

## Growing Up Saudi

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### Part 2: The Boys

By Michael Slackman in Riyadh



Nader al-Mutairi's cell phone beeps, signaling a text message. The phone flashes the words "My Love" over two interlocked red hearts. The message is from his 17-year-old fiancée, Sarah, who is also his cousin. But according to Saudi tradition, Nader, 22, and Sarah are not allowed to see one another or spend time together until their wedding.

"I have a connection," Nader says, as he reads the message, explaining how Sarah manages to communicate with him in a country where any contact between unmarried men and women—even a phone call—is forbidden.

His "connection" is his 20-year-old cousin, Enad, who has secretly slipped his sister, Sarah, a cell phone that Nader bought for her. These conversations are taboo and could cause problems between the two families.

In the West, young people often challenge authority. But in Saudi Arabia, most young people seem to accept the religious and cultural demands of the Muslim world's most conservative society. They may chafe against the rules and try to evade them at times, but they generally believe in them and say they intend to continue them with their own children.

Young men like Nader and Enad are taught that they are the guardians of the family's reputation, expected to shield their female relatives from shame, and avoid dishonoring their families by their own behavior.

"One of the most important Arab traditions is honor," Enad says. "If I call someone and a girl answers, I have to apologize. It's a huge deal. It is a violation of the house."

Enad and Nader are more than cousins; they are lifelong friends and confidants, as is often the case in Saudi Arabia, where families tend to be large and insular. (Both men have parents who are married to cousins.) Each has the requisite mustache and goatee, and they usually wear the traditional Saudi robe known as a *thobe*.

They are part of an enormous group of Saudi youth: 60 percent of the population is under 25 years old (compared with about 30 percent in the U.S.). They are average young Saudis, not wealthy, not poor. They live in the capital, Riyadh, a city of 5 million that gleams with oil wealth and has roads clogged with S.U.V.'s. But it has very little entertainment for young men—no movie theaters and few sports facilities. If they're single, they can't even go into malls where women shop.

## Religious Police

Saudi Arabia is one of the most powerful nations in the Middle East and an important U.S. ally in the region. Its influence stems largely from its oil wealth—Saudi Arabia has more than 25 percent of the world's known oil reserves—and its position as the birthplace of Islam and the guardian of its two most sacred sites, in Mecca and Medina.

A strict fundamentalist interpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism governs all aspects of life in Saudi Arabia, with the Koran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad effectively serving as a constitution.

Unrelated men and women are completely segregated from one another. Girls and boys attend separate schools, and separate classes in college. Women must wear black head-to-toe coverings called abayas in public, and they're not allowed to drive. Religious police enforce these rules, arresting and sometimes flogging those caught violating them.

The nation is a near-absolute monarchy led by King Abdullah, a member of the al-Saud family that has ruled Saudi Arabia since 1932. Oil was first discovered in 1938 by an American company that became known as Aramco (Arabian American Oil Company). The United States and Saudi Arabia have been dependent on each other ever since.

### **A Woman Alone**

Nader and Enad are concentrating on eating with forks and knives in a Riyadh restaurant (at home they use their right hands) when they notice that a woman has entered alone. She is completely draped in a black abaya, her face covered by a black veil.

Still, they are appalled to see a woman alone in public, and Enad pretends to toss his cigarette at her. "Thank God our women are at home," he says. Nader and Enad pray five times a day, often stopping whatever they are doing to head to the nearest mosque. Prayer is mandatory, and the religious police force all shops to close during prayer times.

Enad believes *jihad*, or holy war, "is a duty," and that Muslims should go to fight in places like Iraq or Afghanistan.

"If someone comes into your house, will you stand there or will you fight them?" he asks. "Arab or Muslim lands are like one house."

Enad is a police officer; Nader works as a communications officer for the military. Each earns about \$1,200 a month. It's not nearly enough to become independent from their parents, but it's not a big concern because Saudi fathers are expected to provide for even their grown children.

There are eight other children in the home where Enad lives with his father, his mother, and his father's second wife. (Islam permits men to have up to four wives.)

The apartment is a haven for Enad and his cousins, who often spend their free time sleeping, watching *Dr. Phil* and Oprah with Arabic subtitles, and drinking coffee or tea. The women have a separate living room behind closed doors.

Enad and Nader were always close, but their relationship changed when Enad's father agreed to let Nader marry one of his four daughters. Nader picked Sarah, in part because he saw her face when she was a child and recalled that she was pretty.

They quickly signed a wedding contract; Nader expects to see his new wife for the first time when they are photographed as husband and wife after the ceremony—which will also be segregated by sex.

"If you want to know what your wife looks like," Nader says, "look at her brother."

### **'Numbering'**

If there is one accessory that allows a bit of self-expression for Saudi men, it's their cell phones. Nader's is filled with pictures of women taken from the Internet, tight face shots of singers and actresses. His ring tone is an Arabic love song. Many of his cousins have the *Titanic* theme as their ring tones.

Cell phones and the Internet are also what allow young Saudis to evade some of their country's social rules. For Nader, his phone is how he illicitly communicates with Sarah.

But some young men are more brazen. A common practice known as "numbering" involves driving around with friends, chasing cars that contain black-draped figures, and then trying to give the girls their cell phone numbers. Bluetooth allows them to send their phone numbers directly to the phones of the girls being driven by—a technique that's replacing the low-tech approach of writing their numbers on pieces of cardboard and holding them up to the window.

"Maybe 3 out of 10 nights we get one phone number," says a teen named Fahad.

"Getting a girl to actually talk to you on the phone is much rarer. But it happens, so we're always hoping."

Many young Saudis struggle to reconcile the Western concept of romance, which they see in movies and videos, with the social restrictions of their religion and their culture. One weekend, Enad and Nader get into an argument about romance.

"I am a romantic person," Nader says. "There is no romance." He means that Saudi traditions do not allow for romance between young, unmarried couples, but the more traditional Enad objects.

"How is there no romance?" Enad asks angrily. "When you get married, be romantic with your wife. You want to meet a woman on the street so you can be romantic?" It is a conflict with no resolution in this deeply conservative country. But whatever ambivalence young Saudis may feel, most end up doing what is expected of them.

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Part 2: The Girls

By Katherine Zoepf in Riyadh



The dance party in a private Riyadh home is in full swing, with about half the guests—two dozen girls in their late teens—gyrating to the music. Their *abayas*, black head-to-toe cloaks that all Saudi women must wear in public, are tossed onto chairs around the ornate room.

Suddenly, the music stops, and an 18-year-old named Alia steps forward, swaying slightly on her high heels. "Girls, I have something to tell you," she says. "I've gotten engaged!"

There's a chorus of shrieks at the surprise announcement. The girls have been friends since childhood, and Alia will be the first to marry.

Most Saudi girls meet their husbands for the first time the day they become engaged. They are not allowed to date—or even be friends with boys—and their marriages are arranged by their families.

A cell phone picture of Alia's fiancé—a 25-year-old military man named Badr—is passed around, and the girls begin pestering Alia for the details of her *showfa*.

A *showfa*—literally, a "viewing"—usually occurs on the day that a Saudi girl is engaged. A girl's suitor, when he comes to ask her father for her hand in marriage, has the right to see her dressed without her abaya. In some families, he may have a supervised conversation with her. Ideally, many Saudis say, a *showfa* is the only time in a woman's adult life that she is seen without her abaya by a man outside her family.

The separation between the sexes in Saudi Arabia is so extreme that it is difficult to overstate. Saudi women must wear black *abayas* in public at all times. Because women are not allowed to drive, they are driven around in cars with tinted windows. They attend girls-only schools and university departments, and eat in special "family" sections of restaurants, which are partitioned from the areas used by single male diners. Riyadh has women-only gyms, boutiques, and travel agencies, and even a women-only shopping mall. While many Saudi women go to college, very few get jobs afterward—largely because of the logistical difficulty of maintaining rigid gender segregation in the workplace.

Even as Saudi Arabia has taken some small steps toward democratic reforms in recent years, Saudi women are still denied the basic equality and rights that women in the West, and even in some Arab countries, take

for granted. They're not allowed to vote, and they need written permission from a male relative before they can leave the country. Under the Saudi interpretation of Islamic law, a woman's testimony in court does not carry the same weight as a man's. "Women are treated like perpetual legal minors in Saudi Arabia," says Farida Deif of Human Rights Watch.

### Facebook Friends?

Girls like Alia are well aware of the limits that their conservative society places on their behavior. And, for the most part, they say they do not seriously question those limits.

Most girls say their faith (the strict Saudi interpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism) runs very deep, although they argue a bit among themselves about the details—like whether it's OK to have men on your Facebook friends list, or whether a male first cousin should ever be able to see you without your face covered.

But they seem to regard the idea of having a conversation with an unrelated man before their *showfas* with horror. When they do talk about girls who chat with men online or who somehow find their own fiancés, the stories sound like urban legends: Fuzzy in their particulars, told about friends of friends, the stories don't sound real. Unmarried young women in Saudi Arabia are so isolated from boys and men that when they talk about them, it sounds as if they're discussing a different species.

Later that evening, Alia reveals that she will be allowed to speak to her fiancé on the phone. Their first conversation is scheduled for the following day, and she is so worried about what to say to Badr that she is putting together a list of questions.

"Ask him whether he likes his work," one friend suggests. "Men are supposed to love talking about their work."

"Ask him what kind of cell phone he has, and what kind of car," suggests another. "That way you'll be able to find out how he spends his money, whether he's free with it or whether he's stingy."

Alia nods and takes notes. It's becoming more acceptable for engaged couples to speak on the phone, though more conservative families still forbid all contact. The world of men—though it is as physically near as the reception rooms in their homes where their fathers and brothers entertain friends—is so remote from the girls that some resort to disguise in order to venture into it.

A girl and her friend might cross-dress—sneaking into a brother's closet for thobes, the ankle-length white garments traditionally worn by Saudi men—and then challenge each other to do something forbidden like walking up to the men's counter at McDonald's, or even driving.

### Religious Police

At Prince Sultan University in Riyadh, two second-year students are showing off photos of themselves dressed as boys. In the pictures on their cell phones, the girls wear thobes and have covered their hair with the male headdresses called *shmaghs*. One of the girls has used an eyeliner pencil to give herself a grayish bit of stubble along her jaw line.

"A lot of girls do it," says 18-year-old Sara al-Tukhaifi.

"It's just a game," she adds, although they could be arrested by the religious police and even flogged for their behavior. "I haven't done it myself, but those two are really good at it. They went into a store and pretended to be looking at another girl—they even got her to turn her face away."

Saudi newspapers often lament the increase in rebellious behavior among young Saudis. Recently, there have been reports of ugly confrontations between youths and the religious police. And the practice of "numbering"—where a group of young men in a car chase another car with young women, and try to give

the women their phone numbers via Bluetooth, or by holding up signs with their numbers—has become a part of Saudi urban life.

A woman can't switch her phone's Bluetooth on in a public place without receiving a barrage of the love poems and photos of flowers that many Saudi men keep stored on their phones for this kind of e-flirting. Last year, Al Arabiya television reported that some young Saudis have started buying "electronic belts" which use Bluetooth to beam the wearer's phone number and e-mail at passing members of the opposite sex.

Sara and her friends say it's frightening to be chased by boys in cars, and they insist they don't know any girls who have actually spoken to a boy who contacted her via Bluetooth.

"If your family found out you were talking to a man online, that's not quite as bad as talking to him on the phone," Sara says. "With the phone, everyone can agree that is forbidden, because Islam forbids a stranger to hear your voice. Online, he only sees your writing, so that's slightly more open to interpretation.

"One test is that if you're ashamed to tell your family something, then you know for sure it's wrong," Sara explains. "For a while I had Facebook friends who were boys. I didn't e-mail with them or anything, but they asked me to 'friend' them and so I did. But then I thought about my family, and I took them off the list."

darcy & elizabeth Sara and her friend Shaden both speak admiringly of the religious police, whom they see as the guardians of perfectly normal Saudi social values, and Shaden boasts about an older brother who has become a member of the religious police. "I always go to him when I have problems," says Shaden, who did not want her last name used. "And he's not too strict—he still listens to music sometimes. I asked him once, 'You do everything right and yet you're listening to music?' He said, 'I know music is *haram* [forbidden], and *inshallah* [God willing], with time, I will be able to stop listening to music too.' "

She adds, "I told him, 'I want a husband like you.' "

Shaden lives in a large walled compound in a prosperous Riyadh suburb; her father's brothers live with their families in separate houses within the compound, and the families share a garden and pool. Shaden and several of her male cousins grew up playing together around the pool. Now, at 17, she's considered an adult and can no longer mingle with the boys.

"Until I was in 9th or 10th grade, we used to put a carpet on the lawn and we would take hot milk and sit there with my boy cousins," Shaden recalls.

"But my mom and their mom got uncomfortable with it, and so we stopped," she says. "Now we sometimes talk on MSN, or on the phone, but they shouldn't ever see my face."

She holds up a DVD of *Pride and Prejudice*, the version with Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Bennet, which she has watched dozens of times. "It's a bit like our society, I think," Shaden says of Georgian England. "It's dignified, and a bit strict. Doesn't it remind you a little bit of Saudi Arabia?"

Shaden sighs. "When Darcy comes to Elizabeth and says 'I love you'—that's exactly the kind of love I want."