

News

'Battle of the sexes': Saudi men react to women driving



RIYADH: A Saudi man checks his mobile as women wait for their drivers outside a hotel in the Saudi capital on Sept 28, 2017. — AFP

RIYADH: With many carrots and some sticks, ultra-conservative Saudi Arabia seeks to tackle entrenched male attitudes towards women drivers before millions take the wheel, many for the first time, next June. For decades, hardliners cited austere Islamic interpretations to justify the ban on women, with some maintaining that they lacked the intelligence to drive and allowing them to do so would promote promiscuity.

The ban finally ended last week, but many women fear they are still easy prey for conservatives in a nation where male "guardians" have arbitrary authority to take decisions on their behalf. "You can revoke the ban, but you cannot force men to allow their sisters and wives to drive," said a Saudi man with a private taxi company in Riyadh, declining to be named. "As head of my family, I make the decisions - not the women," he told AFP, expressing an aversion to his wife driving as that would mean more contact with unrelated men.

Such views are hardly an anomaly in the gender-segregated kingdom, despite Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's stunning reform push that has sought to liberalize the kingdom and add more women to the workforce. "Expect more accidents" because of women drivers, remarked one Saudi, echoing an avalanche of sexist comments on Twitter. Saudi authorities last week arrested a man who threatened a violent backlash against any female driver whose car breaks down. "I swear to God, I will burn her and her car," the man, wearing a traditional white robe, said in an online video.

'Modern-day camels'

Such attitudes have prompted fears among some women that they will struggle to get licenses or could be deliberately failed in driving tests. The government has preemptively addressed such concerns, with the interior ministry pledging to enforce the law by any means necessary. Riyadh is already moving to bring female driving instructors from abroad and establish driving schools exclusively for women. Authorities are also moving to criminalize sexual harassment with a new law, with flogging and jail terms as possible penalties.

The Saudi media is also taking on conservative opposition - with a dash of humor. "Driving has always been a minefield in the battle of the sexes... Sorry fellas but women are the better drivers," declared a recent graphic published in the English-language daily Arab News, citing research that male drivers are involved in more accidents. Newspaper editorials have argued that if women were allowed to ride camels in the time of Prophet Muhammad

(PBUH), then they should be allowed to drive "modern-day camels" - cars.

Others have highlighted the economic benefits of the reform: Saudi families would no longer need foreign chauffeurs, often a major source of financial strain. Sabq online newspaper published a cartoon comparing the merits of two drivers: A scraggly dressed foreign man and a veiled Saudi woman. "Man: Salary. Housing. Bad Tempered. Knows your deepest secrets. Ruins your car," it said. "Woman: Love. Care. Consideration. Commitment."

'Village mentality'

But authorities are careful not to antagonize the sensitivities of hardline clerics. The Council of Senior Scholars, the kingdom's highest religious body that is close to the royal family, announced the majority of its members found that lifting the ban was "permissible". Experts say their approval - after decades of opposition - symbolizes the government's tightening grip on the religious establishment that has long dominated Saudi politics.

"It's unlikely that the scholars who consistently maintained that driving would damage ovaries, deprive (women) of their virginity and integrity had a sudden epiphany that their decades-old beliefs were wrong," said James Dorsey from Singapore's S Rajaratnam School of International Studies. When the ban was lifted, several women's rights activists who long fought it alleged that authorities warned them not to make any public comments - seemingly not to highlight that activism can lead to reform. The government denies the claim.

Ali Shihabi, from the Washington-based think tank Arab Foundation, said on Twitter that the government did not want activists to "further provoke the conservatives who were already provoked by (the) driving decision". The decision was led by Prince Mohammed, who styles himself as a reformer who will set the country on the road to modernity and civil liberty.

But some experts have called the decision pure tokenism until the kingdom dismantles its rigid guardianship system. "Women still face a number of other hurdles," said research firm Capital Economics. "It may take many years for Saudi society to fully accept a greater role for women." A Saudi executive at a multinational company in Riyadh said the main obstacle remains a prevailing "village mentality", although some patriarchs prefer having women drive themselves than be chauffeured around by unrelated men. "Women drivers will become a new normal and then people will say: 'How come we didn't allow this to happen sooner?'" — AFP

MP urges debate over scrapping petrol hike

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He demanded a copy of the request if any, and if the two banks have not filed any request, what would

Saudi king in Russia with oil, investment, Syria on agenda

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This leaves Moscow aligned with Saudi Arabia's archrival Iran, whose influence Riyadh fears is growing in the region. "The Saudis want help on Iran, and Russia wants trade and investment," said Mark N Katz, an expert on Russia-Middle East relations at George Mason University. "In the Saudi mind, they're definitely linked and the Russians are going to try to separate these." Billboards have been erected on the road from the airport to central Moscow welcoming King Salman in Arabic and Russian. His son, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, visited in May just before his elevation to crown prince, and in 2015 the countries' sovereign wealth funds agreed to \$10 billion in investments. A business forum will include speeches by top ministers and the heads of state-owned energy giants Saudi Aramco and Gazprom as well as a presentation of Saudi's Vision 2030 reform program, which aims to end the kingdom's dependence on oil. Moscow sees the trip as a payoff for its two-year-old intervention in Syria and recognition of its growing Middle East clout.

"Even 12 months ago, Riyadh was highly critical of Russia's involvement in Syria and the relationship looked as frozen as ever," said Chris Weafer, senior partner at economic and political consultancy Macro-Advisory Ltd. "Today that has changed 180 degrees. Both countries now see political and economic advantages from a closer, albeit pragmatic, relationship. This visit is intended to make sure it stays on track."

Discussion of Syria is likely to focus on what the country will look like once Islamic State is defeated, Assad's future, what peace talks between Saudi-backed opposition activists and Damascus can achieve and the creation of new de-escalation zones. The king may also seek assurances that Iran will not have a permanent role in Syria. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Moscow hoped the king's trip would breathe life into a relationship with huge potential and was interested in maintaining dialogue with Riyadh "about the Middle East and Syria in particular".

Any discussion of the oil market and the efficacy of moves to prop up prices by cutting supply will be closely watched. The oil price fall in the last three years has over-stretched both producers' budgets, making an extension of joint cuts beyond March 2018 more likely. Moscow said last month it had discussed with Riyadh extending the deal but no specific decisions had been made ahead of a Nov 30 producers' meeting in Vienna.

Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak said in an interview broadcast on Monday that the planned \$1-billion fund to invest in energy projects was part of efforts to strengthen cooperation in oil, gas, electricity, renewable energy and other projects. Russian firms are also discussing deals with Saudi Aramco, such as providing drilling services in Saudi Arabia, and Russian oil giant Rosneft's interest in crude trading, he added.

Separately, the presidents of Iran and Turkey vowed during talks in Tehran yesterday to work closely together to prevent the disintegration of Iraq and Syria and to oppose the Iraqi Kurds' drive for independence. Shiite Iran and mainly Sunni Turkey, a NATO member, have tradition-

be the procedures.

The lawmaker asked the minister if trading in the shares of the two banks has been suspended and for how long. Tabtabaei asked if Kuwait Investment Authority, the country's sovereign wealth fund, has appointed any advisor to study the merger and demanded a copy of the contract with the advisor and its technical reasons. He asked about the government's stake in the two banks before and after the merger. He also inquired if the Central Bank has imposed any conditions on the planned merger. Tabtabaei asked if the government has received any offer from any side to buy its stakes in one or both banks.

ally had cool relations but both have been alarmed by the Iraqi Kurds' vote for independence in a Sept 25 referendum, fearing it will stoke separatism among their own Kurdish populations.

"We want security and stability in the Middle East ... The independence referendum in Iraq is a sectarian plot by foreign countries and is rejected by Tehran and Ankara," Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said, according to state TV. "We will not accept a change of borders under any circumstances."

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei also said after meeting Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan that the two countries should prevent Iraq's Kurdistan from declaring independence, state TV reported. "Turkey and Iran must take necessary measures against the vote," Khamenei was quoted as saying. He also said the United States and foreign powers planned to create a new Israel in the Middle East by supporting the vote in Kurdistan, according to state TV. "America and Israel benefit from the vote ... They want to create a new Israel in the region ... The Iraqi Kurdish secession vote is an act of betrayal toward the entire region," Khamenei said.

Iran and Turkey have already threatened to join Baghdad in imposing economic sanctions on Iraqi Kurdistan and have launched joint military exercises with Iraqi troops on their borders with the separatist region. Erdogan, who is on a one-day trip to Tehran, said Ankara was considering taking further measures against Iraqi Kurdistan. "We have

already said we don't recognize the referendum in northern Iraq... We have taken some measures already with Iran and the Iraqi central government, but stronger steps will be taken," he said. Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region announced on Tuesday it was calling presidential and parliamentary elections for Nov 1. Baghdad has responded with further punitive measures. Iraq's central

government, its neighbors and Western powers fear the vote in favor of secession could spark another, wider conflict in the Middle East region to add to the war in Syria, and fear it could derail the fight against Islamic State. The Kurds are the region's fourth largest ethnic group, spread across Iran, Turkey, Syria and Iraq, all of which oppose any moves towards a Kurdish state.

Erdogan, whose security forces are embroiled in a decades-long battle with Kurdish separatists in southeast Turkey, repeated in Tehran his accusation that Israel was behind the Iraqi Kurds' referendum. "There is no country other than Israel that recognizes it. A referendum which was conducted by sitting side by side with Mossad has no legitimacy," he said, referring to the Israeli intelligence agency. Israel has denied Turkey's previous claims of involvement in the vote, but has welcomed the Kurds' vote for independence.

Rouhani also said yesterday that Tehran and Ankara planned to expand their economic ties. "Turkey will import more gas from Iran... Meetings will be held next week to discuss the details," he said. Rouhani and Erdogan underlined the goal of tripling two-way trade to \$30 billion in 2018, to be processed in their own currencies, easing the pressure on Iran whose banking sector is subject to US sanctions. The atmosphere for the talks was a far cry from Erdogan's last visit to Tehran in April 2015 when a speech he gave just days before sparked demands from some Iranian lawmakers for it to be cancelled. The Turkish leader had accused Iran at the time of seeking to "dominate the region" and demanded that it withdraw its troops from Iraq and Syria. — Agencies



Moscow sees trip as recognition of its growing Middle East clout

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