



A Kingdom's Future: Saudi Arabia Through the Eyes of its Twentysomethings
Woodrow Wilson Center

Monday, January 14, 2013 12:00pm-1:00pm

5th Floor, Woodrow Wilson Center, 1300 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Washington, DC 20004

The Woodrow Wilson Center hosted an event on Monday (1/14) showcasing a book by **Caryle Murphy** entitled "A Kingdom's Future: Saudi Arabia Through the Eyes of its Twentysomethings." The event featured a presentation by the author and a discussion with 22-year-old Saudi student **Faris Ahmed al-Sulayman**, with **Haleh Estandiari** moderating.

Caryle Murphy began her presentation by explaining the history behind her book. In September 2011, while working as a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, she began interviewing Saudi youths around the United States in New York, California, Florida, Massachusetts, and Washington DC. In the spring of 2012 she traveled to Saudi Arabia to conduct interviews with "twentysomethings," mostly in the form of extended, one-on-one interviews. In all, her total interviews from the U.S. and Saudi Arabia included 52 Saudi men and 31 Saudi women, all in their twenties, and in addition to geographic diversity, her study included interviewees from varying economic and religious backgrounds. Her book presents these interviews, measuring the political ideas of Saudi youth.

Murphy began discussing her research by pointing to the fact that 64% of Saudi's 19 million people are under 30 years old (compared to 41% of Americans under 30), and that while she interviewed the "twentysomethings," the biggest age group in Saudi Arabia is aged 12-16. She mentioned the effect this group will have on Saudi Arabia saying, "In two years this youth bulge will start entering the workforce or seeking higher education, this is when unemployment will be felt."

She went on to discuss how the youth's generation is considerably different from previous generations because of their access to social media. There are 5.8 million Facebook users in Saudi Arabia, and Saudis rank first among all Arab countries in terms of twitter users. The effect social media is having on politics is notable because, "Social media gives Saudis more freedom of speech and an ability to cross strict gender barriers. It is also used for expressing political dissent and organization." **Faris Ahmed al-Sulayman** mentioned that in Saudi Arabia, Twitter is primarily used for political messages while Facebook is used to bridge society's strict gender-gap.

Despite the prevalence of social media in Saudi Arabia, Murphy pointed out that the desire for significant political reform is not particularly strong. She said that most youth admire the protests of Egypt, Tunisia, and other Arab countries, but they don't want to imitate them. They retain hope that the monarchy will give the people more rights in the future and they appear to be more apathetic about political change. In addition, Saudis don't want to jeopardize their safety and security and are content with the status quo as long as the government continues to give financial support to the people and maintains a traditionally Islamic country.

For the most part, religion remains an important part in the lives of young Saudis. Murphy made this point while discussing her interviews, saying, "Very few of the people I interviewed were against banning the religious police. They feel the religious police are a hallmark of religious society, although they feel the police should be less strict and not concerned with trivial things like whether a woman has her nails painted."

Delving further into the topic of women's rights, Murphy pointed out that over 50% of Saudi Arabia's students in higher education are women. She believes that women's demands will increase and that "women will be a significant driver of social and political change in Saudi Arabia." In discussing Saudi students overall, she noted that there are currently 145,000 Saudis studying abroad through the King Abdullah Scholarship Program and after they graduate "I

think the returning Saudis will have more effect in the business community than politically, but they will want to see civic change and more freedom of speech."

Looking towards the future, Murphy believes that if the youth bulge has difficulty entering the workforce, the calls for political reform will grow. Currently their concerns are focused elsewhere; she quoted one of her young Saudi interviewees who said "Most Saudis are worried about the time after King Abdullah." Things seem relatively stable now, but Saudi citizens are unsure what the next ruler will bring. Murphy said, "In the future I see a more diverse but polarized society," and she concluded by saying "Despite there being a yearning for political reform in a significant minority, there is not a critical mass of youth threatening the rule of the house of Saud."

After **Caryle Murphy** finished speaking, a brief question and answer session began. The first question was directed at both Murphy and al-Sulayman: "Why do you believe the Saudi government has allowed wide and easy access to social media that is often restricted in other authoritarian countries?" Murphy responded by agreeing with the question's premise, pointing out that there have been only three people arrested for tweets in Saudi Arabia and those arrests were made because the tweeters discussed Islam, not politics. Murphy believes social media is difficult to control and quoted a young Saudi man from an interview who said "there are too many of us." Al-Sulayman answered by saying self-censorship is extremely prevalent among Saudi citizens and it is a "powerful disease." Not only do people worry about the government when they self-censor, but they are also concerned about what their family will think about more liberal behavior. He noted that there are a few Saudis who are willing to say really controversial things but they either have too much of a following to arrest, or are currently on trial.

The second question asked Murphy why she believes there have been fewer protests in Saudi Arabia than in neighboring Arab countries. She said that Saudis are better off financially than most Arab countries experiencing major protests and that the Saudi Grand Mufti, who many Saudis respect, issued a fatwa against street protests. Murphy also reiterated her point that many young Saudis are apathetic. Another questioner asked about the political desires of Saudi Arabia's migrant workers, who are much poorer than Saudi citizens. Murphy explained that "Migrant workers are irrelevant because they no political rights" and so they were not included in her study.

Finally, Murphy was asked if there were educational reforms designed to prepare more Saudis for vocational work. She listed several examples of young Saudis taking on vocational positions, such as taxi drivers, but she noted that most are not keen to take jobs they think are beneath them. Vocational jobs lack the prestige that comes with a desk job and so while Saudi Arabia has 15% unemployment, there are 8 million foreign workers in country filling the jobs Saudis don't want to do.