



Blogging Saudi Arabia Undermining the Wahhabis, one post at a time.

[Stephen Schwartz](#)

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On October 21, a new message came out of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the land of Wahhabi Islam, with its commitment to financing jihad, its public beheadings, and its total subordination of women. But rather than the usual extremist preaching, promoting the bloody terrorist acts of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq or inciting hate against non-Wahhabi Muslims, Jews, Christians, and others around the world, the message was a call, in imperfect English, for "the first Saudi bloggers meet up." And with it, Saudi Arabia passed a milestone.

The announcement on the website "Saudi Blogs" [saudiblogs.blogspot.com] came from "Ahmed" and was not without its contradictions. It noted obtusely that "according to the Saudi style, [the meeting] will be for males only."

Within four hours, the first reply to Ahmed declared, "Both sex[es] must b[e] involved in this"--that is, the improvement of Saudi blogging. Confusingly, however, the author of that comment, "Super MO," conceded that coeducational blogging might best be limited to the net. Within a few more hours, however, a female blogger said she would love to attend the proposed meeting.

Men and women blogging together, of course, represents a total flouting of Saudi rules mandating sex segregation. And there can be no turning back. Saudi authorities cannot confiscate all the computers, Blackberrys, and cell phones in the kingdom. Nor can they forbid the use of the English language.

Saudi Blogs inventories more than 80 active sites, 67 of them in English or

English and Arabic. Saudi women produce some of the most interesting sites. They are so daring in their freedom of expression that one congressional staffer who reads them regularly expressed complete bewilderment, asking, "How can this happen?" The globalization of American culture obviously has a lot to do with it, since many blog entries are written in the hip-hop, text-message idiom of Western teenagers.

The most startling and thought-provoking Saudi blog is "Farah's Sowaleef"

[farahssowaleef.blogspot.com], *sowaleef* meaning "chitchat." The site advertises itself as "The Everyday Natterings of an Exhausted, Repressed, and Bored 'Saudi' Arabian Chick." Writing in a generally readable *mélange* of English and occasional Arabic, the author, Farah Aziz, alias "Faroooha," reveals herself to be a student at "KSU"--King Saud University (not Kansas State), the kingdom's oldest university. Faroooha is a "spoiled jingoistic" resident of the capital, Riyadh, as well as of Najd, the desert province from which Wahhabi radicalism and the royal house of Saud emerged.

Faroooha has a lot to complain about, and she is unafraid to do so. When she chooses, her English is perfect. She also posts color photographs, obviously taken on a cameraphone, on her blog. Some of the images are banal in the extreme--piles of candy in the city at the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, for example--but one, in the entry dated October 26, seems unsurpassable in its expression of the Saudi regime's pathology.

The photo shows an interactive panel installed on a wall at KSU, where women students are requested to indicate their choice of a destiny after death by choosing between two pictures. On the left a woman is shown dressed in a head and neck covering, a full body *hijab* resembling a raincoat, and a floor-length dress. She carries a handbag. Next to her is a depiction of flames. This woman, despite her extremely modest attire, is headed for the fires of hell. On the right a woman is shown outfitted in the recommended female dress: a black *abaya*, covering the head, face, and entire body, whose contours cannot be distinguished. The woman dressed this way is headed for paradise, depicted as a park in which, strangely enough, only black-*abaya*-clad women are gathered.

The message is almost beyond belief: Eternal damnation awaits a Saudi woman who carries a handbag, exposes her eyes, or allows her female form to be even faintly discernible. For those who obediently wear the *abaya*, God's reward in paradise will include continued concealment and sex segregation.

This interactive gimmick is pure, unadulterated Wahhabism. Faroooha comments, "Bulletin boards in universities are usually put up for academic purposes . . . in KSU, this is what you would expect to find."

Faroooha's blog entry for October 13 includes her English translation of an essay entitled "Imagine Being A Woman," written and posted in Arabic by a Saudi female writer, Badria Al-Bisher. The article is a manifesto for a Saudi women's protest movement. "Imagine being a woman," writes Al-

Bisher, "and this guardian of yours is your 15 year old son." Sure enough, under the strictures of Saudi Wahhabism, a woman cannot make any decisions on her own, and must defer to a teenage son if she has no older male relative. She must get permission from him to obtain an education or work.

The text continues, "Imagine being a woman and needing to take constant taxi rides just to run your everyday errands [because women are not allowed to drive]. Imagine having to be patient with a driver who does not understand you and having to bear with the cultural differences, just to get where you want. Imagine having to wait for your kid brother everyday, just so he can take you to work [because women are not allowed to go out without a male escort]. Imagine hiring countless drivers who learn how to drive using the car you own, who practice at your expense, and whom you coach for months and months until you exhaustedly sigh '*what kinda life is this???*' All this because you are a woman, and thus are not permitted to drive."

The same article condemns Saudi-Wahhabi incitement to rape non-Wahhabi women: "Imagine that women in the 21st century follow *fatwas* of scholars who at one point start to discuss the viability of capturing the enemy's women, and then having sexual relations with them. Some even go on to discuss the capturing of this enemy's women at time of peace, as well; and all the while, you do not even know who the enemy in question is."

Blogging has also become a major phenomenon in theocratic Iran. But in

Saudi Arabia, the sudden explosion of blogging coincides with evidence of a very real move toward openness in religious thinking, guided by the new king, the octogenarian Abdullah. At a global Islamic summit at the end of 2005, Abdullah proclaimed the need for "moderation that embodies the Islamic concept of tolerance," adding, "I look forward to Muslim inventors and industrialists, to an advanced Muslim technology, and Muslim youth who work for their life just as they work for the Hereafter, without excess or negligence, without any kind of extremism."

That vision sharply conflicts with the obsessions of al Qaeda and Hamas, which exalt death over life. The same summit meeting heard a message from Jordan's King Abdullah II calling for an end to *takfir*, the practice of a Muslim's accusing another Muslim of unbelief on the basis of his opinions alone. Forbidden by the prophet, *takfir* has become common since the rise of Wahhabism. Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, founder of the sect, declared all Shias and Sufis--for that matter, all who would not profess his interpretation of the faith--unbelievers. All who have been thus excommunicated are subject to murder and despoilment. *Takfir* underpins the pernicious ideology holding that only radical Muslims are real Muslims, and binds young terrorists together by conferring on them the spurious status of an elite in what is actually a criminal conspiracy. The Jordanian king's denunciation of *takfir* recognizes Shias as Muslims, specifically negating the religious argument of the Sunni terrorists in Iraq--not to mention the Wahhabi Sunnis in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan--who describe Shias as heretics.

Residents of the Saudi kingdom confirm to American friends that a new atmosphere has become perceptible since Abdullah took the throne. Fatima al-Hejazi, a young Saudi researcher, notes that at a National Dialogue Forum in the city of Abha in December 2005, a representative of the grossly oppressed Shia minority in Saudi Arabia called for equal religious rights. Al-Hejazi suggests this action was inspired by the anti-*takfir* declaration from Jordan.

In another important development, four Saudi women have been elevated to the board of directors of the chamber of commerce of Jeddah, the country's commercial capital. Elsewhere such an act might seem trivial; in Saudi Arabia it is revolutionary--and especially significant because it involves the business class, the probable leaders of a Saudi transition to normality.

"Saudi Blogs": For all its simplicity, the phrase has a revolutionary ring, like "Continental Congress" or "Polish Solidarity." Poland and the other Soviet-bloc Communist dictatorships were liberated with the help of the mimeograph and Xerox machines. Saudi Arabia and Iran may be freed by blogs and camera phones, perhaps giving Saudi King Abdullah more than he bargained for in the way of "an advanced Muslim technology." For now, the Saudi authorities continue to block conventional websites maintained by reformists, like tuwaa.com, while permitting infamous Wahhabi hate sites, like alsaha.com, to operate. But the tyrants are falling behind and losing control of events. The spirits of the pamphleteer Benjamin Franklin and the great communicator Ronald Reagan must be tickled.