until she released a video explaining that June 17, 2011 was set for a day in which women should start driving their cars. She began by driving herself prior to the campaign, filmed by veteran feminist activist Wajeha al-Huwaider, to encourage mobilization of other women. However, this resulted in her detainment on March 30 from her home in the Eastern Province; she was released 10 days later. Along with, and perhaps partly because of, her receiving widespread international media attention, al-Sharif was also criticized by some for violating the nation’s morals and the ‘acceptable’ pious behavior of its women or for drawing unnecessary negative attention to the state. Despite this, many did not, and women, around 60 of them, still drove on the set date of June 17, 2011 and defiantly posted such online.

The campaign continued under the name ‘Women2Drive’, though it was subsumed under a larger ‘Right2Dignity’ or ‘My Right to Dignity’ movement for Saudi women’s rights in general. This lasted until 2012 when it would be replaced with another campaign called
‘October 26 Driving’ of 2013. A supportive campaign also emerged called ‘I Am a Man in Support’, referring to male supporters of women’s driving. On September 26, 2011, the Saudi state announced that women would be appointed to the Shura Council and allowed to vote and run in the municipal elections of 2015. While a Saudi feminist activists’ initiative called ‘Baladi’ did exist since 2005 when it began calling for women’s inclusion in the first round of municipal elections, the activists responsible for it were confused at the state’s timing since they had shifted their focus to women’s driving at this time. For them, this cast doubt on the state’s sincerity. Ironically, on September 28, 2011, a woman was sentenced to 10 lashes for driving. Following the campaign’s efforts and international pressure, this ruling was finally pardoned by the king. In a similarly cosmetic fashion as the appointment of women to the Shura Council, the state also allowed for Saudi women to join in the Olympics in June 2012, following intense international pressure as well as the threat of Saudi Arabia’s exclusion altogether from the Olympics.

Examples of Saudi Feminist Political Activists, the “Arab Spring”, and “HASM” Moment

1) Women’s Driving Campaigns, the Arab Spring, and HASM

For the first women’s driving campaign in 2011, campaign slogans were spread by the campaigners on Facebook and Twitter. These slogans ranged from ‘It Is My Right to
Drive’, ‘I Will Drive My Car Myself’, ‘I Will Drive Starting June 17’, ‘Teach Me to Drive So I Can Protect Myself’, to ‘Women2Drive’. Such rhetorical choices and framing clearly resonated during the Arab Spring moment, as supporters started mobilizing Twitter hashtags like ‘We Are All Manal al-Sharif’, during al-Sharif’s arrest, as well as ‘Saudi Women Revolution’. The latter was also a name adopted by a group of women who informally protested in 2011, outside of the ‘Baladi’ campaign, to demand the right to register and vote in municipal elections\(^{12}\). Some protest stickers with these slogans were also produced by activists and spread around various cities.

The influence of the Arab Spring was also clear in an interview at the start of the campaign, where Wajeha al-Huwaider evokes a *diagnostic frame* of blame for the women’s driving as such: “I’m under the impression that this mobilization has somewhat changed mentalities inside the country, but I also see that authorities haven’t budged an inch. Our leaders are like many others in the Arab world: they don’t take their people’s opinions and aspirations into account” (France 24). In evoking the Arab World, it is clear that the framing of the Saudi government here is to delegitimize its position and echo the popularized characterization of unsympathetic Arab autocrats during the Arab Spring (France 24).

What is also interesting is that Wajeha al-Huwaider was in the passenger seat when Manal al-Sharif first posted a video of herself driving. This act was inherently political from the perspective of the state, while the same does not appear to be so in public

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\(^{12}\) As stated by Hatoon al-Fassi at AGSIW panel titled “Women and Elections in Saudi Arabia” on December 17, 2015.
perception. This is because Wajeha al-Huwaider signified that this movement was a continuation of the political agitations that had begun in the early 2000s. This is evidence of the political start to the driving campaigns of 2011 and on. This connection was not widely acknowledged by the Saudi public, or by media commentators and academics following Saudi women’s activities, nor was it encouraged by the campaign itself. The motivations for such was to evade repression witnessed through the arrest of Manal al-Sharif, to facilitate a continuation of their activist activities, as well as to increase appeal and stave off any further opposition that came with Wajeha al-Huwaider as a controversial public figure and accusations of having a ‘foreign political agenda’.

One of the tactics of the ‘Women2Drive’ campaign to avoid repercussions used was the repeated distribution of a statement by Prince Nayef, the then-Minister of Interior, in which he stated in 2005 that women’s driving was “a societal issue that is for society to decide” (AlRiyadh 2005). The movement would utilize this statement as proof of government approval. In other instances, the state would be indirectly targeted by framing women’s driving as an obligation of the state to facilitate in accordance with international law, namely, CEDAW, which Saudi Arabia ratified in 2008.

This tactic somewhat marked an initial continuation of similar methods used in the 2007-2008 campaign, particularly when the campaign would frame the ban on driving as a ‘taboo’ to be broken, rather than a state-sanctioned ban. However, this was different from the previous campaign of the early 2000s in that it began with such framing in order to avoid repercussions, rather than an ideological commitment to viewing the social as more
constrictive than the state. This is evidenced by one of the ‘Women2Drive’ campaign’s first YouTube videos, posted on May 15, 2011. The campaigners chose to feature tweets by prominent allies with the aim of showing the momentum and acceptance of the campaign, in doing so it also featured those of Islamist affiliations in order to gain social capital, such as Mohammad al-Ahmary. As Maha al-Qahtani, a member of the ‘Women2Drive’ campaign, described it in an interview for this research: “social media was useful for the Saudi women’s movement because it cut people off from believing the April Fool’s lies about the nineties women [referring to the previous backlash against women who drove in 1990], and as a result, support from the moderate Islamist or conservative is now something very tangible”.

When asked if social media facilitated such increased diffusion of ideas between Islamists and liberal feminist activists, Maha al-Qahtani explained that: “Truth be told, the moderate and democratic Islamist movement has been the most negatively affected for its activism. Its approach is democratic and this violates Wahhabist thought that idolizes governmental authority… I think social media was a tool for discussion, debate, and a vibrant space for spreading knowledge, light, and rights, without intimidation or bullying [among these groups]” and that the state had been the obstacle for such exchanges since allowing so was a threat to the state. She evidenced this by pointing to how “accounts that defame others are left, but if you mention a thought, you can be arrested and hidden behind the sun (read: arbitrarily arrested)”. 
Furthermore, this can be traced as emerging over its second year and with the ‘October 26’ campaign, which grew increasingly ‘political’ with intersections with HASM and would then focus on the state’s role in structural constraints against women’s agency. This observation was affirmed in interviews with the activists, as Aziza al-Yousef, a member of the ‘Women2Drive’ as well as ‘October 26’ campaigns, explained: “in terms of the driving campaigns, yes, everyone used to blame the religious movements and there was a meaningless debate over this. What the ‘October 26’ campaign was able to do was that it clarified the state as responsible, first and foremost”. Surprisingly, Maha al-Qahtani even added that: “I don’t even know who said that men are against women’s driving in the first place. In the 1990s, women drove, my aunts included. They would drive my grandfather around because he couldn’t himself”.

However, as result of the ‘Women2Drive’’s initial focus on the ‘taboo’ of driving, public critique online took the form of framing the campaign’s focus on women’s driving as narrow and frivolous in its desire for internationally defined women’s rights, simply for the sake of their being defined internationally as desirable or rights. For instance, the demand for women’s driving was often contrasted with legal reform for Saudi divorcees and widows who were framed as experiencing the “real” hardships of a lack of women’s rights in Saudi Arabia. In reaction to this, the campaigners sought to frame their cause in a way that might resonate as more “meaningful” in relation to Saudi women’s rights. As a result, in September 2011, the women’s driving campaign became designated as only one campaign of the larger movement group, declared then to be: ‘My Right to Dignity’, or ‘Right2Dignity’. Manal al-Sharif, the movement’s most public figure, described it as
such: “our initiative’s name has changed to ‘My Right, My Dignity’ in support of all our obstructed rights and God willing it will start again with the desire and perseverance of the women themselves”\textsuperscript{13}. She included the hashtag ‘Saudi Women Spring’, indicating that the initiative had not departed from its inspiration from the Arab Spring.

And while the group itself did not seek to outright explain this as a shift to being more comprehensive and political, since there would be repressive repercussions for such, as well as potentially flare up critiques of their holding a ‘foreign political agenda’. This move can still be seen as a step towards the political. This is firstly because it allocates the previously deemed “apolitical” demand of driving as part of a larger political project that is concerned with the political status of women in Saudi Arabia, i.e. her relationship with the state and the public sphere, the guardianship system and her citizenship. The emphasis on rights and dignity, evoking the Arab Spring-themed norms, also facilitated this broader focus. Secondly because this move created further demands on the campaign, as a movement, to be more expansive in its concerns and, as we will see, led to a political turn in both the members and the movement. This shift was also furthered by mutual influence between the campaign and others, like HASM, as well as due to repeated experience of structural restraints reinforced primarily by the state, rather than the religious or the social.

As Maha al-Qahtani described it: “the beauty of the women’s driving campaign is that it proved that [the ban] is not a religious decision, but a political one, as well as its focus on

\textsuperscript{13} As stated on al-Sharif’s Twitter account: @Manal_AISharif
broader women’s issues”. However, she still maintains a level of skepticism after having met the “sisters from the nineties” and been part of the ‘Women2Drive’ campaign, which she described as, “at the start, filled me with the spirit of excitement to meet a group of fellow countrywomen, but this excitement soon died”. She explained that, “we held meetings and, honestly, I benefited from these since I was able to meet with the some of the sisters from the nineties [referring to veteran Saudi feminist activists who came into contact increasingly with the activists of Women2Drive campaign and Right2Dignity movement] to gain from their experiences. But women’s driving, or women’s rights for that matter, cannot rise on women who are afraid. It rises on women who know their rights and believe that death is being without freedom”.

This hesitance can be seen in one of the first identifying documents by the new movement on September 25, 2011, titled “Our Identity and Our Names”, in which it is emphasized to be a “peaceful” campaign in which the members state: “we strive to end all discrimination against women, and restore their rights that have been bound by societal customs that contradict with Islamic Sharia. We do not condone this fact to be used for any other political or personal goals” (Right2Dignity 2011). This can also be seen in the how the group distanced itself from “ideological classifications” (Right2Dignity 2011) and utilized diagnostic framing to allocate Saudi women’s rights as restorable through addressing custom, rather than Islam or the state.

Despite this, the use of “peaceful” indicates a slight acceptance of the movement’s political nature and aims as well as its being facilitated by the Arab Spring moment.
While this characteristic might be assumed of a women’s campaign for driving, the term was purposefully used at the time to evoke a designation that had become synonymous with “good” political action during the Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia. This is because, while protests were designated as ‘haram’ previously, images of the Arab Spring encouraged an exception to this for political protests in neighboring countries that were “peaceful” and “orderly”. Thus, the campaign was influenced by, and also made use of, this Arab Spring-inspired norm that also evoked campaigns of political origins.

Additionally, only a few days later on September 28, 2011, the Right2Dignity group issued a statement in which they condemned security services’ targeting of its members and other women who attempt to drive by pointing to women’s expanded “political rights in [King Abdullah’s] last speech in 25 September 25, 2011”. They critiqued the Ministry of Interior specifically and encourage women to refuse investigation, demand a lawyer, and publicize any physical or legal harassment by stating that “publication is the best remedy to end these harassments” (Right2Dignity 2011). This statement coincided with the movement gaining knowledge that the Ministry of Interior had created ‘files’ on its members, as well as the investigation and charge of one of its core members, Najla Hariri, as well as the initial sentence of Shaima Jastaina to 10 lashes for driving. This stands in contrast to the Right2Dignity movement’s identifying statement and, from observation, a trend can be seen that this tone and focus on the state as the main structural barrier to their agency only increased from that point on.

This trend can also be traced in a comparison with the later ‘October 26’ driving
campaign. First, aside from this shift, the influence of the Arab Spring moment remained. Aziza al-Yousef, a founding member of the ‘October 26’ campaign, explains that she had participated in 2011 with the first ‘Women2Drive’ campaign (as part of the ‘Right2Dignity’ movement) and contributed with a video of herself driving in protest. Through this, she was able to meet fellow activists that together formed the second ‘October 26’ campaign, “on the head of them was Eman al-Nafjan”, a member of the ‘Women2Drive’ campaign and a member that was able to tap into already-gained international prominence and international media presence due to her being among the few Saudi women to blog in English since 2008. In considering the influence of the Arab Spring moment, she states in an interview, “it is no doubt that the Arab Spring livened up spirits with hope for change, but my interest in rights was preceded by that”. Additionally, “social media brought the activists together in real life. When we started driving in 2011, we didn’t know each other. Through Twitter and noticing each other’s accounts, we moved from Twitter to real life”, explained al-Yousef.

Second, the first place a difference becomes apparent is in the campaign’s identifying document, which was in the form of a petition, since its website was blocked by the Saudi state. It was addressed to the Saudi government and was signed by over 26,600 signatories (Change.Org). The ‘October 26’ campaign begins by stating that women’s driving is about more than just a woman getting into a car, but about a recognition of half of society, a natural right granted by God, and recognition of her “legitimate (Shar’i) and civil right” to partake in development, evoking the sahabiyyat who rode camels in the time of the Prophet. It goes on to argue to the state that: “Deferring women driving to a
societal consensus only increases division and is not reasonable nor logical to force
people to unanimously agree before lifting the ban. We are a society like others in that we
are comprised of different views, especially in issues that are not explicitly prohibited by
an Islamic text” (Change.Org).

More importantly, the women activists argue, in this petition that: “If the state refuses to
lift the current ban on women driving, we demand that it provide citizens justification for
its refusal, and not to transfer responsibility for such a decision to a societal consensus as
an alternative justification” (Change.Org). The statement continues with a very political
demand for a democratic method of deciding on the matter of women’s driving: “In the
event that the government does not lift the ban on women driving, and does not provide
justification for its continued refusal, we demand that it provides a mechanism to enable
’society’ to express what they want. We do not demand this as a means of adopting a
particular ideology or importing values from abroad. But we ask for this because
we cannot find any justification for the government's opposition to women

In an interview on Al-Hurra, Mohammed al-Qahtani, a HASM co-founder, addressed the
association’s stance on the women’s driving campaign in particular. Al-Qahtani
responded with the following: “even in light of the Arab Spring, the state did not allow
women to drive! Even just to go from her home to her work. I personally take my
children to school, I take my wife to work. I become the family driver in the morning, in
the afternoon, and the evening. I don’t want to bring a foreign driver into my home. They should give us the choice. Let my wife drive. This is an issue that should be left to choice, if someone wants to they have the right to drive, if they don’t, they can leave it. I don’t understand why the state is stubborn on issues that it claims are societal issues, and does not even offer the issue up to society. Doing so, in turn, requires political reform to allow women to discuss their issues in a parliament where they can reach such decisions. There is no source of authority to go back to assert such decisions otherwise.14

Interestingly, the term ‘hasm’ was used as a verb here in place of “assert” and in suggestion of a democratic means of governance.

What is most noteworthy is that this line of reasoning appears later in the petition of the ‘October 26’ campaign for women’s driving, although not surprisingly so since its founding members are among those unofficial supporters of HASM. This also shows their level of political agency in their willingness to take on the similar goals of political critique and, in evoking the fact that society is not asked its opinion on issues, a demand for an altered political system and a more participatory form of governance. In an informal conversation, one of the authors of the ‘October 26’ campaign described their campaign as “only the start”, particularly in its demand for societal involvement in decision-making as well as its legitimization of public campaigns, as it acts as a kind of ‘weakest link’ or loophole to legitimize further campaigns and demands of a more political nature.

14 Author’s translation of statements in AlHurra interview with Mohammad al-Qahtani on August 3, 2011.
Aside from such rhetorical shifts and framing tactics, one of the main ways used in this thesis to gauge this trend towards an assertion and practice of political agency by Saudi feminists was to track the movement’s increased interaction with the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (HASM). This, too, served as evidence of this shift. This is because this movement was clearly externally understood and internally designated as political in its members, demands, and the movement itself, as well as itself being formative and facilitative, in combination with the Arab Spring moment, for this magnification of the political agency of women’s movements.

Through an extensive process of mapping activist networks, as well as tracking their public and private support and efforts, it became clear that the women’s driving campaign had many links with HASM, both in terms of alliances as well as in terms of diffusion of political ideas. Over the course of the campaign, particularly from its first manifestation (2011-2012) to its second (2013-Present), a change in rhetoric can also be observed that is arguably magnified by such exchanges and diffusion, as mentioned above. However, this was also in addition to other previously mentioned factors such as the campaign’s aim of frame resonance to shape the state and public responses to the campaign, as well as in response to adversarial counter-frames and state narratives. Specifically, two main trends were observed. The diagnostic framing of the movement began to focus increasingly on the state as the main constraint of women’s rights, rather than Islam or society, and that it increasingly included political concerns and a willingness towards critiques of the Saudi political system and citizenship as being limited.
In regards to the results of mapping the informal networks of activists, the key members of the Women2Drive and October 26 campaigns were found to be also linked at varying degrees to HASM, or at the least to its same political concerns. For instance, Maha al-Qahtani, a member of Women2Drive and “of great importance to October 26 campaign”, as a key member described her, is also wife to a HASM co-founder, Mohammed al-Qahtani, and “unofficial member” or “official supporter” of the organization, which are both designations given to participants who work with HASM but evade the same scrutiny it receives by forgoing the designation of official membership. In an interview with Maha al-Qahtani, she explains this debate as follows: “HASM was not against women’s rights, they saw political reform as the main goal and the foundation of any political system that served the people. After the Arab Spring, there was a clear and felt interest from Saudi women, and at daring degrees, in political activism. They joined and helped the members of HASM in writing, publicizing, and in-person meetings with women relatives of political prisoners and helped them with raising the issues of their relatives for mobilization of public support”. She acknowledged the necessity of women’s contributions to HASM in saying that these activities “lifted the burden or workload [that had been] solely on the HASM members”.

Another example of such is found in Samar Badawi, sister of liberal activist Raif Badawi and wife of a prominent Saudi liberal and HASM activist and lawyer, Waleed Abualkhair. Described by Eman al-Nafjan, a key member of the ‘Women2Drive campaign and founding member of the ‘October 26’ campaign as “one of the strongest Saudi women I know”, Badawi supported the ‘Women2Drive’ campaign by driving in
protest and posting it online. She also filed a lawsuit for a rejection of her request for a driver’s license against the Ministry of Interior’s General Directorate of Traffic. Badawi is known for such contributions to Saudi feminism as well as through her winning a legal case against her father’s guardianship, so that she may be allowed to marry of her choice in 2010. However, she was also among the unofficial supporters of HASM throughout this period. Her contribution to its efforts led to her temporary arrest in January 2016, following her administering her husband’s account and posting a rare picture from within a Saudi jail, of him and a fellow HASM member. It included the supportive statement: “a leaked picture of the detained rights activists Fowzan al-Harbi and Waleed Abualkhair in Riyadh’s al-Malaz jail, as a smile lifts up their lives”\textsuperscript{15}.

In describing a dispute that happened between women activists, particularly the more liberal-leaning, and HASM, Maha al-Qahtani explains that: “the Ithniniyah (diwaniyah meeting held regularly on Mondays) were started and recorded so that HASM could disseminate its political ideas and goals online. The women’s section disputed it as unfair since women were not allowed to attend, but the reason was fearing for them and because the Ithniniyah was open to the public and many mabahith (secret police) were always in attendance”.

Evidence of this can be seen in a dispute on December 22, 2012, when Halah al-Dosari publically questioned HASM’s limiting its upcoming Ithniniyah meeting to men. She responded to Iman al-Qahtani, known as an official supporter of HASM at the time, by

\textsuperscript{15} As stated by Badawi on Abualkhair’s Twitter account: @WaleedAbulkhair.
asking “women were allowed to HASM trials, why would they be excluded from entry now?”\(^{16}\). The organization responded in stating, “It is for men only for purely circumstantial purposes that have nothing to do with what you might assume, there will be a meeting designated for women that will be announced\(^{17}\). In response, al-Dosari replied positively, “I appreciate that, that is what I expected from the founders of HASM”\(^{18}\). Azizah al-Yousef further explained to her, “I will contact you about this, the issue is not exclusion, there are other calculations to consider”\(^{19}\).

One way that this was resolved was by holding alternate meetings held by women, most notably one of the founding members of the ‘October 26’ campaign, for other women to attend. It was also only semi-public, where entry was predicated on an already-accepted member deeming the newcomer to be “safe” to join in. Additionally, al-Qahtani explains that: “The Ithniniyah was called ‘thniniyat the Culture of Civil Society’ and was run by no more than 11 HASM members, but only after fieldwork carried out by them. They made visiting trips over various parts of the Kingdom to introduce rights. Its ideas spread, though not on a mass scale, but it was good that they met with many parts of society and engaged in their respective intellectual activities and joined their lectures. There were two women in particular [referring to women of the driving campaign] that were ‘unofficial members’ of HASM, I do not want to mention their names, but their role and other women’s role began mostly after the spread of recorded videos of these Ithniniya sessions. When the trials of HASM began, they were present at the courts, they helped in

\(^{16}\) As stated on al-Dosari’s Twitter account: @Hala_AlDosari.
\(^{17}\) As stated on HASM’s Twitter account: @ACPRAHR.
\(^{18}\) As stated on al-Dosari’s Twitter account: @Hala_AlDosari.
\(^{19}\) As stated on al-Yousef’s Twitter account: @AzizaYousef.
documenting the rights violations of women involved with the political prisoners’ campaign at the Board of Grievances. They also helped in publicizing HASM, including its documents and videos. They also helped in the translation and wording of its statements. Specifically, many of the youth, both women and men, participated in these efforts together”.

This is echoed by Aziza al-Yousef, who stated in an interview: “HASM has a broad viewpoint and they believe that when humans gain their political and civil rights, all other rights will be achieved. And of course they were interested in the women’s driving campaign. Dr. Mohammed al-Qahtani was with his wife and she, Maha al-Qahtani, who is also an important part of the campaign, received the first driving ticket issued to a woman in the Kingdom’s history”.

She describes the internal negotiations in regards to the driving campaign’s relationship with HASM as follows: “As for the women activists, some of them were interested and supported HASM, like Eman al-Nafjan, Halah al-Dosari, or Zanah al-Shehri. Others were scared at first, they feared HASM’s [political] project was a repressive one. But currently I think the picture [of HASM] is much clearer to everyone”. As such, the example of Halah al-Dosari, as a Women2Drive member in 2011 displays the shift which occurred, as she was initially a less likely affiliate of HASM since then, but, while part of the ‘October 26’ campaign, has become an avid public supporter of HASM. Additionally, it is clear from rhetoric used and issue valuation that there was an ideational affect as a result as well. This shift can be seen as perhaps solidifying since March 2013, in which
she states, commenting on the successive trials of HASM members that were underway: “No matter how I may differ with HASM, today I am with them until their rights are confirmed to make demands peacefully and their freedom is not tied or qualified”\textsuperscript{20}. This sentiment grew, as Halah al-Dosari later publically wrote in September 18, 2012: “History will also write the story of the trial of Dr. al-Qahtani, al-Hamid, and the members of HASM organization. It will record their charges for future generations so that they may see what kind of minds ruled and lived here”\textsuperscript{21}.

This example is particularly interesting in that it shows how a campaign for driving, what al-Rasheed might call a campaign aimed at extracting gendered services from the state or a sign of patriarchic bargaining and distraction from “serious” political reform, actually led to the opposite of such in how women were drawn to supporting that same reform and increasingly assert their political agency and counter state narratives that describe the social as the main constraint to women. This can also be confirmed in how Azizah al-Yousef described her own positioning as being a part of the both the women’s driving campaign and her husband being one of the founders of HASM, Aziza al-Yousef explained while interviewed that her positioning in both movements was part of one aim: “rights, in my opinion, are not divisible. I define myself as an activist in human rights and not a feminist, and I don’t see any contradiction between participating in women’s driving campaigns and HASM”. Furthermore, it can also be seen in the political concern with which she gauges the campaign’s success: “in regards to driving, everyone used to only blame the religious movement and there was a tiresome debate. But now what the

\textsuperscript{20} As stated on al-Dosari’s Twitter account at @Hala_AlDosari.
\textsuperscript{21} As stated on al-Dosari’s Twitter account at @Hala_AlDosari.
‘October 26’ movement has achieved is that it clarified that the first and foremost responsible [for this ban] is the state”.

Another example of such broader political concerns can be seen in the case of Loujain al-Hathloul, an independent feminist activist but also close supporter of the ‘October 26’ campaign, and her high profile “letter to King Abdullah”. First, this will necessitate a turn to context. Following the July 3, 2013 coup in Egypt, the Saudi government responded by sending its salutation to the General Abdulfattah Al-Sisi, “who managed to save Egypt at this critical moment from a dark tunnel God only could apprehend its dimensions and repercussions, but the wisdom and moderation came out of those men to preserve the rights of all parties in the political process” (SUSRIS 2013). Focusing on the key points of achieving hopes, preserving the rights of all parties, and inclusion in the political process, the HASM association took this wording as an opportunity to reassert its political claims. In its July 6, 2013 statement, it praised “the glorified Revolution of 25 of January” and that “the phases Egyptian revolution is going through are normal. All revolutions have gone through the same road”.

In turning to Saudi Arabia, it continued in quoting the Saudi government’s letter to Adly Mansour, and followed it by stating: “We [HASM] would like to remind the Saudi government that here, too, in this country, is a people that are waiting for the fulfillment of their hopes. They, too, want the same wisdom and moderation that saves, for all sides in the country, their right to the political process. Charity begins at home and hence, calls

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22 As stated in archived copies of HASM’s website.
for political participation cannot be credible when they're coming from a country that
doesn't have a constitution, a parliament, an independent judiciary system, a civil society,
a free media, nor a fair distribution of wealth; a country whose jails are full of prisoners
of conscience who are human rights and political reform activists. Citizens, especially the
youth, have showed clear maturity, awareness and ambition while keeping up with the
Arab revolutions on social networks to participate in public affairs and be part of a
movement that will engage them in the political decision-making. Therefore, it is better
for the ruling family to take the initiative to achieve these ambitions in order to preserve
its position… we remind the Saudi government of the demands that achieve the public
hopes of political participation and equitable wealth management - which were
repeatedly demanded by the reformists”.

The HASM statement concluded in stating: “these demands are not a luxury; they are the
people's rights, and an urgent need to stabilize the country and protect its future. It is a
priority for a broad segment of society, especially the youth. The free and fair popular
referendum will show the extent of public support of these demands”23. This tactic of
demanding, at a minimum, a referendum to gauge the validity of their demands is also a
rhetorical framing that can be found in the ‘October 26’ women’s driving campaign who
repeats, in retort to officials’ claims that driving is undesired by society: “we demand that
it provides a mechanism to enable “society” to express what they want”.

What is often overlooked is that a similar sentiment was also stated by feminist activists.

23 As stated in archived copies of HASM’s website.
An example is how Halah al-Dosari, a member of the ‘Women2Drive’ campaign and founding member of the ‘October 26’ campaign, posted HASM’s statement online in support. Most prominently so was the example of independent feminist activists such as Loujain al-Hathloul, prior to her being chosen as the face of the ‘October 26’ women’s driving campaign. Al-Hathloul also took part in expressing such sentiments following the Saudi government’s support of the Egyptian coup. In a letter-like, 26-tweet long statement on August 22, 2013, which concludes in critiquing the Saudi political system and alluding to its support of the Egyptian coup: “I repeat, improve the state of your own country before meddling in the others’ affairs in neighboring countries. It is for your benefit”.

Prior to this repeated warning, al-Hathloul had begun by praising efforts such as the improvement of the image of the Arab Muslims through the National Dialogues, opportunities of study abroad scholarships, and the appointment of women to the Shura Council. She contrasts these with “the issue of political prisoners, in all of their types, without right or justice”, and asserts: “Because they dared, I will dare too. I will shout the truth in the loudest voice because I am accustomed to this. It is my duty to speak the truth and I do not want to be an accomplice. Many nights I am visited by ghosts of innocent men and women that are tortured for crimes that have no base in our justice. Let us begin with the story of men who fought for bettering the state of our country in a peaceful manner”\(^\text{24}\).

\(^{24}\) As stated by al-Hathloul in archived copy of now-deleted letter.
At this point in the letter, she continued to recount the establishment of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (HASM) in 2009, followed shortly after by a judge’s decision of some of its founders’ arrest. She quotes Abdulaziz al-Hussan, a prominent lawyer working with HASM, and his statements against their arrests and the state. Al-Hathloul also evokes the Declaration of Human Rights as representative of HASM’s demands and asserts that it is not in contradiction with Islam. She then recounts HASM’s demands against arbitrary arrests, political corruption such as following the 2009 Jeddah floods, and for an elected parliament. Following this, she highlights the issue of arbitrary arrests as what HASM is among their most famous and argues, “there is nothing in their acts against Islamic teachings or Saudi law, rather the fault is in the judge himself that is representative of your politics and governance”25.

She continues by pointing to the second critique: “Arbitrary arrests being of the most famous actions in this period. You are not satisfied in only arresting people, you are careful to be unjust to them as well by denying them fair trials, which is the simplest right to be given a defendant, even if he is a criminal”. Finally, she points to the case of Raef Badawi as “another example of your government’s incapacity to accept an opposing opinion in a peaceful manner. When Raef Badawi called for the trial of Ibrahim al-Ghaith in the International Criminal Court, his call was within the law and he did not violate anyone’s rights or hurt any human. But he was arrested and sentenced to seven years and 600 lashes”26.

25 As stated by al-Hathloul in archived copy of now-deleted letter.
26 As stated by al-Hathloul in archived copy of now-deleted letter.
She concludes, “in all three cases, you proved your inability to hear oppositional opinions and use of force to commit injustice to people. This is a strike of shame on your governance that history will remember. You are who call for justice and not breaking up the lines of neighboring Arab peoples and repeat ‘the silent in the face of injustice is a silent devil’. You failed to protect the peoples of your country from division and implementation of justice. I accuse the judges of being complicit in this disaster and issuing your unjust decisions, which made the protectors of the country also its thieves. I accuse all who helped in injustice against the innocent in the country of Islam that emphasizes justice and fairness. This is only in regards to your actions inside your country. Lessen such injustices against the individuals of your society so that you may fear less your loss between the lines of history and becoming merely a dark memory. I repeat, improve your internal affairs before getting involved in the affairs of others’ in neighboring countries. This is in your own interest”27.

As this letter shows, there is not much of Saudi governance which the Saudi feminist al-Hathloul did not critique, there is also very few political issues prevailant at the time within Saudi Arabia that she did not address. This is one of the main examples of concern for the regional, accompanied by an assertion of her political agency as a Saudi woman activist. This is a particularly interesting example given that al-Hathloul was first known simply for her critique of the veil in a short video posted on Keek, followed by increased critique of social constraints on Saudi women. This example is also particularly striking since, at the time, al-Hathloul had garnered enough fame to the point where others might

27 As stated by al-Hathloul in archived copy of now-deleted letter.
have been weary of speaking strongly of the state on ‘political matters’, such as critique of the political system, as it may result in repercussions.

It is also striking because, despite this fact, Eman al-Nafjan, a co-founder of the ‘October 26’ campaign and unofficial supporter of HASM, explained how Loujain al-Hathloul’s relationship with the campaign was welcomed from its start in October 2013, only a month after this letter. Eman al-Nafjan explains that: “we at the October 26th Campaign were looking for a celebrity to announce the campaign, we contacted people who we knew were pro women driving… someone suggested Loujain and we contacted her. When we explained the campaign to her, she instantly and boldly agreed to announce it… and we could safely say that the October 26th Campaign had started. She had nothing to do with the idea of the campaign before her announcement and little to do with it after… Instead of backing down and staying in Canada where she was studying, Loujain booked a flight home to Riyadh and then drove herself from the airport while her father filmed her. Then she posted the video… The Ministry of Interior called her father in and made him sign a pledge to not allow her to drive again. It got so bad that her great uncle was pressured into releasing a statement renouncing her actions. Despite all of that she still stands her ground and to this day tweets and plans to post videos that go against Saudi duality” (Al-Nafjan 2013).

This statement was only months after the start of the campaign, however, and al-Hathloul’s relationship grew closer to the campaign’s members over time. In fact, the campaign’s main account still features Loujain al-Hathloul’s picture, along with Maysa
al-Amoudi, who was a member of both campaigns, as its identifying background picture. This image was used following their detainment for a month starting December 1, 2014, after al-Hathloul had attempted to cross the UAE-Saudi border by driving her car.

2) Women’s University Protests and the Arab Spring

Not all Saudi feminist activism was done through resource mobilization provided by HASM and considering Saudi women in their participation in university protests is an important example to highlight grassroots efforts of activism. This shows how Saudi feminism, and women’s political agency in particular, as discussed in this chapter, was also apparent in less networked examples of Saudi women activists as well.

In March 2012, hundreds of students participated in organized protests in King Khalid University, in the Southern city of Abha. These protests were started by female students, shortly followed by students in the male sections of the university. They were promoted as likening these female students to students who participated in the start of numerous revolutions of the Arab Spring, and praised the concept of “peaceful protest”.

This was perhaps the most visible protest to occur in Saudi Arabia during the Arab Spring that was followed by government response that included real gains and demands met. Namely, the ouster of the head of the university. Of course, this did not mean that the protests did not include an intimidating state presence in the form of being heavily
policing and students questioned for their actions – all of which was posted online by the protesters. This was followed by protests of female student protests in Qassim University in Buraidah, as well as Tabuk University in the Northern city of Tabuk. None of these students shyed away from using social media to publicize their cause, nor did they shy away from utilizing local traditional media such as the ‘Ya Hala’ show on Rotana Khalijia TV Channel. This is noteworthy given the risks of doing so, since protests are illegal in Saudi Arabia and such stances can be easily framed as against the state. As such, the combination of rights rhetoric, evoking the Arab Spring, as well as willingness to engage in the public, even given a risk of losing ‘patriarchic bargaining’ power with the state, arguably indicate an assertion of political agency by these young women.

To explore this further, it is important to hear from the participants themselves. On March 16, the day before the protest in Qassim University, the female student Fatima al-Habeeb wrote: “I am excited to participate in tomorrow’s sit-in, but I am also afraid. I’ll try as much as I can to overcome my fear, because change does not come easily”

28 As stated on al-Habeeb’s Twitter account: @FAlHabeeb

Upon her return from the protest on March 17, she wrote: “I feel very proud about what I did and what my female students did. I can truly say now, after today, that I changed something and I did not stay quiet about my rights”

29 As stated on al-Habeeb’s Twitter account: @FAlHabeeb

Four years later, she remembers it as such: “2012 was the year of the Saudi Spring, and it was a Saudi Women’s Spring in particular”, holding both to be interrelated and interdependent. In an interview conducted for this thesis, the political agency and influence from the Arab Spring “moment” is apparent in this student’s perspective: “There was something in the air then. You must
remember, right? Everything around made us feel like revolution is possible, that having a better life is possible. I was reading 1984 at the time, which contributed to what happened as well”.

When asked in the interview about the method of protest, al-Habeeb further explained, “it was planned”, evidence of their organizing efforts. Specifically, she states that it was planned on a Facebook page that was run by both male and female students. Although she wasn’t part of that page, word had spread and caused sufficient mobilization that she didn’t need to be. She continued: “Everyone hated how the university was. But they argued on how to handle it. Some said that there is no use, that what we're doing is futile, that nothing will change. Some challenged the mere idea of a protest, saying that it is haram, that we must obey the ruler. Then there were us, the dreamers… On that day, a few friends and I started chanting at 8 am and people joined. The rest is history”.

In considering the state, al-Habeeb recognized that “some people attribute it to the nature of Saudi Arabia and how it's easier to arrest guys, but I think woman are just more courageous”, though it seemed she favored her fellow women’s activists, as she recalled from her own experience: “it's interesting to note that no male students protested that day”, referencing the protest she participated in at al-Qassim University. She went on to clarify: “actually, across Saudi Arabia, all the students that protested were females, with the expectation of KKU”. When questioned about how she saw her activism in relation to how she identifies herself as a feminist today, al-Habeeb explained: “I do now. Back then, I didn't know what feminism was. Back then we considered ourselves a part of the
Arab spring as a whole. At least I did”. This further indicates how the students were keen to assert their political agency. Aside from this, al-Habeeb also expressed that the images and events of other political activities of Saudi women during the Arab Spring were also of inspiration or, as she stated, “indirect motivator” for these university protestors.

3) The first Semi-Public Trials of HASM and Saudi Feminist Involvement

The first semi-public trial of HASM’s most prominent founding members, Mohammad al-Qahtani and Abdullah al-Hamid, began on September 3, 2012. The first trial of a HASM member as a member of HASM occurred in 2011 with the arrest of Mohammed al-Bajadi for his joining in the first organized protest by Saudi women for political prisoners at the start of the Arab Spring. However, the association had only just begun to be known more broadly in Saudi public at that time and al-Bajadi’s trial was held in a secret court. It did not have the same visibility or influence as the event of the later HASM trials. Furthermore, the later trials were important for symbolic purposes. The semi-public nature of these trials meant that “the court and its surrounding courtyard were transformed into a site for theatrical performance where HASM actors and their lawyers offered detailed revisionist interpretations of Islamic concepts in replies to the judges. HASM actors hoped that images of them in the court would be transmitted to a wider audience than that allowed to be present” (Al-Rasheed 2015: 70). This was assisted by those who showed up but were not allowed inside, or who were allowed in for a while but then asked to leave, and those who were attempting to negotiate an ability to enter, all
of which used what they could gain access to and posted or took photographs of such for
the growing Twitter audience (Al-Rasheed 2015: 70).

This was largely successful, since: “for several hours on the day of the court hearings,
social media activism became common among HASM supporters, who transformed the
trials into a virtual forum for all to follow and comment on. Their heavy engagement with
new social media functioned to amplify the plight of the founders, disseminate alternative
interpretations of the charges, and encourage emotional attachments to the accused. New
media offered the opportunity to create rhetorical space to debate issues around HASM
founders, their initiative, trials, and later imprisonment. With each trial the audience
became bigger, and the legal discussions spread across sections of society that might not
necessarily be aware of the individual cases. This was what HASM and its founders
hoped for, mainly the spread of the culture of rights and the contestation of authoritarian
rule in its own judicial institutions (Al-Rasheed 2015: 70-71). In doing so, “when they
defended themselves they used language as public speech to deconstruct the domination
of the state and the hegemonic religious language of its judges. By offering new
interpretations of the same concepts that the judges used to criminalize their activities,
they believed that only they provided the tools for political change” (Al-Rasheed 2015:
70). Given the importance of this case for Saudi political activism during the Arab
Spring, it is prudent to explore its intersection with Saudi feminist activism. This is first
to display the involvement of Saudi women themselves in such political activism, and,
second, to show how Saudi women’s political agency was featured as part of activist
efforts surrounding these trials.
For instance, in attendance was Iman al-Qahtani, a female rights activist and journalist. She live-tweeted the trial and took pictures when she could. Just before leaving the courtroom, however, an officer asked her, “Why are you writing?” She boldly answered, “Because this was an open trial—and I am a journalist” (Abdulkarim). In addition to attending the trials, Iman al-Qahtani was a regular supporter of HASM and very present online. In its eighth court session, on December 8, al-Qahtani was in attendance and the judge ordered her arrested for providing “false information” online about the trials. This was reportedly mediated by her denying her attendance as a journalist, but rather simply as a supportive sympathizer, and through appeals to the judge by other HASM members in attendance.

However, Iman al-Qahtani’s public association with the association also led to rumors of her being of the mabahith (secret services) (Al-Rasheed 2015: 57). This was first promoted by veteran feminist activist, Ebtihal Mubarak, who accused her publically of “spying on activists” in May 2012. Additionally, al-Qahtani stopped appearing online in April 2013 and was reportedly banned from travel in July 2013 when she attempted to leave the country. In an informal conversation as late as May 2013, al-Qahtani explained that she was still working under a general Twitter account in support of HASM and the political prisoners campaign. She did not appear publically again until February 2015, when an article under her name was published that demonized the Arab Spring and praised the Saudi government for evading its chaos. It is difficult to confirm what is true

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30 As stated on Mubarak’s Twitter account: @EbtihalMubarak.
surrounding this drastic development, as such, it is worth noting two points. First, Iman al-Qahtani was defended by many international organizations who claimed the article was clearly unwillingly written. Second, that Ebtihal Mubarak did not elaborate on how she obtained such information regarding al-Qahtani’s status as an informant, nor was the claim repeated or affirmed by anyone else. Nonetheless, since she was a veteran feminist, it was enough to affect the credibility of Iman al-Qahtani for activists and supporters that followed her work online. This was slightly less the case for those that worked closely with al-Qahtani, particularly women involved in the political prisoners’ campaign.

What is important to note here is the fact that her offering activist support during the HASM trials, as a Saudi feminist activist, was not unique. Numerous Saudi feminist activists began to write blogs, post tweets, speak to international media, as well as international human rights organizations like Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, start hashtag campaigns, update and translate Wikipedia pages, write posts in English for other websites – all in support of HASM and its call for civil and political rights, as well as democratic reform. Through such activities, they practiced their political agency, saw such aims as an extension of the Arab Spring, and held them as inextricable from their own gains as women activists. This began to be a trend and many of these women began to be called ‘huquqiyat’, or ‘female rights activists’.

Another example is Nofah Abdulaziz who was among the most prominent younger activists and worked tirelessly on following HASM’s work and assisting in its involvement in the political prisoners’ campaign. She also worked to and promote the
Arab Spring-themed concepts, disseminated further by HASM, of the right to protest, a fair trial, freedom of expression, to elect government, and the like. She was among the first, and according to some reports\(^{31}\) the first, to use the hashtag ‘e3teqal’. She used this as early as 2011 to promote and mobilize for these concepts and to disseminate information about protests and arrests online. She even held hunger strikes for many of these political causes.

This same hashtag would later form the ‘e3teqal’ Twitter account which was responsible for essentially running the political prisoner’s campaign on Twitter, up until 2013. In an informal conversation, she explained that often times dedicated ‘huqoqiyat’ would become ‘unofficial members’ of HASM in order to remain involved in their internal activist activities, have access to the activists, as well as court documents to follow events such as the HASM trials. However, they would not be listed or recognized as ‘official’ so as to evade repression of the security services. Despite such tactics, Nofah Abdulaziz is also an example of the costliness of asserting political agency, as this female voice was ultimately forced to go quiet.

Other examples of these ‘huqoqiyat’ are those that make up the ‘consciousness-raising association’, which was initiated at the start of these semi-public trials in October 2012 and remained active until January 2015. The association explained that it focused on “spreading political and rights consciousness in Saudi Arabia in an impartial manner. We [aim to] spread facts with impartiality and leave the opinion to you. We believe that

\(^{31}\) As recounted by the ‘w3i team’ activists at their website: w3iteam.wordpress.com.
change for the better begins with making the people aware of what is happening around them” and it promised “to produce a series of files on people’s movements, record political phenomena, and document what we are used to being forgotten. We hope this will help in spreading and learning from these [activist] experiences”32. The association covered the histories of each co-founder of HASM, it followed the trials, the concepts, causes, and individuals it adopted. In such works by the association the influence of HASM is clear as well, as they often focus on ‘rule of law’ and justice framings and particular laws, such as Article 114 of Saudi Arabia’s Law of Criminal Procedure.

What is most relevant is that it was also careful to equally focus on “the feminist movement in Saudi Arabia” and featured this on both its Twitter account and main website. It did so by following both ‘liberal’ activists and ‘Islamist’ activists. The emphasis on ‘impartiality’ in its founding statement stemmed from the fact that these women tended to view other women activists with concern, as they considered them to be partial to their causes, whether liberal or Islamist. For instance, the ‘huquqiyat’ chastises the “feminist silence on the arrests of women for political prisoners, under the claim that they are women with extremist ideas” which they hold as comparable to “conservative women, which make up most the women relatives of political prisoners, attack women who call for driving or elections, under the claim that they are liberal ideas”33.

For this reason, it is prudent to consider if, and how, members of the women’s driving campaign related to the HASM trials. One instance is apparent in how Eman al-Nafjan, a

32 As stated in the ‘w3i team’ website: w3iteam.wordpress.com.
33 As stated in the ‘w3i team’ website: w3iteam.wordpress.com.
co-founder of the ‘October 26’ driving campaign, describes Aziza al-Yousef: “she is the only Saudi woman to attend eight sessions of the ACPRA trials” (Al-Nafjan 2015). Other women, including those from the ‘October 26’ driving campaign, also accompanied al-Yousef. However, she attended the most sessions. Further support and intersections were also traced online. For instance, in recording reactions to the trial of prominent liberal activist and HASM member Waleed Abualkhair, al-Nafjan quotes al-Yousef who stated on July 2014: “how will we reach a civil society that supports the government in reaching safety when all the main promoters of civil society are behind bars” (Al-Nafjan 2015). In her post titled “Saudi Heroes” (Al-Nafjan 2015), she includes women’s driving feminist activists and HASM activist members and lawyers alike. Similarly, in July 18, 2013, she writes on how Saudi activists “hibernate after series of arrests” and lists activists, most noticeably numerous members of HASM, that were tried and sentenced. She also highlighted the first use of the new terror laws against HASM member Waleed Abualkhair (Al-Buluwi 2015). Additionally, Nasema al-Sadah, a member of Shia women’s initiatives in the Eastern Province as well as the ‘October 26’ driving campaign and the ‘Baladi’ campaign for women’s participation in municipal elections, stated during the trials, on March 9, 2013: “To stand balanced and according to principle, without being reactionary, and to demand justice for all with disregard for your own political identification or differences is true bravery and strength”\(^{34}\).

More surprising is that Manal al-Sharif also participated in such signs of support for HASM. This is surprising since it signifies a willingness to engage politically despite

\(^{34}\) As stated on al-Sadah’s Twitter account: @Nasema33.
repercussions of such, given her very high profile. Additionally, it is surprising given her
tendency to having previously aligned with more liberal positions, like Saudi women
activists of the 1990s, with a slight bias towards focusing on the social and unease
towards fully accepting political activism or reformist efforts from Tanwiri activists. This
evidenced the influence of the Arab Spring moment and the mutual influences between
movements which such conditions facilitated.

Specific examples of such is that al-Sharif posted on June 25, 2012 a statement issued by
HASM on the democratically just requirements of the Islamic Ba’aa. On November 24,
2012, during the trial of al-Qahtani and al-Hamid, she also showed support by repeating
the official Twitter account’s questioning “who truly is preventing development, us or
those who fence up lands?”35. This was a reference to their calls for political reform in
the form of a constitutional monarchy being met with charges of obstructing
development, which she compared as misplaced when compared to those who engage in
corruption such as arbitrary claims to urban land. Following the trials’ sentence, she
posted Marc Lynch’s article “Silent on Saudi Arabia” which supported the trial of HASM
members in March 20, 201336. Later, she drew a connection between the mutual struggle
and trial of feminist activists Wajeha al-Huwaider and Fawziyah al-Owaini and the trial
of HASM members. She exclaimed on June 16, 2013: “I washed my hands since the days
of the trial of HASM, but I convinced myself that there was a ‘strap’ of hope and kept
wishing. Today [after the trial of the feminist activists] I wash my hands with Clorox”37.

35 As stated on al-Sharif’s Twitter account: @Manal_AlSharif.
36 As stated on al-Sharif’s Twitter account: @Manal_AlSharif.
37 As stated on al-Sharif’s Twitter account: @Manal_AlSharif.
This was not a one-way involvement between Saudi feminists and the HASM trials, as there are also examples of how Saudi feminism and women’s political agency was featured as part of these trials. For, if we are to understand these trials as what many Saudis termed a “theater” or “drama” of staged activism with a widespread audience following it online, the inclusion of Saudi feminism is an important feature in showcasing how such political activism was not dichotomous to women’s activism.

One example occurred on April 24, 2013, during the third session of the trial of Abdulkarim al-Khodr, a HASM founding member, who was held in Buraidah. Ten Saudi women, that ranged in backgrounds from feminist and human rights activists to his own wife, attempted to attend as they had done in previous trials in order to witness the unfolding of events and disseminate it outside the courtroom. However, the judge denied their entry and quoted in defense the Quranic verse ‘and abide in your homes and do not display yourselves’ in objection to the presence of women activists in the public sphere and his courtroom in particular. The women, along with the HASM member, objected to this denial of their political agency and involvement. In fact, al-Khodr objected to attending the session altogether if the female allies were discriminated against and not allowed to attend. As a result, despite international condemnations from Amnesty International and the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, he was held for an extended 4 months in jail before the sessions began again and he was finally sentenced in June 24, 2013. This, too, is also an example of mutual movement convergences, as al-

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38 As recounted by HASM members and other activist witnesses.
Khodr was of the more conservative members of HASM and did not have to risk arrest to take such a position unless it had become central to these movements’ convergences, as encouraged and supported by the Arab Spring moment.

A day before this trial session, a Saudi woman journalist named Hind al-Asheq was careful to interview al-Khodr. In doing so, she was raising awareness of his case and was in support of the concepts associated with HASM, as a facilitator of Arab Spring-themed norms surrounding dignity, rights, and political involvement or more specifically for HASM the demand for legalized civil society. In tracing this intersection, it is noteworthy that the website, i.e. ‘Free Arabs’, which facilitated her political agency as a writer, was founded by key Arab Spring activists in North Africa and is of a liberal-leaning ideological background and position as well. She also utilized this to highlight the intersectional relationship between feminist women activists and HASM, particularly since al-Khodr was defined as of the Islamist reformist background within HASM. To do so, she asked about his position on women involvement in HASM, to which he replied “we are not against women’s involvement in the political realm” and frames his inclusive answer as legitimized based on the Islamic complementary concept of women and men relations (Al-Asheq 2013).

Further evidence of this is that on October 9, 2013, when Aziza al-Yousef, a prominent feminist activist and member of both women’s driving campaign, ‘October 26 Driving’, attended the trial of HASM’s youngest member, Umar al-Saeed. She recounts how, among the charges against al-Saeed, were his support for women’s rights. In doing so,
she critically wrote of the trial: “The judge asked Umar al-Saeed about his cooperation with the Shia [activists]! Isn’t that one of the goals of the National Dialogue is for!”39. She then recounts how Saudi feminism then took the stage, as the judge spoke to Umar al-Saeed and said that: you [read: HASM] are calling for women’s rights. What do you say of women’s rights?”. Al-Yousef then commented: “Wow, now women’s rights are a charge!”40.

This charge against al-Saeed was likely in response to his activities, which further display movement intersections, such as his physical presence and regular attendance at the trials for Saudi feminist protestors for political prisoners in combination with his publicizing such trials with pictures and written updates on Twitter, as well as his support of their cause with the use of Arab Spring-themed and HASM practiced rights rhetoric. For instance, when commentators questioned what the judge had done wrong to the female protestors, he would explain publically that: “the judge forbid the women from the chance to request an attorney, or enough time for them to prepare their defenses, and he denied them their right to a public trial, and the charges against them are substantively void”41. Additionally, he posted this online following the judge objecting to their presence in court, in which he declared in protest: “after women were banned from entering, Abdulaziz al-Shubaili (the women’s lawyer and HASM member) will not enter the courtroom and we will not utter another word until everyone is allowed to enter the

39 As stated on al-Yousef’s Twitter account: @AzizaYousef.
40 As stated on al-Yousef’s Twitter account: @AzizaYousef.
41 As stated on al-Saeed’s Twitter account: @181Umar.
session”⁴². Later, he explains to a supporter the concept of women’s right to voting in the following way: “Before there was democracy, there was the political system of the Rashidun. After Omar’s death they would ask women and record their vote for the next Caliphate”⁴³.

4) Women Activists for Political Prisoners, HASM, and the Arab Spring

What the year of 2011 offered that the year of 2007 did not for these women activists of the political prisoners’ campaign was the “movement moment” of the Arab Spring and its accompanied resources of mobilization tools such as social media. Under such conditions, structural constrains were disrupted. These Saudi women activists began the well-known Facebook page titled ‘Prisoners Until When?’ which was the first space created for the purpose of public mobilization and detailed organizing for this campaign. It has also been cited that this was done in coordination with HASM (Ottaway 2011: 10), although this is difficult to verify at this time.

The first manifestation of its mobilizing capabilities came on February 2, 2011, in which around 18 women activists, coming from varied cities, held a protest in front of the Ministry of Interior in Riyadh for the political prisoners’ campaign. Rather than outright calling it a protest, the women activists labeled it a ‘visit’. This resulted in their arrests and release shortly after, following their signing of pledges to not repeat their ‘visit’

⁴² As stated on al-Saeed’s Twitter account: @181Umar.
⁴³ As stated on al-Saeed’s Twitter account: @181Umar.
again. This ought to be understood as not only the first protest under an organized campaign for political prisoners, but also evidence of women activists’ practice and assertion of their political agency. This is because it was done in an effort to challenge the ‘open door route’, which is a policy that states government officials’ doors are to be literally opened every Friday to the public. This is an indirect challenge to the political system as well as political rights or the lack thereof in Saudi Arabia. This is because this policy in particular is often emphasized by Saudi officials as the appropriate route for grievances and, since it invites participation of people in governance by virtue of the availability of ‘open doors’, it is also emphasized as evidence of a sort of pseudo-political right and pseudo-democratic method of governance.

This was followed by a much larger protest of 200 on March 13, 2011 that included both men and women. Feminist activists such as Nouf Abdulaziz were among those in contact with the protestors and disseminated their demands and information of events ‘on the ground’ to others online as part of a mobilizing effort. While she did not attend herself, she explained that, “some of my relatives are there”\textsuperscript{44}. This included critique of governmental responses to the protest, legitimizing calls for political rights, and an emphasis on utilizing justice framing and rights-based rhetoric prevalent during the Arab Spring. In line with the women’s protestors of February 2011, Nouf Abdulaziz described them in her online posts as ‘protestors’ (mu’tasameen) and contrasted that the fact that the police were treating them like ‘rioters’ (mutathahereen) \textsuperscript{45}. This was in an effort to

\textsuperscript{44} As stated in Abdulaziz’s Twitter account: @Nofah1.
\textsuperscript{45} As stated in Abdulaziz’s Twitter account: @Nofah1.
evade claims of the activists’ breaking laws against protesting in Saudi Arabia, which uses the term ‘muthaharat’ rather than ‘e’tesam’.

Similar protests were held during the year of 2011, most prominently on March 20, April 10, April 21, July 3, October 9, and November 28. The protest on March 20 marked the largest of these, as its participants reached 400 women and men. Of these protestors, 50 women activists were arrested and spent a night in al-Hayer prison and were released the next day following their signing pledges. This was a first for most of them and shocked many onlookers in their local community and online. Additionally, one of HASM’s co-founders was arrested, the first of which to be arrested during the Arab Spring. His name was Mohammad al-Bajadi and, among Saudi activists, he was often promoted as the ideal image of an Arab Spring rights activist. This is because, upon his arrest, a policemen questioned why he supported campaigners that were relatives of political prisoners when he has no relatives in jail, to which he is said to have replied: “all political prisoners are my family”46. He was also imprisoned for his support of the previously mentioned women’s protest for political prisoners that occurred in 2007, before such efforts had organized into a campaign. One of the later-prominent women’s activist named Bahiya al-Rashoudi, who was also the daughter of the HASM co-founder Suleiman al-Rashoudi, was among those arrested following this protest. In defense of the political right to protest, she wrote a public letter47 directed to the king and disseminated it online.

46 As recounted by activist witnesses.
47 As read in now-deleted Facebook post by al-Rashoud, archived via Twitmail account: @ARashed11.
The letter detailed the nature of the arrests of the participating women activists, including her own sisters, and evoked a combination of justice and sympathy framing as well as protectionist notions of women. This can be understood as in effort to mobilize support for the political right of protest and the legitimacy for making such political demands as fair trials, obtaining attorneys, treatment of prisoners in jails, or the release following lengthy stays in prison for untried prisoners or prisoners that have been tried and found innocent but were not released. With such calls evoking the norm of the rule of law that grew prominent during the Arab Spring, al-Rashoudi explained, on the one hand, her demand for the release of her father and HASM co-founder, but, on the other hand that “our goal was not protests or otherwise”\(^{48}\). Although this can be read initially as denying the women activists’ political agency, it was a tactic evade the counter-framing of their inherently political challenges as hypocritical being demands the implementation of law when they, themselves, were breaking the Saudi anti-protest laws\(^{49}\). Similarly, the letter concluded with the term ‘nunashed’ to emphasize that the activists were appealing rather than demanding the King to address their campaign\(^{50}\). These were confirmed to be intentional tactics to the ‘wa3i team’ of rights activists at a time when these women were still willing to discuss such matters for it to be recorded in online sources.

In line with al-Rashoudi’s letter, protests then began to adopt prognostic framing that focused on the necessity of reforming political rights and the lack of respect of such by the Ministry of Interior. An example of how this played out in the campaign’s tactics is

\(^{48}\) As read in now-deleted Facebook post by al-Rashoud, archived via Twitmail account: @ARashed11.

\(^{49}\) As read in now-deleted Facebook post by al-Rashoud, archived via Twitmail account: @ARashed11.

\(^{50}\) As observed by the ‘w3i team’ activists at their website: w3iteam.wordpress.com.
when the protestors began to gather at the Royal Diwan or primary executive office of then-King Abdullah and the Board of Grievances on April 10. These were publicized on the ‘Prisoners Until When?’ Facebook pages as well as various Twitter accounts. This is particularly for the incident in which two judges emerged from the Board of Grievances to explain to the protestors that “the Royal Diwan has no authority over the General Security Services”, which was evoked to question the political system and promote the Arab Spring emphasis on rule of law.

In contrast, the following protests in July and October of 2011 were at the Ministry of Interior, in which 15 women activists were arrested. While it was not possible to find women activists from these particular protests willing to recount their perspective for this thesis research, activists in support of HASM who had spoken to such sources in 2013 when there was still a willingness to do so present and found that: “following the arrests of October 9, 2011, the families lost hope in solutions [that involved trying to contact officials] and sought to mobilize at an escalated level”\textsuperscript{51} through continuing their series of protests. An example of this frustration is a short, objecting letter spread online following the arrests, it was to the King from a mother of one of the younger male protestors (aged 16) to be arrested that day. She also demanded the release of her husband in that letter, but only her son was released the next day.

In the year of 2012, the most prominent protests were held on July 25, September 24, October 8, November 4, and November 27. The aforementioned “escalation” came in two

\textsuperscript{51} As recounted by activists for the ‘w3i team’ archive at their website: w3iteam.wordpress.com.
forms. The first was flash protests in unorthodox locations, in particular popular shopping malls, such as those in June and September 2012. The second was the prevalence of “sit-ins”, rather than protests, which became highly common and promoted by the campaign into 2013. This promoting is also reflectant in similar “sit-in” tactics used by the Saudi women university students at the same time. During such sit-ins for political prisoners, the Arab Spring norm of “peaceful” was used in familiar revolutionary slogans such as ‘salmiyyah, salmiyyah’. This slogan was found on numerous protest posters that the women activists took along with them.

In the protest of July 25, 2012, around 70 women activists participated. What was unique of this protest was that it was held in Jeddah’s division of the Ministry of Interior, yet, due to the campaign’s ability to mobilize, participants from Riyadh, al-Qassim, al-Jouf, Jazan, Abha, Tabouk, Dammam, and others, had joined. The pretext for the protest was an appointment with the Minister of Interior to discuss the campaign’s demands. However, due to their large numbers and willingness to hold a sit-in in wait for the Minister, the security services and military officers negotiated until the protest ended with 5 members offering their contact information to attend the appointment at a later date. This led to the arrest of one of them and the rest evading arrest by returning to their home cities. A video of women in attendance was found posted online, in which they hold up the campaign’s title ‘Prisoners Until When?’ as well as state their demands to their fellow male activists recording them.
Following this, on August 19, 2012, the activist Reema al-Juraish, who was part of the first protest in 2007, had attempted to hand out around 500 Eid presents that included letters in an effort to raise awareness for the political prisoners’ campaign. She explained that, “At 4:30am, I headed to the Eid mosque with my gifts. About 100 meters away from my house, a car tried to stop us and they pointed machine guns at us… For an hour, they questioned me and tried to look for supposed explosives within those boxes. Finally, they told me to write down my confession” (Khalid 2012).

In the ‘tarafiyyah sit-in’ of September 24, 2012, a protest was held outside al-Tarafiyya prison and the date was intentionally planned to coincide with the Saudi National Day and thus highly followed on Twitter. It had 45 women activists present. The choice of the Saudi National Day was, on the one hand, a bid to mobilize the Saudi public and gain its attention. On the other hand, it ought to also be understood as a critique of Saudi national citizenship in that it was a protest against limited or unimplemented political rights in the backdrop of a day which is meant to celebrate the nation itself. Again, Reema al-Juraish, whose husband has been illegally detained for the past 8 years and she too has been arrested briefly after taking part in protests against his detainment, spoke to Reuters before participating in the al-Tarifiyah sit-in and (likely because of that) was later specifically targeted and physically attacked by officers. She had to recover in a hospital afterwards, but did not hesitate to speak\textsuperscript{52} to Al-Hurra Channel regarding the treatment she received. This was among the first protests in which the campaign emphasized

\textsuperscript{52} “Reema al-Juraish on al-Hurra Channel 12/11/1433 Exposes Mohammed bin Nayef.” YouTube. Online video clip, \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1xGC7m_JU}.
Aside from these sit-ins, women activists featured prominently during this time, partially due to the fact that arrests of their men counterparts had increased. For instance, the protests of October 8 and November 4, 2012, included only women activists, and ranged from 11 to 14 participants, including some of their children. The protests were held at the Bureau of Investigation and Public Prosecution, as well as the Courts Complex in Buraidah. A video was recorded and released of a woman activist holding up protest signs and speaking directly to the officers at the Bureau of Investigation and Public Prosecution. They list their demands and exclaim, “We went to the Ministry of Interior, you shut the doors. We went to the courts, you shut the doors. We went to the Bureau of Investigation twice, and you shut the doors. Where do we reach our voices? When your doors are shut? The media says the doors are open”, after which the video is cut off when the officer points the woman activist to a police car that turns on its sirens as it approaches.

On November 27, 2012, a similar protest was held at the National Society for Human Rights, but included men and around 22 women. Because of its location, this protest was widely covered in international media. In this instance, the campaign was able to capture a picture of policemen circling the protestors in preparation of their arrest and preventing their leaving the scene, which included women. This was utilized online to evoke

protectionist notions of women. Commentators used justice framing to condemn the willingness of the officers to be in such close physical proximity to the women protestors in the absence of their guardians. This marked the start of the peak of confrontations between the protestors and the police, which only increased in prominent protests which occurred in 2013, following which many arrests occurred and repression, in combination with the trials of HASM and a shift in the “Arab Spring moment”, meant a dramatic decrease in the political prisoners’ campaign’s presence off, and even on, social media.

This peak played out in the following instances in the year of 2013: confirmed protests held on January 5, February 9, and February 25. This was also facilitated by the very prominent lecture\textsuperscript{54} of HASM’s co-founder Suleiman al-Rashoudi, its oldest member and likely most respected in Islamist circles. In this December 11, 2012 lecture, which was followed by his arrest, al-Rashoudi presented an extensive argument that protest of the state was, in fact, not ‘haram’ or against Islam.

The most influential of these protests, by far, was the 18-woman protest at the Royal Diwan in Buraidah on January 5, 2013. It was influential not only because of the women activists’ participation in itself, but also because of the officer’s reaction to these women. In this protest, the women were surrounded in a similar fashion as they were in the earlier protest of November 27, 2012. However, this time, there were no other men present and the image of male officers surrounding a lone group of women was galvanizing to the Saudi public and caused a vast increase in mobilization for the cause. Additionally, all of

\textsuperscript{54} “Sit-Ins and Protests in Islam, by the former judge Suleiman al-Rashoudi.” YouTube. Online video clip, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn1xGC7m_JU.
the women had been arrested and eye-witness reports circled on social media that described the arrest as forceful.

Thus, what was unique in this instance was their justice framing efforts, as the women activists began to report details of how the officers attempted to use force, including physically assault them. It brought the role of these women activists to the forefront as key mobilizers. One such report came from the women activists themselves. For instance, in their public statement\textsuperscript{55} following their release, which had over 33,300 readers, the women activists explained that the religious police were present and “the security services threatened the women with electric tasers so that they were would get in the [security services] buses with representatives of the religious police, of which one of them said ‘hit them and pull them by force’”. They also recounted police officers hitting them, as well as female officers showing up for similar purposes. Their statement also recounts their transfer between jails, their experiences of being invasively searched before allocated a jail cell, and their interactions with the judge during their trial. They concluded, “while we signed the pledges, we told the judge verbally that we would protest again”\textsuperscript{56}.

Due to public pressure, seven of the women activists were released the next morning. However, the remaining 11 women activists remained detained for five days and were put on trial. The women who were over the age of 30 and held in prisons were tried on January 9 and released, whereas the women who were younger than 30 were transferred

\textsuperscript{55} As recounted in the movement’s Twitmail account at @Letter_E3teqal: http://bit.ly/2b0aBGC.
\textsuperscript{56} As recounted in the movement’s Twitmail account at @Letter_E3teqal: http://bit.ly/2b0aBGC.
to a women’s shelter (prisons for Saudi women under the age of 30) in Riyadh and tried on January 13. These women activists’ defense teams included prominent lawyers affiliated with HASM, Ibrahim al-Modamaigh and Abdulaziz al-Hussan. Following this, the women were all released, likely in part due to the level of public attention and critique. This was particularly the case since the public prosecutor of the women in Buraidah had requested the women be punished by flogging, which was reported online by Abdullah al-Saeed, the brother of HASM’s youngest co-founder, Umar al-Saeed57.

As evidence of the influence of HASM, upon the announcement of the trial of these women, there were numerous calls online for the trials to be open to the public, as people wished to attend. Many activists did try to attend, but were either not allowed into the court building or, if they were, were not allowed into the court room. The activists that did make it into the court building in Buraidah witnessed the women activists entering their trials and “constrained with chains” which, upon such fact being posted online, started an online campaign to change profile pictures to black “which truly found a widespread support from Saudi Twitter users”.

Many very prominent Saudi Islamists, particularly of the Sururiyah trend, spoke out against the women activists’ trial and detainment. This is particularly significant, since most such Islamists were hesitant to do so outright since the time of the arrest of Yousef al-Ahmed, who was arrested for his video on July 9, 2011 in support of the women activists of the political prisoners campaign and against their arrests following a protest at

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57 As stated on al-Saeed’s Twitter account: @181Umar.
the Ministry of Interior on July 2, 2011. Among those that spoke out were, again, Yousef al-Ahmed (released on November 12, 2012), as well as Salman al-Oudah, Naser al-Omar, Mohammed al-Hodaif, Ibrahim al-Faris, Abdulaziz al-Matrafi, and others58.

Additionally, the women activists’ legal defense team, including two lawyers publically affiliated with HASM, played a key role in their highlighting physical assaults against their clients and their pushing for coverage in local media. The head of Buraidah police made an unprecedented public statement to address the claims and said, “aside from it being legally forbidden, the beating women is not of the morals of service men” and agreed to forward their complaints to the General Bureau of Investigation and prosecution (An7a al-Watan 2013).

Another issue the campaign seized upon was the way in which the women activists had been divided, as some stayed in the Buraidah jail while others were sent to Riyadh’s Social Care House for Girls. In their statement, titled “the kidnapped Buraidah women”59, which echoed their lawyers’ statement in this respect, pointed out the fact that a ‘mahram’ or legal guardian and lawyer was not present during their arrest, interrogation, or during this transfer to Riyadh. They explained that, “we asked for our mahram but they told us the religious police were our mahram… crazy! If the religious police are our mahram, why can’t we uncover in front of them? What kind of religion or custom allows this?”. Interestingly, the lawyers described objecting to this as the height of the Islamic principle “promoting virtue and preventing vice”.

58 As observed by the ‘w3i team’ archive at their website: w3iteam.wordpress.com.
59 As archived in the movement’s Twitmail account at @Letter_E3teqal: http://bit.ly/2b0aBGC.
Following the numerous protests and arrests, at this point, a strong network of women activists had formed. However, as will be shown, just as this happened, the state began to target them individually. In less than a month, women activists protested on February 9, 2013, in the same location of the Royal Diwan in Buraidah. In fact, “most of them had been previously tried or signed pledges to not return to protesting”, yet continued to do so. This protest was also held in coordination with women protesting at the same time in Riyadh in front of the National Society of Human Rights. One of their demands included “independence of the judiciary”, “fair trials for the detained”, “release of our prisoners without trial”, “the release of Suleiman al-Rashoudi” and “halting symbolic trials”, likely in reference to the prominent and then on-going, semi-public trial sessions against HASM co-founders al-Hamid and al-Qahtani. It was also observed that: “they were all arrested right away in both Buraidah and Riyadh. Some violations were recorded, such as removing the veil of a young woman in Riyadh and beatings in al-Qassim”\textsuperscript{60}.

The Ministry of Interior released all the women on the same day, except those that had previously protested in an attempt to pinpoint the main coordinators of the repeated protests. The women that were not released were transferred to general prisons in preparation for their trials. In Buraidah, many male guardians held a protest in objection to this and the women were released without trial after three days. In Riyadh, three women were released on bail and their trials postponed to a later session date, in which they received harsh jail sentences.

\textsuperscript{60} As recounted by activists for the ‘w3i team’ archive at their website: w3iteam.wordpress.com.
According to the court’s decision of March 12, 2013, which was issued at a time when the trials of HASM co-founders were also occurring, the activist Bahiah Suleiman al-Rashoudi, also daughter of reformist and HASM co-founder Sueilman al-Rashoudi, received a sentence of four months in jail. Similarly, Hanan al-Ameri and Hamidah al-Ghamdi were sentenced to two months in jail. The decision explained that these sentences were with a suspension of execution, where the enforcement of such would occur “in the case any of them repeat this same act or if they post anything on social media or traditional media sources that includes calls for protests (using both phrases ‘muthaharat’ and ‘e’tesamat’, thus incorporating the rhetoric the protestors had used) and calls for incitement against the wali al-amir (government)”\textsuperscript{61}. It went on to state: “this judgment would be implemented for those who proven to have repeated such actions and, in addition to this, there will be no obstacle to also accepting a separate case to be brought against them with a separate decision of punishment”\textsuperscript{62}. The women were charged with impeding development, inciting public opinion, and blocking three main road. The first charge, namely that of impeding development, is also a charge that became well-known and ridiculed as part of the charges brought against al-Hamid and al-Qahtani in the first HASM trials.

Shortly after this, beginning on February 25, 2013, a three-week long series of sit-ins began. It included the setting up of tents, and protests, were started by these same women activists and others. It was observed that, “the women’s participation caused the

\textsuperscript{61} Copy of court decision against women activists.
\textsuperscript{62} Copy of court decision against women activists.
campaign to reach the level of a public issue”. It began with an announcement on the Twitter account called “e3teqal” which was among those responsible for coordinating the campaign. The account posted that: “Today's announcement will be extraordinary. It will break the walls of fear for many young people, that's what we say to the interior ministry. Our activism has been peaceful and it will remain peaceful and legitimate”.

And on the first day of what came to be known as “e’tesam Buraidah” (the Buraidah protest), a woman burned a picture of the then-Minister of Interior, Mohammed bin Nayef63. This was the first time such imagery could be seen publically in Saudi Arabia among activities other than Shia protests in al-Qatif. The women activists also brought bullhorns with them to publically announce their demands. Furthermore, many of these women activists would post the happenings online, such as one who “tweeted a series of photos of the police force closing the roundabout, surrounding them, arresting pedestrians and filming what was happening” and explained that: “With the presence of all these forces, I would like to tell Mohammad bin Nayef that detainment will not stop us from demanding the release of our prisoners whose freedoms and souls you took” (Khalid 2013). Such female activists’ sentiments were also disseminated by the official HASM accounts online as well (Khalid 2013).

Initially, the sit-in was not planned, but because of the arrests happening when activists began to leave the scene the next day, the women decided to stay. As a result of them not having brought supplies and as a sign of the, they began to announce the need for such

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63 “Burning Mohammed bin Nayef’s Picture at e’tesam Buraidah.” YouTube. Online video clip, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8a0lURbNSvA.
supplies online. Supporters would stop by with blankets, food, diabetes medication, and other necessities. This highlighted the effectiveness of the campaign. Many of these supporters were soon arrested, such as Houd al-Aqail who was also affiliated with HASM and had brought blankets for the women. His sister, Khawla al-Aqail, spoke against this publically and questioned the state’s authority in doing so. While her own activism did not include joining these protests, she did, however, hang large protest signs from her home’s rooftop as well as speak in interviews64 to Arab media channels to highlight not only the arrest of her brother, but the campaign in general.

Another noteworthy aspect of this protest is that, in addition to supporters visiting the site, more women protestors joined in from the streets. By the third day of the sit-in, however, all of the women were arrested. At the same time, a video was released by the campaign online called “the crimes of the Ministry of Interior”, which gained unprecedented salience for the campaign and over half a million views online. This assertion of political agency brought these particular women activists’ names to the forefront of the campaign at an unprecedented degree.

Following their arrest, the women were tried and held for around 28 days. This was not familiar territory for the activists of the ‘Prisoners Until When?’ campaign, as women were typically tried and sentenced, but ultimately released without a lengthy sentence.

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Additionally, there were reports again that the women were beaten while detained and they began tactics such as hunger strikes. Some of the women activists, such as Aminah al-Rashid, explained that other activists like Reema al-Juraish were taken to a hospital as a result of this. They would also often emphasize the denial of access to attorneys as well, which was in line with the norm of rule of law that had gained pertinence. A video of the mother of the activist Reem al-Moqbel was also posted online and gained over 40 thousand views. In it, she appears very distraught, describes her daughter as “kidnapped”, and asks where her daughter is or what will become of her, thus adding to a public sense of the women activists’ plight.

With such stories heard and events occurring, numerous protests occurred in Buraidah, Onaizah, al-Russ, Riyadh, al-Jouf, cities in the North and South for the release of these women. There were even protests in front of the Saudi embassy in Kuwait as well as a protest in Morocco. These protests were held outside prisons, Boards of Investigation and Prosecution, police stations, and a mall. Numerous male relatives were arrested during these protests, some released later, while others were not. More importantly, many supportive protestors who did not have arrested relatives, and thus no direct grievance related to the campaign, began to join in such protests as well. This evidenced perhaps the peak of its mobilizing efforts. Women were also present at these protests too. For instance, around 25 women were present at a protest on February 28, 2013. Other times,
such as on March 15, 2013, women would hold ‘inside protests’ where they would gather in large groups inside their homes, hold up signs and declare various slogans, and then be able to post it online as a form of picture or video protest. This is because women who would not ordinarily assert their political agency sought out a method of doing so that would have the least amount of repercussions.

Among the slogans used was the Arab Spring-inspired shants “The people want the freeing of the prisons”, “down, down with Bin Nayef” and a protest held in desert area was called “Friday of rage”. There were also campaign-specific slogans like “do not worry prisoners, we will persevere”, or “mabaheth and police, go tell on us to the Ministry of Interior”. Or slogans that evoked HASM-like rhetorical claims, “try the prisoners or let them go free”. More novel were slogans directly about the arrested women activists, which typically took on gendered protectionist framings: “Bin Nayef, you coward, keep your hands off women” and “Bin Nayef don’t be forceful… women are a red line”, “Our women will not be humiliated, leave, leave you coward”, “Oh for shame, Bin Nayef is playing with fire”. In this way, the women activists were a kind of loophole that facilitated many protests to occur and facilitated a case where making political critique and demands, including the act of figuratively drawing red lines for the government, was widely supported by the general Saudi public.

This was further the case when al-Sharq newspaper issued an ill-advised title for their coverage of the protests which described the government as “cleansing Buraidah”. This caused widespread condemnation of the portrayal of the protestors as offensive and some
employees of the newspaper even resigned in protest of this as well, causing the newspaper to apologize and retract its framing of the events and thus indirectly legitimize the protestors further. Following public pressure, on March 3, 2013, the Ministry of Culture and Media also reported the al-Sharq and al-Iqtisadiyyah newspapers to one of its committees that oversee violations of media laws as well (News Qassim 2013).

Amidst the three-week Buraidah sit-in, HASM reacted by holding an ithniniyah lecture on March 5, 2013, titled “The Protests of Buraidah and a Peaceful Movement” by co-founder Mohammed al-Qahtani and Mohammed al-Abdulkarim. This lecture was posted only days before the court decision against al-Qahtani and his subsequent arrest on March 9, 2013.

Also on March 9, 2013, the Prince of al-Qassim met with the direct families of the most prominent women activists who were arrested. A delegation of “businessmen and shaiks chosen by the Ministry of Interior met with these relatives of the women activists, namely, of May al-Talq, Reem al-Moqbel, Aminah al-Rashid, and Reema al-Juraish” and explained they were responsible for “solving the issue of political prisoners” and that they could visit them. However, the families refused and demanded the women’s release68. On March 11, 2013, a judge in Buraidah ordered the release of 9 women activists, other than the aforementioned. At the same time, a judge named Nayef al-Qafari resigned and cited the issue of political prisoners as one of his main reasons for doing so.

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68 As recounted for the ‘w3i team’ archive at their website: w3iteam.wordpress.com.
(ElMarsad 2014). He was widely praised online for this move. Following this, a mix of trials and releases of protestors occurred for both men and women.

One interesting case that shows the focus of the campaign on the rule of law, in combination with its use of the male guardianship system towards this goal, is the case of when a questionable delegation of men from Buraidah visited Prince Mohammed bin Nayef to plead for a pardon of the four most prominent women activists. In response, the relatives of these women activists issued a joint stating, naming the men of the delegation as unaffiliated to them and that “these names do not represent us and we do not accept their speaking with the imprisoned women inside jail. For we object to the presence of investigators without mahrams, so of course we object to those who don’t even have any official status such as these”. The Twitter account which coordinates the campaign also released a second statement, described as “very important delegation of the case”, in which the same relatives of the women activists explain they willingly delegate the case to a lawyer named Essam al-Mash’aly.

This was in an effort to contrast their choice to that of the aforementioned (and likely government-assigned) delegation which was described as “the families considered it to be an attempt to excuse their having been kidnapped without respect of legal protocols or judicial oversight”. Following this, a very widely-read “open letter” was released by

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69 As archived in al-Oudah’s Twitmail account at @Salman_AIOdah: http://bit.ly/1C7yEOe.
Salman al-Oudah in support of the campaign on March 17, 2013. Shortly after this, the women were released on March 26, 2013\(^7\).

The aforementioned examples of events, campaign tactics, and its literature, show the intersection between women activists for the political prisoners’ campaign, the Arab Spring moment and discourses or norms that came with it, the HASM-promoted framings and tactics, as well as how elements of the social like gendered protectionism were used in such efforts against the structure of the state. This challenges assumptions of women activists as lacking political agency or as having campaigns that inevitably act as functions of the state, in one way or another.

It was significantly difficult to gain compliance to interview women activists that were part of this campaign for political prisoners, as most of them have chosen to remain low-profile particularly since the period following the HASM trials. Nonetheless, two participants finally agreed to be interviewed for the purposes of this thesis research. Their perspectives highlight the campaign’s relationship to the Arab Spring, HASM, and their practices and conceptions of women’s political agency itself and as related to the other Saudi women’s campaigns.

One of these interviewees is named Bayan al-Bajadi, she is from Buraidah and is a cousin of Mohammad al-Bajadi, the first HASM co-founder to join the first protest with women activists of this cause and be arrested and tried in a secret court in 2011 and was only

\(^7\) As observed in the ‘w3i team’ archive at their website: w3iteam.wordpress.com.
recently released. The other interviewee is Sabreen al-Theeb, who had two relatives that were arbitrarily arrested, and participated in a protest in Riyadh.

In considering the Arab Spring moment, Sabreen al-Theeb observed that: “since the e’tisamat (protests) happened at the early stages of the Arab Spring, it might have had an unintentional affect in terms of revolutionary ideas and real-life images and its closeness to the people’s inner consciousness and thus encouraged their willingness to do more. However, even if there wasn’t an Arab Spring, that wouldn’t have stopped the idea of demonstrations because inner pressure to do so was spread among the families that were hit the hardest and thus had stronger motivation”. On the other hand, Bayan al-Bajadi thinks that, “the government created injustice and the Arab Spring created the bravery to face that injustice”. Specifically, she observed that, “Of course the Arab Spring had a great effect on my participation in activism (demonstrating, distributing leaflets, posting mobilizing messages around the city, etc). I think it [the Arab Spring] also caused the series of big demonstrations [for political prisoners] too”.

However, al-Bajadi explains how, “the issue of political prisoners is a very old one” and so it is not uncommon to be perceived as an issue preceding the Arab Spring. She goes on to explain, “since I live in a city (Buraidah) where most of its youth are active, revolutionary, so I hear all the time, since I was younger, about the youth’s confrontations with the state”. Al-Bajadi drew the start of the issue to two waves of arrests in her city, in the years 2004 and 2006. She explained that: “this was a really sad event, because [from then on] it was impossible to meet at our family get-togethers
without my seeing, with my own eyes, older mothers and wives with broken hearts over
their sons and husbands that have been arrested for months without any clear reason and
without trial. But the one solace for this despair was that this pain was going to end soon,
with releases instead of trials – or so the promises went”.

She explained that the families remained quiet at first, likely referring to the early 2000s,
but that they would meet regularly. “I don’t know if they did that to comfort each other or
to agree on ways to make it easier to reach ‘the big head’ [read: the state] so that it may
release their sons”, she commented. During that time, she observed how these women
mostly remained silent, their activism minimal and without echo or affect. Al-Bajadi said
that this could have been due to fear that ‘the walls have ears’, that activism was haram,
or because the activism they were willing to do was just too timid to garner any attention.
“In any case, what I know is that since the beginning of the Arab Spring, many things
exploded. Fear from the state was less, the degree of bravery was higher, and freedom
was redefined a million times”, she explained. Al-Bajadi then recounted events of the
Arab Spring as inspiring and declared them proof that “so, the state isn’t immortal. It
isn’t as strong as we think”.

On the other hand, in regards to the question of HASM’s connection to the campaign, al-
Bajadi characterized it as such: “HASM is amazing, it doesn’t look at any religion, sect,
nationality, color, or race. It defended all the prisoners when it said ‘they must be tried in
open trials’ or else be released immediately, or jailed for a specific (rather than open-
ended) time, or even death penalty if they deserve it”. This confirms previously drawn
connections between the language and tactics popularized by HASM and these women’s activism. Similarly, Sabreen al-Theeb answered: “HASM was a free and peaceful movement that called for legitimate (shar’i) and rights-based reforms. It helped greatly in raising awareness among people of society and their elites that are in great need of political reform. In terms of their connection to the political prisoners’ campaign, they helped in an unforgettable way and it is enough to say that some of its members were arrested because of their concern, their taking stands, and their attendance at the demonstrations of the political prisoners”. It is clear from these answers that HASM provided both practical as well as symbolic resources for this women’s campaign for political prisoners.

In considering the relationship between HASM, this campaign, as well as the other women’s campaigns, al-Bajadi remarked: “there is a connection somewhat between the political prisoners’ campaign and other campaigns for women’s driving, elections, and the like. I defend the right of the prisoners because of his right to a fair trial that the state denied him this right. I also defend my right to drive a car and my right to elections. And my right to a lifting of the male guardianship, because I am an adult. And much else… all of it is rights denied by the state, which has everything in its hands”. And that, “rights are one and indivisible and that who is responsible [for their absence] is one”. This convergence of perspective and connection of movements is interesting and can be understood best in light of this Arab Spring “movement moment”.


When asked about the women activists of the other women’s campaigns, al-Bajadi felt that: “in terms of the feminist activists, I noticed they really cared about HASM as HASM, they liked it as a peaceful movement. But I don’t think they all agreed that the prisoners deserved a fair trial, at all”, this is in line with the aforementioned concerns shared by other ‘huquqiyat’ or female rights activists. This is reflectant in al-Theeb’s answer, as well, who stated: “there is no connection at all between the political prisoners’ campaign and other campaigns for women's driving or elections and the like”.

The fact that al-Theeb was likely motivated by similar concerns for impartiality and fairness is clear in her response as to whether her participation in the campaign is rightly characterized as private claims to the state, i.e. meaning the campaign would be a form of patriarchic bargaining in that it would hold the state as a source of services for their respective group. She responded that: “throughout my interest in the political prisoners’ campaign, I did not once raise a protest sign for the imprisoned of my own family. I dealt with it as a broader principle, as comprehensive for the near and the far, of stopping harshness and authoritarianism towards the issue of political prisoners. Also, if your own personal problems led you to care for others that are similar that is normal and natural behavior and it does not contradict or conflict [with general rights projects]. In fact, if the issue had remained as strictly out of personal interest and 'just my family’ type of thinking, then everyone would have remained in circles of wastas (meaning to extract benefits with briberies and patronage) and ‘request petitions’ for such would be used, without the need for widening the circle. But, instead, it shifted to a larger scale, to the
benefit of general rights for all. And this is how things begin usually, the family connection was a motivating factor”.

Moreover, evidence that the Arab Spring facilitated such a broadening of principle and appeal for the activists can be seen in al-Bajadi’s comment that: “as a result of this [ideas and images of the Arab Spring], the issue of arbitrary arrests became not just about the families, it became a public issue. In fact, some families were the ones that were silent because they feared what the government would do or because they agreed with it. The prisoners started to have people that don’t even know them defend them out of principle that any prisoner, whoever it may be, has the right to a fair and open trial”.

Finally, both interviewees found claims that they should not leave their homes as “patriarchal”, asserting their feminist stances on this particular form of women’s political agency. Sabreen al-Theeb highlighted her frustration at social constraints against these activists in stating: “patriarchy, even in our calls for rights. May god help us with the mentality of some men of our society. In general, we hear similar objections against everything women do. This is the result of the cultural and social makeup of the Saudi society specifically.”. Whereas al-Bajadi said that, although patriarchal, “there were women who did adopt this view and still went out to demonstrate. Their excuse was ‘there are no men at home, they are all in jail’, and so they had to go out of the home instead”. Additionally, al-Bajadi found that, for women, it was still “easier by levels for women to protest in comparison to men”.
Conclusion

This chapter was the second of two chapters to consider Saudi women activists’ political agency. In this chapter, the early events of the Arab Spring in 2011-2013, their effect on Saudi Arabia, and how it shaped Saudi women’s activism was first briefly introduced. Following this, prominent examples from this “Arab Spring” moment, and their intersection with other activists like HASM, were considered. These were defined and analyzed in this section as follows: first, women’s driving campaign, second, women’s university protests, third, the first semi-public trials of HASM and women activists’ involvement in such, and fourth, women activists for political prisoners. Such examples were crucial to consider as evidences against the absence of political agency of Saudi women activists and feminist movements in the Arab Spring moment as being dichotomous to other political activists and movements. Relying heavily on primary sources and interviews, this chapter sought to highlight Saudi women as political agents, beyond being inescapably a function of the state, whether as legitimizers or patriarchic bargainers, or trapped in the state’s role of being a distracting topic of debate instead of contributive to more ‘serious’ matters of political reform.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

**Summary of Thesis and Conclusions**

In conclusion, the aim of this thesis was to answer the central research question posed in this thesis: given that the agency of Saudi feminist movements has held an unclear status as trapped by religion and society on the one hand, or as tools of legitimation for authoritarian states on the other hand, do Saudi women activists display any political agency at all? How and in what empowering and creative ways have they tried to posit such agency? Under what conditions was this possible?

In doing so, it problematized an assumption of structural pervasiveness and showcased how Saudi female activists do, in fact, posit political agency. This was accomplished by using Zakia Salime’s concept of “movement moments”, which incorporate historical, cultural, and political, contingencies and signify “turning points” in nonlinear, interdependent, and possibly contradictory, trajectories. In doing so, it also challenged the dichotomies of Saudi women’s activism versus political activism, Saudi women activists versus Islamist activists and Saudi men. It also problematized the concept of ‘Saudi feminists’ or ‘Saudi women activists’ itself by considering activists of broad ideological, geographic, and religious backgrounds in Saudi Arabia that might not have otherwise been considered for the study of Saudi feminism.
This necessitated analyzing the contemporary context of Saudi feminist movements and their interactions and intersections with other movements. It considered, in particular, the recent period of the Arab Spring and the rise of social media in Saudi Arabia that has served as particularly strong evidence against an assumption of their absence, as Saudi women activists and their movements became unmistakably visible.

This analysis included first reviewing the literature on Saudi feminism and its activism. It considered how Saudi feminism has been represented in such literature in relation to the state, religion and society, and considers its focus on Saudi women’s agency and activism and social movements. It then established the methodology most appropriate to conduct this work, namely, the research design and questions, paradigms and assumptions, sources of data and procedures for its collection, and the chosen data analysis strategies.

Following this, the thesis’s focus turned to “seeing structure” and provided historical background of the structural context in which Saudi women’s activism is situated. This was in order to see how it emerged, what led up to it, and how it is located in the periods under consideration in this work, namely, in the Arab Spring. This fourth chapter served two functions. First, it served as a historical background of state-women relations in Saudi Arabia. This background was important to understand the significance of Saudi women’s political activism that occurs later on. Second, it served as a detailed illustration of the role of women in the legitimacy of the Saudi state.
Finally, this led to the core of this thesis where “seeing agency”, i.e. analyzing Saudi women’s political agency, was considered in two parts. The first part, i.e. Chapter Five, focused on the early prominent examples and factors contributing to Saudi women’s political agency in the early 2000s. These were defined and analyzed in this part as follows: first, Saudi women political agency and the reformist activist movements of the 2000s, second, the Saudi women’s political agency and new technologies of the 2000s, and, third, Saudi women’s political agency and the political prisoners of the 2000s. Such factors were shown as contributive, historical roots for the political agency of Saudi women activists and the later feminist movements in the “Arab Spring” moment.

In the second part, i.e. Chapter Six, the early events of the Arab Spring in 2011-2013, their effect on Saudi Arabia, and how it shaped Saudi women’s activism, was briefly introduced. Following this, prominent examples from this “Arab Spring” movement moment, and their intersection with other activists like HASM, were considered. These were defined and analyzed as follows: first, women’s driving campaign, second, women’s university protests, third, the first semi-public trials of HASM and women activists’ involvement in such, and fourth, women activists for political prisoners. Such examples were argued as crucial evidences against the absence of political agency of Saudi women activists and feminist movements in the Arab Spring moment as being dichotomous to other political activists and movements. Relying heavily on primary sources and interviews, such analysis highlighted Saudi women as political agents, beyond being inescapably a function of the state, whether as legitimizers or patriarchic
bargainers, or trapped in the state’s role of being a distracting topic of debate instead of contributive to more ‘serious’ matters of political reform.

**Significance, Implications, and Limitations**

The importance and significance of this analysis is that it illustrates how Saudi feminist activism is not explainable by the prevalent understanding of Arab women as trapped by religion and society on the one hand, or as tools of legitimation for authoritarian states on the other hand. Such conclusions and findings hold particularly important implications given that this understanding is even more prevalent in the context of Saudi Arabia, where a lack of democracy and a perceived abundance of traditionalism have led to an assumed absence of feminist movements altogether, especially their positing women’s political agency.

However, it is important to note the limitations of this thesis. Namely, that it was not concerned with exploring other forms of agency, other than political agency. This was not due to an assumption that the political sphere holds higher value or that ‘true’ agency can only be found in public, but simply because other forms of agency have been extensively considered in Amelie Le Renard’s work. Additionally, because a focus on political agency is where the gap in literature on Saudi women exists, or, in the cases where it seems to be hinted at, is mischaracterized.
Directions for Future Research

In terms of new directions for future research, a recommended area of study has emerged in what might be called the “HAZM movement moment”. This movement moment can be seen in the current period starting most prominently by the end of 2014. This period marked a renewed incorporation of the Saudi state’s gendered project of “religious nationalism” within the context of broader geopolitical and sectarian rivalry in the region. It is also likely motivated by a new King’s desire to surpass his predecessor’s legacy. Saudi exceptionalism has arguably reemerged, but as part of the new King’s masculine exceptionalism, most notably in the form of unprecedented militarization of the idea of nation. This is arguably further bolstered by outside discursive trends like Islamophobia which have a ‘rally around the flag’ effect. Thus, the militarized nation has meant the promotion of a militarized masculinity and ‘ideal’ Saudi male, instances of Saudi womanhood symbolizing the need for militant protection, and also ‘acceptable’ Saudi womanhood as being itself militarized in some instances within the idea of nationhood.

Specifically, though the reign of King Salman has only recently begun, it arguably has already displayed a partial renewal of what al-Rasheed called, the “masculine state”. This is indicated in some of his first moves as King, as he removed the “reformist” head of the religious police considered to have been sympathetic to women’s causes (Al-Omran 2015). The King also removed the female deputy minister of education, Norah al-Faiz, whom was initially appointed in 2009 by the late King Abdullah (Al-Omran 2015). Both
moves have “triggered fresh concern among [Saudi] women that the perceived advances they made under the previous monarch, King Abdullah, will stall under his successor” (Al-Omran 2015) and appear as indicators of the King’s political project leaning toward an idea of nation reframed according to what al-Rasheed termed “religious nationalism”. Accordingly, this change in the idea of nation has negatively affected Saudi women’s positioning within the nation because of fear surrounding increasingly militarized national narrative which would likely deem their non-state sanctioned activity as traitorous to the nation, particularly following the start of King Salman’s “Decisive Storm” military operation in Yemen (Batrawy 2016).

For Saudi women and men, the increased masculinization of the Saudi state and militarization of the idea of the Saudi nation has meant changed gendered constructs of both Saudi masculinity and femininity within the Saudi nation. In the case of Saudi men, the Saudi Grand Mufti’s public calls for the first mandatory draft of all Saudi males introduced and promoted a religiously sanctioned Saudi masculine “ideal” in service of the nation (Al-Arabiya 2015). Alongside this call came an increase in valuing of Saudi men in the military, which was not previously part of the Saudi national narrative. This valuing was in the form of circulation of staged images of Saudi weaponry and military in training and in preparation for war in Yemen, as well as media coverage of public funerals for Saudi soldiers, labeled “martyrs of duty”, following the start of the war in Yemen (Akhbar 2015) and images soldiers with their families (An7a 2015). The point of such valuing and showing military personnel and weapons being, as Myrttinen argues, that “their public display seek[s] to underline the ‘manly’ prowess of the bearer”, or in
this case the idea of Saudi nation (Myrttinen 2003: 38).

From these examples, it is clear that the idea of nation has become intertwined with glorification of militarized masculinity that fills “everyday life” and men’s gendered “lived experiences” of Saudi nationhood. On the other hand, in the case of Saudi women, “while manifestations of the cultural impact of war” and gendered notions of nationhood on women “are less easy to document, it is certainly not invisible, and can be seen by those living in close proximity to the society” as part of everyday life (Hill 2003: 21).

For this reason, in line with this thesis’s methodology of inquiry and to utilize a “gender lens” that emphasizes the everyday experiences of women (Sjoberg, Cooke, & Neal 2011: 6), I conducted a short interview with a Saudi mother, named Amal, to investigate an example of Saudi women’s experience under King Salman’s militarized masculine state and Saudi women within his gendered idea of nation. The Saudi mother, Amal, also observed the aforementioned new valuation of militarized masculinity and a shift in the idea of nation, even in the feminized space of her daughter’s school. Its female teachers reproduce such valuation in their holding numerous activities for young girls that solidify the idea of a militarized Saudi nation with its military. The activities include singing songs praising the military, pledging their allegiance to King Salman, and various orchestrated displays of female support “on the home front” for their male counterparts “on frontlines”. Such gendered activities and reproductions of Saudi women identity were not present prior to the redefined militarized masculine idea of nation under King Salman.
However, Saudi women are not only depicted as in need of protection. Unorthodox Saudi womanhoods were allowed to emerge under King Salman’s idea of nation, but, only to the extent that they furthered valuation of the military. As Utas argues, “precarious and treacherous as it may be, the war zone is not merely a wasteland for young women, but at times may also be a field ripe with possibilities for upwards social and economic mobility” (Utas 2005: 408). Most notably is how Saudi women were featured in media as both capable and supportive of a potential mandatory draft into the military (Saudi Society News). Also, Saudi female journalists gained social recognition and upward mobility throughout the “Decisive Storm” conflict in Yemen.

An example of this is the case of Fatima al-Enezi who was widely covered in Saudi media and described as: “with pride, she left her home and children to answer the nation’s call” and cover events at Saudi’s Southern border with Yemen (Al-Halabi 2015). There, she was photographed posing with non-related Saudi male defenders of the border (Al-Halabi 2015), breaking with “peacetime” expected norms of segregation. In the photograph she wore the traditional covering and held a rifle, such that this image was then promoted as an example of a brave, yet still pious, Saudi heroine or “hyper agent” of the nation (Utas 2005: 406).

Similarly, another Saudi female reporter, Haifa al-Zahrani, was featured in Saudi media, as she was photographed also wearing her covering and a military-styled helmet and vest, even posing inside a military tank. Playing into the militarized idea of nation and her
“masculine” position in it, she argued publically that she did not want to be “treated as a
girl” and “on the ground, she demanded to be treated like a man” not because she was
brave, but because she was “fulfilling a duty to the nation” (Al-Sharq 2015).

The final example of Haifa al-Zahrani is an area of particular interest for future studies.
This is because she was previously a feminist activist, supported Manal al-Sharif, and
was a member of the ‘Right2Dignity’ movement of 2011. However, in a recent interview
for this research, she retracted such positions and stated that: “I was not a member in the
sense of being a ‘member’, rather, I was only of those that supported this campaign. The
Arab Spring had no affect… [And] who critiques the government holds no allegiance to
the country… The best feminist efforts that are in accordance with government laws and
the worst is thinking they can force the government by outside organizations to grant
their wishes”. In regards to political activism, al-Zahrani went on to say that: “HASM is a
traitor to the country and humanity and it does to deserve any support and I don’t see any
Saudi women supporting them, especially after they admitted to being financially
supported by foreign sources… [And] I don’t see any issue between the feminist
movement and the government, but rather between the feminist movement and society.
The state fully supports women, even at varying times. What is more of a problem is
societal acceptance”.

When questioned further on her own feminist activism involvement, al-Zahrani stated
that: “Yes, I stopped entirely out of my utter faith, and from personal experience, that
these campaigns are not sincere and they do not sit well with me in terms of their lacking
national loyalty”. In terms of the relationship between her previous activism and current position as a prominent female journalist covering the war in Yemen, she explained: “My work as a journalist is not a form of feminist activism. I told you, the state supports Saudi women, and proof of this is that I was the first female journalist to enter national security operation rooms in all military fields. I was the first female journalist to join the ‘Decisive Storm’, to cover the lines of fire, and the first journalist to enter mabahith prisons, and others… This is proof that women can reach anywhere, as long as they don’t challenge the state and its laws”. Her take on Saudi feminism and the HAZM moment was that: “the current state of Saudi feminism is, unfortunately, clearly challenging the state and some of it is betrayal of the country. Everything is possible to take with niceness, but force and challenge is pointless”.

On the other hand, Saudi feminists like Maha al-Qahtani maintain a less than favorable stance towards the state. As al-Qahtani commented on the “HAZM moment” as such: “I don’t predict anything new in the current state of things, except maybe worse, because the current mentality is entirely authoritarian”. As evidence of the repressive nature of this moment, Aziza al-Yousef commented: “In regards to this question, please excuse me from answering it”. As such, Tamador al-Yami, a member of the ‘October 26’ movement, stated cautiously that: “activism continues now through safer ways… not movements out in the streets”.

When asked specifically about the HAZM moment, al-Yami explains that: “Yes, female activists were more hesitant than before after what happened to Loujain and Maysa and
also the destabilization of the region made activists, females I mean, aware that, they know that, when the country needs them to calm down, they will calm down. When the country has priorities and border issues to deal with and the country needs to focus on protecting its existence and national security, those activists will not do something crazy to jeopardize the security of their countries at such a time. They’re, after all, loyal to their countries, citizens who care for their countries, who know when the right time is and when to expect a positive reaction from the state, if any, and when not to. When to pull and when to release. I think that is also a factor that should be considered when analyzing the current situation when activism is nowadays lower than before”. Furthermore, reflecting a different emergent trend within Saudi feminists, she stated: “I don’t think Saudi feminism is linked to HASM whatsoever, or in any way. They are two different things. That one was a political movement asking for political rights. Feminism is not political, at all. It is just a women’s rights movement, which is not aiming to change the status quo of any states, not even our government. It does not ask for much, except for the right to drive. So, it is simple, it’s clear, it’s straightforward, it doesn’t have any other agendas except driving and it shouldn’t be compared to any other movement, whether political or any other agenda except the rights of women. Since it’s not related, I don’t think there was any positive or negative intersection between them”.

Al-Yami’s stance is likely reflected of a hesitance that emerged since the HASM moment, due to rhetoric of HAZM and the arrests of Loujain al-Hathloul and Maysa al-Manea. The safer ways of activism which al-Yami mentions seem to include those who focus on utilizing opportunities of this moment, like Hatoon al-Fassi and Rasha Hefzi’s
work towards women entering municipal elections and participating in municipal
councils. Even acts such as Lama al-Suleiman, who resigned from her elected position
after not being allowed a seat by men at the Municipal Council (Baqai 2016). On the
other hand, Saudi feminist activists like Halah al-Dosari of the ‘October 26’ campaign
left the country altogether, for the time being.

In this way, the specific example of former activist al-Zahrani, the reactions of current
feminist activists, the instances of utilized opportunity spaces for activism, and, in sum,
the general shift from HASM to HAZM moments in Saudi Arabia brings up significant
questions regarding the political agency of Saudi women under movement moments
during periods of much higher degrees of repression and less accommodated rhetoric,
tactic, and alliances that the Arab Spring moment provided, most notably in HASM. How
do Saudi women activists posit political agency now? How do we understand that
tensions between activists on methods and positions which have emerged, particularly in
terms of their relationship to the political?

** Conclusion

In accordance with the arguments and conclusions of this thesis, what is of most interest
is how the sum of such examples do not indicate Saudi women being once again trapped
by authoritarian structures, nor does it indicate an inevitable form of “resistance” or
“agency” for these Saudi feminists (Mahmood 2012). Instead, like the Arab Spring and
HASM moment, further studies that would consider extending the conclusions of this thesis to investigate a potential HAZM moment would find contentions and contingencies as most important for understanding Saudi women’s political agency, as has been suggested in this thesis. Furthermore, the applicability of this thesis’s argument is in that it mainly sought to problematize this assumption of structural pervasiveness and showcase where Saudi female activists do, in fact, posit political agency, particularly using the concept of “movement moments”, that incorporate historical, cultural, and political, contingencies and signify “turning points” in nonlinear, interdependent, and possibly contradictory, trajectories.
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