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WOMAN UP!

Promoting Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia to Counter Violent Extremism

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CVE Series



Introduction

The United States of America was built on the principles of life, liberty, and equality under the law for all citizens, regardless of sex or race. As the leader of the free world, its foreign policy goals include promoting these principles abroad and holding other governments accountable for their commitments to basic human rights.

The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) compiles over 5,000 pages of reports annually that focus on the human rights conditions in 190 countries to disseminate information and prompt action on the attendant issues. The 2014 report reveals the severity of human rights restrictions in the Kingdom, specifically noting the restrictions on women and their lack of freedom of expression, assembly, religion, and movement.

As an advocate for the protection of human rights, the United States can use its influence to foster positive change in the Kingdom by diplomatic means. Furthermore, investing in women's rights in Saudi Arabia could be a strategic move for the United States because of the impact on the economy and on combating violent extremism. Promoting women's rights would not only improve the social, political, and economic climate in the Kingdom, but would also set a precedent for the rest of the region due to centrality of Saudi Arabia in the Muslim World and its cultural and political influence throughout the region.

Human Rights Abuses in Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has some of the most discriminatory policies toward women in the world. Women are treated as second class citizens, deprived of most civil liberties and treated as the property of their male guardians. There is no legal minimum age of marriage, resulting in thousands of child marriages every year. Saudi women cannot marry divorce, travel, work, obtain emergency medical treatment, or leave their homes without the consent or accompaniment of their *mahram* or legal male guardian.

In addition, strict rules of gender segregation proscribe separation of women from unrelated men in public spaces, which limits women's access to parks, museums, libraries, and other public facilities. They are also excluded from all senior positions in religious institutions and their political representation remains extremely low. Furthermore, government religious police called *mutaween* patrol public areas to ensure that women are fully covered in public. Harsh punishments are inflicted if any of these rules are broken.

Since women effectively have the status of minors in Saudi Arabia, male guardians have complete control over their movement and can even place them under house arrest by restricting them from leaving the home. This was evident in the case of the late Saudi King Abdullah who subjected four of his daughters to house arrest since 2001 for their actions in promoting women's rights.¹ He had divorced their mother for not being able to give birth to a son and she sought shelter in London. The

¹Tharoor, Ishaan. "Don't Forget the Late Saudi King's 'Jailed' Princesses." The Washington Post, 23 Jan. 2015. Web. 6 July 2015. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2015/01/23/dont-forget-the-late-saudi-kings-jailed-princesses/>>.

four daughters, Sahar, Jawaher, Hala and Maha are still being held hostage, even after the passing of their father, and their whereabouts are unknown.

Since men have all of the decision-making powers and are in control of the women's actions, domestic abuse is a very common phenomenon. In 2013, the Council of Ministers passed a law that criminalized domestic violence, but the law has proven to be insufficient. The punishment for violating this law is paying a fine or receiving prison time of up to one year. But few cases are reported because survivors of domestic abuse are reluctant to report them for fear of damaging family honor or their own reputations. Honor crimes are still practiced in the region where women are punished and sometimes killed for bringing shame upon the family. In addition, those who report domestic violence are susceptible to facing counter-accusations of fornication.

A 2005 Freedom House study *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Citizenship and Justice* found Gulf States to have the largest gap between males and females on the topic of civil rights.² Specifically, it found that women face systematic discrimination as a result of laws practiced by conservative authoritarian monarchies and entrenched cultural practices that prevent progress. New laws guaranteeing women's rights are worthless if regional authorities do little to uphold them. More often than not, such as in the case of domestic abuse, survivors are often encouraged to reconcile their "marital issues" at home and not bring the issue to court.³ If cases are reported, many times the survivors face counter-accusations and end up receiving punishment. One example of this is a case where a young woman and man were both gang-raped - the victims received a six-month prison sentence and two hundred lashes for being alone with someone of the opposite sex who was not a family member.⁴

Strict laws against freedom of speech and harsh restrictions on non-governmental empowerment/advocacy organizations make it extremely hard for women to protest against the government and lobby for any sort of reform. One example is the case of Lujain Al-Hathloul, a women's rights activist, who entered Saudi Arabia with a valid driver's license from the United Arab Emirates. Al-Hathloul's protest of the ban of women drivers in Saudi Arabia led to her arrest and trial under terrorism laws.⁵

² Kelly, Sanja. "Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Recent Gains and New Opportunities For Women's Rights in the Gulf Arab States." *Freedom House*. Freedom House, n.d. Web. 9 June 2015. <<https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Women%27s%20Rights%20in%20the%20Middle%20East%20and%20North%20Africa,%20Gulf%20Edition.pdf>>.

³ Kelly, Sanja. "Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Recent Gains and New Opportunities For Women's Rights in the Gulf Arab States." *Freedom House*. Freedom House, n.d. Web. 9 June 2015. <<https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Women%27s%20Rights%20in%20the%20Middle%20East%20and%20North%20Africa,%20Gulf%20Edition.pdf>>.

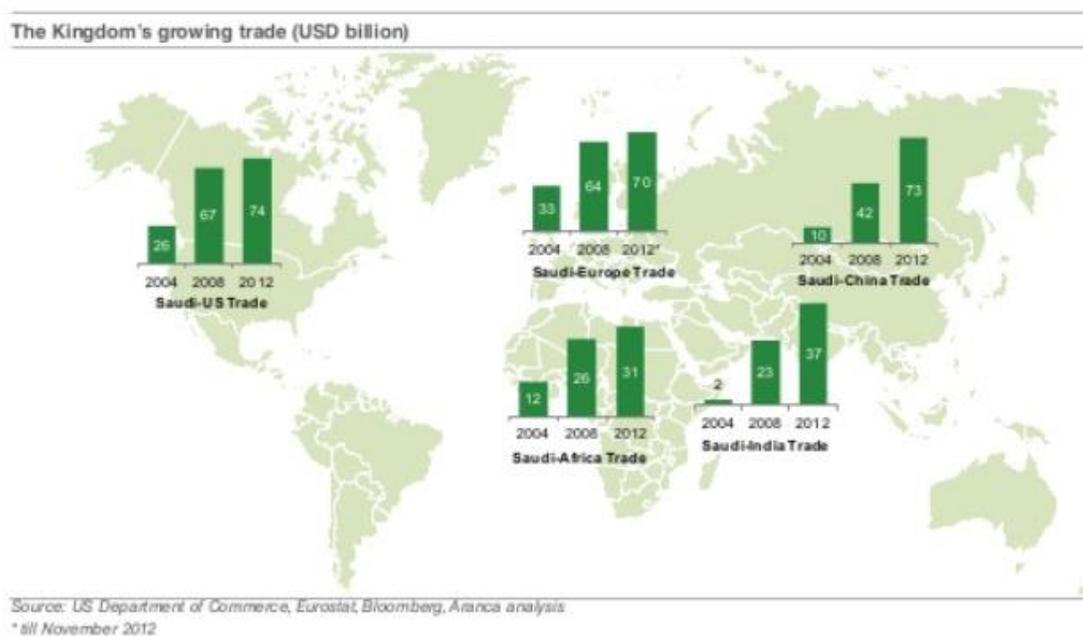
⁴ OECD Development Center. "Saudi Arabia." *Gender Index*. Social Institutions & Gender Index, 2015. Web. 8 June 2015. <<http://genderindex.org/sites/default/files/datasheets/SA.pdf>>.

⁵ The Associated Press. "Saudi Women Drivers Referred to Terrorism Court." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 25 Dec. 2014. Web. 02 July 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2014/12/25/world/middleeast/ap-ml-saudi-women-driving.html?_r=0>.

Global Impact

As an oil superpower and home to Islam’s most holy places, Saudi Arabia is arguably the most powerful and influential country in the Muslim world. It is the world’s largest exporter of crude reserves and has exported 7.47 million barrels in January 2015, as reported by the Joint Organizations Data Initiative.⁶

Saudi Arabia’s Growing International Trade⁷



This export power gives the Kingdom a great deal of influence over energy markets, affecting a number of governments dependent on Saudi oil for fuel purposes. For decades, Saudi Arabia and OPEC have controlled the market by adjusting the supply of oil and setting high prices. This has affected US consumers directly, prompting US foreign policy to focus on good relations with Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has maintained its influence throughout the region as it is greatly involved in domestic and international issues stemming from other Arab nations. The image below illustrates this influence.

⁶ Newsteam Staff. "U.S.-Saudi Relations." *Council on Foreign Relations*. N.p., 11 May 2015. Web. 7 June 2015. <<http://www.cfr.org/saudi-arabia/us-saudi-relations/p36524>>.

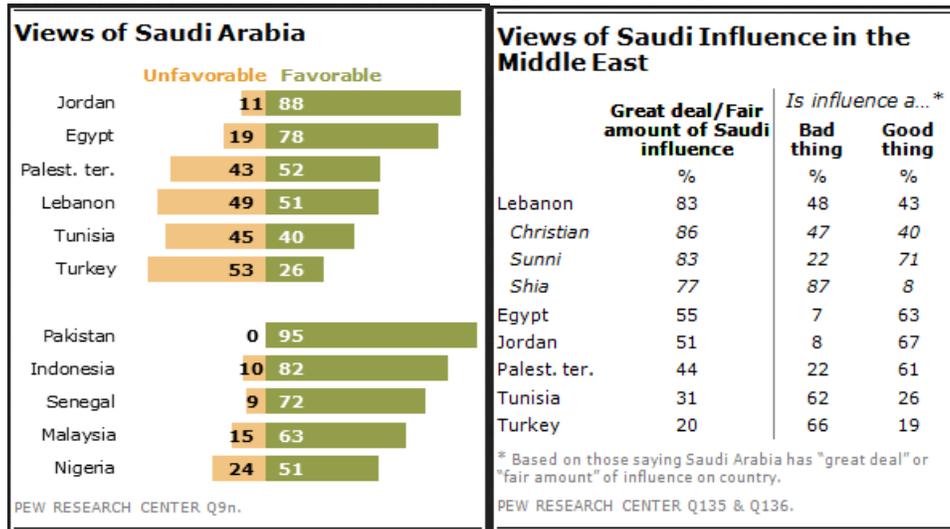
⁷ Aranca. *Saudia Arabia on the Move: The Making of a Trillion Dollar Economy*. Rep. Aranca, 2013. Web. 6 July 2015. <<http://www.aranca.com/downloads/special-reports/Aranca-Report-For-The-Euromoney-Saudi-Arabia-Conference-2013.pdf>>.

Saudi Arabia as a Regional Power



Not only does Saudi Arabia have influence over energy markets and international politics, it also is viewed as the beacon of Islam worldwide. It hosts the two holiest cities in Islam and is the strictest Islamic regime in the world whose legitimacy stems from Wahhabism, a conservative form of Islam. It requires all of its citizens to be Muslim and strictly enforces its own brand of Sharia law. Because Saudi Arabia derives its legitimacy from Islam and rules in its name, its message, policies, and customs resonate throughout the Muslim world. The image below further illustrates the positive view that other Arab countries have of the Saudi government. These results are based on a survey from the Pew Research Center showing the continued influence Saudi Arabia has throughout the region.

Pew Research Survey Results 2013⁸



If the strictest and most repressive government in the Arab and Muslim world were to change its policies on women’s rights, this would set a precedent for many Muslim countries who emulate Saudi policies. It would show other states that the repression of women is not a principle of Islam and debunk myths that Islam justifies the abuse of women. More often than not, traditional customs are the source of mistreatment of women in the Middle East, not Islam itself. Many times, verses of the Koran and the Hadith have often been manipulated in order to fulfill the political agendas of the regime. If the leader and holiest country of the Muslim World were to improve its treatment of women, other countries would follow suit.

Some reforms have been made in Arab states regarding the status of women based on the findings of the 2002 report of the Arab Human Development that linked the economic and political stagnation in the Arab states to gender inequality issues.⁹ While conservative regimes still remain in power, small steps toward reform were taken, such as enforcing electoral quotas for women in parliament in countries like Morocco and Jordan.

Among the benefits from equal rights between women and men are increased educational and economic opportunities.

⁸ Pew Research Center. *Saudi Arabia's Image Falters Among Middle East Neighbors*. Rep. Pew Research Center, 17 Oct. 2013. Web. 5 July 2015. <<http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/10/17/saudi-arabias-image-falters-among-middle-east-neighbors/>>.

⁹ Coleman, Isobel. "The Payoff From Women's Rights." *Foreign Affairs*. N.p., May-June 2004. Web. 9 June 2015. <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2004-05-01/payoff-womens-rights>>.

Political and Economic Benefits

The Economy

Saudi Arabia is desperately looking to expand and diversify its economy. As John Kerry has stated, “No country can get ahead if it leaves half of its people behind. This is why the United States believes gender equality is critical to our shared goals of prosperity, stability, and peace, and why investing in women and girls worldwide is critical to advancing U.S. foreign policy.”¹⁰ By restricting half of the population from entering the work force and by limiting their roles in society, the country is sabotaging its own economic progress. As Mary Hallward-Driemeier, lead economist at the World Bank’s research development has stated, “the extra effort will be worth it, because better rights for women lead to important development outcomes that can benefit society as a whole. Our analyses of the database shows reforms help improve outcomes in women’s employment, health, and education.”¹¹ Universities in Saudi Arabia see more women graduate but most are denied jobs, especially those that are deemed “improper” for women.

Many reports have shown that when a woman has a job, she gains financial independence from her husband and family, which then gives her a stronger voice in family situations and society as a whole.¹² In addition, giving women more control over the resources greatly benefits society because women are more likely than men to reinvest money into the family. A 2003 World Bank study evidences this notion by finding that when women participate in the workforce, specifically in the Middle East, they are able to raise household income up to 25 percent without raising unemployment rates.¹³ Although the Saudi monarchy flaunts the wealth of the nation, in reality, the Saudi economy has stagnated with annual GDP growth lowering from 7.4% in 2010 to 4.0% in 2013 as reported by the World Bank.¹⁴

¹⁰ Kerry, John. "Why Women Are Central to U.S. Foreign Policy." *U.S. Department of State*. U.S. Department of State, 08 Mar. 2013. Web. 02 July 2015. <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/03/207940.htm>>.

¹¹ The World Bank. "Economic Development=Equal Rights for Women?" The World Bank Group, 24 Sept. 2013. Web. 11 June 2015. <<http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/09/24/Economic-Development-Equal-Rights-for-Women>>.

¹² OECD Development Center. "Saudi Arabia." *Gender Index*. Social Institutions & Gender Index, 2015. Web. 8 June 2015. <<http://genderindex.org/sites/default/files/datasheets/SA.pdf>>.

¹³ Coleman, Isobel. "The Payoff From Women's Rights." *Foreign Affairs*. N.p., May-June 2004. Web. 9 June 2015. <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2004-05-01/payoff-womens-rights>>.

¹⁴ World Bank Group. "GDP Growth (annual %)." *World Bank*. N.p., 2013. Web. 10 June 2015. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?order=wbapi_data_value_2013%20wbapi_data_value%20wbapi_data_value-last&sort=asc>.

World Bank Annual GDP Growth Forecast¹⁵

This stagnation is mainly due to the lack of economic diversity. Studies have shown that empowering women may hold the key to diversifying the economy and bettering Saudi society. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), Middle Eastern and North African countries (MENA) would be able to see annual GDP growth rates increase by up to 2 percent if the level of employment of women were similar to that of European and North American countries.¹⁶ Similarly, based on reports from the OECD, experts argue that MENA countries are underutilizing pools of human skills by excluding or restricting women from the working sector.¹⁷ Likewise, if female entrepreneurship were to increase, the number of businesses would increase, resulting in future economic growth.

By permitting women to participate in the economic sector, economic growth is stimulated as is the political participation of women. A 2013 World Bank report attributes the ratification of international rights convention and female political participation as also being crucial factors of promoting women's rights.¹⁸ They have found that when women hold at least a quarter of national political positions, they are more likely to be considered heads of households and create policies that enable women to control assets. This will also help to empower women to have more economic and social freedom and be liberated from their husbands' control. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), sponsored by the United Nations in 1979 was created to do just that and is perhaps the most comprehensive agreement concerning women's rights internationally. Saudi Arabia is a signatory that ratified the agreement, but clearly it has not upheld its government to the standards listed in the agreement.

It is well-known that supporting gender equality has a great development impact and leads to higher school enrollment, more women in the labor force, higher wages for girls and women, and lower

¹⁵ The World Bank. "Global Economic Prospects-Forecasts." *Saudi Arabia Data*. The World Bank, 2013. Web. 06 July 2015. <<http://data.worldbank.org/country/saudi-arabia>>.

¹⁶ OECD. "Gender Inequality and Entrepreneurship in the Middle East and North Africa." *OECD Development Center*. N.p., Dec. 2013. Web. 10 June 2015. <<http://www.oecd.org/mena/investment/Statistical%20Portrait.pdf>>.

¹⁷ OECD. "Gender Inequality and Entrepreneurship in the Middle East and North Africa." *OECD Development Center*. N.p., Dec. 2013. Web. 10 June 2015. <<http://www.oecd.org/mena/investment/Statistical%20Portrait.pdf>>.

¹⁸ World Bank Group. "GDP Growth (annual %)." *World Bank*. 2013

maternal and infant mortality.¹⁹ All of this progress leads to greater economic prosperity and could be the key to diversifying the Saudi Arabian economy. It is important to note that lack of education, a stagnant economy, poor socioeconomic conditions, and high unemployment rates result in a disgruntled and easily impressionable population, creating the perfect recipe for extremism to thrive.

Countering Violent Extremism

The repressive nature of the Saudi government has allowed the country to become a hotbed for extremism. It is no coincidence that Osama bin Laden and fifteen of the nineteen hijackers of the 9/11 attacks were Saudi. As the USAID notes, there are a series of key factors that promote the growth of extremism which include high levels of social marginalization, poorly governed or ungoverned areas, government repression and human rights violations, endemic corruption and elite impunity, and cultural threat perceptions.²⁰ The vast majority of these factors are found in Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom operates as a closed society ruled by corrupt elites who harshly repress the rights of their citizens. As the annual Human Rights Watch Report states, the government greatly discriminates against people based on sex, ethnicity, race, and religion, leaving many groups marginalized.²¹

Law in Saudi Arabia does not protect basic human rights, which enables government officials and police to detain individuals for actions such as speaking out against the government or worshipping whatever religion they choose.²² Practices such as apostasy and blasphemy are illegal and can result in the death penalty.²³ Corruption is also a large issue as stated in the DRL's annual report. One specific case is that of the director of the urban planning department who had accepted 6.3 million riyals or \$1.7 million in bribes.²⁴ Other examples include employers confiscating passports, withholding wages, and forcing workers to continue working against their will.²⁵

Because of the severity of human rights violations, repression, and corruption, the Saudi government has effectively worked to leave many feeling marginalized. It is under these conditions that extremism becomes appealing as it can provide marginalized people with an identity or purpose

¹⁹ The World Bank. "Economic Development=Equal Rights for Women?" The World Bank Group, 24 Sept. 2013. Web. 11 June 2015. <<http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/09/24/Economic-Development-Equal-Rights-for-Women>>.

²⁰ USAID Policy Task Team. "The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency." *USAID.gov*. USAID, Sept. 2011. Web. 3 July 2015. <http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/VEI_Policy_Final.pdf>.

²¹ Human Rights Watch. *World Report 2015*. Rep. no. 25. Human Rights Watch, 2 February 2015. Web. 2 July 2015. <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/wr2015_web.pdf>.

²² The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. *Saudi Arabia 2014 Human Rights Report*. Rep. United States Department of State, 24 June 2015. Web. 30 June 2015. <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/236832.pdf>>.

²³ The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. *Saudi Arabia 2014 Human Rights Report*. Rep. United States Department of State, 24 June 2015. Web. 30 June 2015. <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/236832.pdf>>.

²⁴ The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. *Saudi Arabia 2014 Human Rights Report*. Rep. United States Department of State, 24 June 2015. Web. 30 June 2015. <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/236832.pdf>>.

²⁵ Human Rights Watch. *World Report 2015*. Rep. no. 25. Human Rights Watch, 2 February 2015. Web. 2 July 2015. <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/wr2015_web.pdf>.

and gives them an outlet to release their anger and resentment against the repressive regime.²⁶ In fact, Saudi nationals are among the largest group of foreign fighters recruited by ISIS in Syria and Iraq. *The Washington Post* reports that the number of foreign fighters has reached 20,000 with an estimated 2,500 of them having Saudi nationality.²⁷ Saudi Arabia has nominally joined the US coalition in air attacks against ISIS, but this has not prevented the thousands of Saudi nationals fleeing the Kingdom to join ISIS abroad. The Kingdom reported that it had arrested a total of 93 people, including 65 Saudi nationals who were suspected of membership in ISIS.²⁸ Furthermore, it claims that these arrests prevented an attack on the US embassy in Riyadh.²⁹

Because women are the most marginalized group in Saudi Arabia, they are an easy target for recruitment by ISIS. *The Independent* newspaper reports that ISIS specifically targets women from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf in its “Women in the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study.”³⁰ The manifesto denounces Saudi Arabia for “barbarism and savagery” in its treatment of women saying they are mistreated by the criminal justice system and pushed into poverty.³¹ In reality, women’s treatment under ISIS outlined by the manifesto does not differ much from the Saudi regime. It still calls for women to live sedentary lifestyles and restricts their educational and occupational endeavors, but allows them to fight in ISIS if there are not enough men.³² Ultimately, the manifesto is used as a recruiting device to attract women from countries where they are severely oppressed, giving them an outlet to release their anger and promising them a less restrictive lifestyle.

The most obvious way of eliminating the threat of extremism is by protecting human rights, dismantling repressive regimes, and controlling state corruption. In addition, one of the more tangible methods is investing in development and including marginalized people in this endeavor. The USAID has already launched a series of projects in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Chad, and Colombia where extremism flourished or had the potential to emerge. USAID believes that development assistance and bettering the economy can work to address socioeconomic factors that

²⁶ USAID Policy Task Team. “The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency.” *USAID.gov*. USAID, Sept. 2011. Web. 3 July 2015. <http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/VEI_Policy_Final.pdf>.

²⁷ Swanson, Ana. “More Than 20,000 Foreign Fighters Have Joined ISIS.” *Washington Post*. Washington Post, 27 Jan. 2015. Web. 7 July 2015. <<http://knowmore.washingtonpost.com/2015/01/27/more-than-20000-foreign-fighters-have-joined-isis/>>.

²⁸ Al Jazeera. “Saudi Arabia Arrests Scores of Suspected ISIL Members.” *Al Jazeera English*. Al Jazeera Media Network, 28 Apr. 2015. Web. 7 July 2015. <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/saudi-arabia-arrests-scores-suspected-isil-members-150428132141916.html>>.

²⁹ Al Jazeera. “Saudi Arabia Arrests Scores of Suspected ISIL Members.” *Al Jazeera English*. Al Jazeera Media Network, 28 Apr. 2015. Web. 7 July 2015. <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/saudi-arabia-arrests-scores-suspected-isil-members-150428132141916.html>>.

³⁰ Saul, Heather. “Life As a Woman Under Isis.” *The Independent*. The Independent, 5 Feb. 2015. Web. 8 July 2015. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/life-as-a-woman-under-isis-document-reveals-for-the-first-time-what-group-really-expects-from-female-recruits-living-in-syria-and-iraq-10025143.html>>.

³¹ Saul, Heather. “Life As a Woman Under Isis.” *The Independent*. The Independent, 5 Feb. 2015. Web. 8 July 2015. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/life-as-a-woman-under-isis-document-reveals-for-the-first-time-what-group-really-expects-from-female-recruits-living-in-syria-and-iraq-10025143.html>>.

³² Saul, Heather. “Life As a Woman Under Isis.” *The Independent*. The Independent, 5 Feb. 2015. Web. 8 July 2015. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/life-as-a-woman-under-isis-document-reveals-for-the-first-time-what-group-really-expects-from-female-recruits-living-in-syria-and-iraq-10025143.html>>.

may be seen as personal rewards for individuals to join extremist groups.³³ Its efforts have included providing jobs, technical training, employment-search support, and grants.³⁴

In the specific case of Saudi Arabia, the most beneficial and long-lasting manner of fighting extremism would be to empower people and create a place for them in the economic and development sector. Women are among the largest group of marginalized persons in Saudi Arabia. That's why including them in the economic sector would not only improve the economy, but would also work to promote women's roles in society and eradicate cultural norms restricting them from appreciating basic human rights.

U.S. Foreign Policy Obligations

Importance of Maintaining Strong US-Saudi Relations

Ever since World War II, stabilizing the Persian Gulf region has been a US foreign policy priority. The United States was in control of much of the oil produced in the region during the 70s until nationalization of oil company Saudi Aramco in the 1980's. An alliance with Saudi Arabia and Iran was deemed crucial in maintaining influence in the region through the US "Twin Pillars" policy of prolonging stability.³⁵ The Iranian revolution of 1979 quickly eliminated one pillar and thus the alliance with Saudi Arabia proved even more important.

The US foreign policy goals include democratization and economic development, two things the Saudi monarchy has always strongly opposed. The importance of oil and stabilizing the energy market, however, have proved to be more important than foreign policy goals of democratization and economic development. Many experts have cited reports that countries suppressing women are more likely to have stagnated economies, lack democratic institutions, and are more prone to extremism.³⁶ This seems to be the case for Saudi Arabia: a country where women are treated as property of men. They are also a single-resource dependent economy and a hotbed for extremist organizations. Therefore, it is crucial for the US to take an interest in Saudi Arabia. Overwhelming data in the area suggests that women are in fact crucial to good governance, stable civil life, and development which is why the US should become proactive in promoting women's rights in Saudi Arabia.³⁷ These factors correlate directly to US foreign policy and would promote stability in the region, prevent extremism, and diversify the economy.

Application of U.S. Foreign Policy Goals

A central goal of U.S. foreign policy is the promotion of human rights abroad and it has pledged to hold other governments responsible for respecting the tenets outlined by the Universal Declaration

³³ USAID Policy Task Team. "The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency." *USAID.gov*. USAID, Sept. 2011. Web. 3 July 2015. <http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/VEI_Policy_Final.pdf>.

³⁴ USAID Policy Task Team. "The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency." *USAID.gov*. USAID, Sept. 2011. Web. 3 July 2015. <http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/VEI_Policy_Final.pdf>.

³⁵ Newsteam Staff. "U.S.-Saudi Relations." Council on Foreign Relations, 11 May 2015. Web. 2015. <<http://www.cfr.org/saudi-arabia/us-saudi-relations/p36524>>.

³⁶ Coleman, Isobel. "The Payoff From Women's Rights." *Foreign Affairs*. N.p., May-June 2004. Web. 9 June 2015. <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2004-05-01/payoff-womens-rights>>.

³⁷ Coleman, Isobel. "The Payoff From Women's Rights." *Foreign Affairs*. N.p., May-June 2004. Web. 9 June 2015. <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2004-05-01/payoff-womens-rights>>.

of Human Rights - the same rights that have been denied to people living under the Saudi regime, especially women. Specifically, the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) works to compile reports on human rights conditions abroad, take firm stands on past, present, and future abuses, and strives to form partnerships with organizations, institutions, and governments that are committed to human rights. It pledges to *promote the rights of women through international campaigns for political participation and full equality; conducts high-level human rights dialogues with other governments; coordinates U.S. policy on human rights with key allies; and raises key issues and cases through diplomatic and public channels.*³⁸ Yet, the most vicious human rights abusers in Saudi Arabia get a free pass. The annual DRL reports make it clear that the United States is not oblivious to the crimes committed by the Al Saud Monarchy's regime. As one of the most influential leaders in the free world and the face of equality and democratic values, it is the duty of the United States to lead efforts in the promotion of gender equality in Saudi Arabia. The United States is a member of many human rights organizations, as well as the United Nations, which serve as excellent forums for change.

After September 11, 2001 the United States took an interest in gender equality issues in both Afghanistan and Iraq, especially after growing awareness of the treatment of women by the Taliban in Afghanistan.³⁹ In fact, pushing the women's rights agenda became a priority in promoting democracy in the region. The U.S. sponsored local women's groups, meeting with female leaders, and establishing electoral quotas for women in government. Improving women's rights in Middle Eastern countries became a larger part of foreign policy and has prompted the creation of groups such as the Congressional Task Force on Afghan Women, Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS), and National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) which focus on issues such as security, government, human rights, and development.

It is organizations like these that draw governments' attention to women's rights issues in hope of amending current legislation to be more inclusive of women. Local organizations such as Women's Empowerment Organization and Al-Mustaqbal Center for Women in Iraq focus on linking female leaders from the provincial and national levels, closing the gap between ethnic and sectarian groups, take advantage of the media to bring awareness to the cause, and to include men in women's rights activism.⁴⁰

The largest U.S. female empowerment program is PROMOTE, which functions as a joint commitment by the US and Afghan Government. It strives to empower 75,000 women between the ages of 18-30 to create a new generation of female Afghan political, business, and civil leaders.⁴¹

³⁸ U.S. Department of State. "Human Rights." *U.S. Department of State: Diplomacy in Action*. U.S. Department of State, 2015. Web. 13 June 2015. <<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/hr/>>.

³⁹ Kuehnast, Kathleen, Manal Omar, Steven E. Steiner, and Hodei Sultan. *Lessons from Women's Programs in Afghanistan and Iraq*. Rep. United States Institute of Peace, Mar. 2012. Web. 11 June 2015. <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Gender/SR_Lessons_from_Women%27s_Programs_in_Afghanistan_and_Iraq.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Kuehnast, Kathleen, Manal Omar, Steven E. Steiner, and Hodei Sultan. *Lessons from Women's Programs in Afghanistan and Iraq*. Rep. United States Institute of Peace, Mar. 2012. Web. 11 June 2015. <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Gender/SR_Lessons_from_Women%27s_Programs_in_Afghanistan_and_Iraq.pdf>.

⁴¹ USAID. "Promoting Gender Equity in National Priority Programs (Promote)." US Agency for International Development, 26 Feb. 2015. Web. 12 June 2015. <<http://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/promoting-gender-equity-national-priority-programs>>.

The USAID committed \$216 million to the program.⁴² Why, then, has the U.S. not taken any initiative in sponsoring similar programs in Saudi Arabia, a country where women's rights are greatly restricted? The U.S. still works closely with Saudi Arabia in economic endeavors and in fighting extremism, but one of the most efficient ways to tackle these issues is by promoting women's rights. It is inequality, poor socio-economic conditions, and repressive regimes that breed extremism. If women were allowed to enter the workforce and fully participate in the economy, this would improve the socio-economic conditions and assist in promoting political rights of women, setting a precedent for other countries in the region.

Plans for Change

Now that the extremity of human rights violations has been discussed and the benefits of women's rights advocacy for Saudi Arabia and the Muslim world have been addressed, it is time to plan a course of action. It is crucial that the US government agencies develop programs that will empower local women to start a movement for themselves and begin to change the traditional stigmas in their own country. This will provide the foundation for authentic change and long lasting empowerment of women in Saudi society. The possibilities are endless on ways to promote change and empower women in the region. Below are a few solutions that the Institute for Gulf Affairs experts have developed with local activists to eradicate the political, social, and economic injustices women face daily in Saudi Arabia.

1. Develop a written US policy on supporting women's rights in Saudi Arabia

The United States should develop an official policy on women's rights in Saudi Arabia that would provide a framework and set of clear objectives with the end goal of empowering women to fully participate in Saudi society. Such objectives should include improving access to all academic fields, increasing the percentage of women in the workforce, encouraging economic development, promoting health education and participation in sports, advocating for women's leadership efforts, and increasing female political representation. A joint commitment by all US departments is required to spark any effective change.

In order to reach these objectives, the written policy would first outline the importance of women's inclusion to political, economic, and social progress and issue a National Action Plan for empowering women in Saudi Arabia. The National Action Plan would focus its efforts on creating programs that would be initiated by specific US governmental departments in conjunction with other US agencies such as USAID. These programs would be created for case specific areas, targeting each objective outlined in the framework. Specifically, the policy should include a commitment to hosting roundtable discussions between US government officials and Saudi women to discuss what factors are most constricting of their abilities to fully function in Saudi society as equals and develop practices to alleviate these restrictions. Funding for such projects can come from government departments as well as other US agencies. USAID is one example as it has greatly funded programs in Afghanistan for the improvement of gender equality. Some examples of previous initiatives include the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan.

After the appropriate initiatives are developed, a timeline would be created to set goals for the programs and require departments to monitor the progress of such projects. The annual DRL reports on human rights conditions should also be utilized to monitor the progress of women's inclusion in all sectors of society, whether that be political, economic, or social.

This policy would also call for a change in rhetoric in US-Saudi relations and pledge to publically engage Saudi Arabia on women's issues at bilateral meeting and it will state the US's commitment to promoting women's rights in Saudi Arabia. Protection of women's rights will be central to the US's efforts in combating violent extremism, oil transactions, and all other collaborations and projects with the Kingdom. Furthermore, it would call for the United States to use the United Nations as a platform to engage the Saudi government on its human rights abuses publically.

States and all applicable organizations that interact with the Saudi government should also be encouraged to adopt this policy. In addition, independent corporations and universities should also participate. Many US corporations do business with Saudi clients and it is during these transactions that women's rights issues can be addressed in the business sector. The Department of Labor should engage with Saudi corporations to urge women to be hired for executive positions and meet with female entrepreneurs in order to help them start up their own businesses. Universities should look to form US-Saudi Women's Councils in order to facilitate partnerships supporting women in the areas of education, health, economic empowerment, and leadership development, similar to the US-Afghan Women's Council based out of Georgetown University.

A written policy would not only outline a course of action for US departments and agencies when interacting with Saudi government officials, but it would also express US's commitment to upholding its own foreign policy goals of promoting human rights and countering violent extremism home and abroad. This National Action Plan would hold the United States government accountable for implementation of policies and initiatives outlined in the policy. A written framework is the first step needed to foster a foreign policy change specifically focusing on women's rights in Saudi Arabia.

2. Publically engage with Saudi Arabia on women's rights in all bilateral meetings

As stated in the National Action Plan, the United States should make a commitment to publically engage Saudi Arabia on the matters of women's issues. Primarily, it should push women's rights issues to the forefront of all US-Saudi relations and discuss creating a more inclusive environment for women in all negotiation settings each time US governmental officials meet with the Saudi monarchy. This should take precedent no matter what the meeting subject is, whether it be political, economic, or social, as women's rights play a significant role in all policy areas. It is also crucial to discuss women's rights issues specifically when meeting with the Saudi government to discuss the coalition's strategies on fighting ISIS. The United States must stress the importance of women's roles in effectively working to counter violent extremism and lessening the numbering of Saudi nationals fleeing to join the ranks of ISIS.

Secondly, it should use the United Nations and the United Nations Human Rights Council as platforms to publically address human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia. Publically engaging Saudi Arabia on its human rights abuses in such a forum will attract international attention to the severity

of human rights abuses in the Kingdom and will prompt nations to create coalitions and work towards bettering human rights conditions in the Kingdom.

3. Create a State Department office to focus solely on women's rights in Saudi Arabia

A new position in the State Department, whether it be permanent or ad-hoc, should be created to coordinate the implementation of the National Action Plan to promote Saudi women's rights. This office will focus solely on women's issues in Saudi Arabia and will be responsible for administering the programs outlined by the policy. It will also manage a grant program and allocate funding for programs and local women's rights organizations. Furthermore, it will facilitate the other U.S. Departments and the Congressional Task Force on Saudi women in developing the best programs, events, and campaigns to implement change. Lastly, it will actively monitor progress in women's rights issues in the Kingdom. It should also study annual DRL reports in order to track the progress of women's rights in Saudi Arabia.

4. Create a Congressional Task Force on Saudi Women

This task force would operate in a similar manner to the Congressional Task Force on Afghan Women, which was created after the deployment of US troops in Afghanistan and realization of the human rights abuses committed against women. The Congressional Task Force on Saudi Women would emulate the Afghan model as it would host roundtable discussions with local women and provide them with the training skills necessary to promote change in the Kingdom. These roundtable discussions will provide Saudi women the outlet to discuss with women's rights and human rights organizations what issues are most pertinent and conjure up solutions to improve them.

5. Utilize the UN as a platform

As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, the United States should use this power and influence within the United Nations to draw international attention to women's rights issues in Saudi Arabia. This body has been the starting point for many coalitions and campaigns working to eradicate human rights abuses globally. As such, it would provide the United States with the ideal diplomatic forum to begin talks with other nations on ways to promote gender equality in Saudi Arabia. The United States should also bring this matter to the United Nations Human Rights Council. This should be the platform to draw international attention to the human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia as its people, especially women, suffer from some of the most severe human rights repression in the world.

6. Create coalitions with both foreign governments and non-state actors

The United States should seek to engage with other governments and non-state actors, such as NGOs, in order to advocate for women's rights in Saudi Arabia. Specifically, the US should look to open dialogue with the European Union, focusing on shared values and principles, to create a coalition with them addressing women's rights issues. Any other state willing to join the coalition would also be welcome. Creating a multinational coalition to start a campaign on women's right issues would enable the campaign to increase its influence globally and include a larger network of supporters. Examples of previous initiatives on multinational women's rights projects include the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Women and the Economy Initiative, the Policy Partnership on Women and the Economy (PPWE), and the Women's Entrepreneurship in the Americas initiative. These programs have each worked to increase women's access to the market

and capital, develop women's leadership, and empower women to create their own startup businesses.

7. Fund local women's rights organizations

The United States should fund local women's rights organizations based in Saudi Arabia. This will enable such organizations to reach broader networks of people. In this way, the US should look to emulate the women's rights advocacy funding programs it started to empower women in Iraq. An example of this is the United States Institute of Peace Iraq Priority Grant Program, which benefitted groups such as the Women's Empowerment Organization and the Al-Mustaqbal Center for Women in Iraq. Such organizations will give Saudi women the platform to change local stigmas, empower themselves, and empower other women. It would be best to work with other governmental and nongovernmental organizations to allocate funding for such projects and develop these grant programs.

8. Launch health campaigns

Because of the high rates of osteoporosis, diabetes, vitamin D deficiencies, hypertension, and obesity among Saudi women as a result of sedentary lifestyles due to their restriction of movement, participation in sports, and physical education, the United States should launch a health campaign. The health campaign entitled, "No Women. No Play." launched by the Institute for Gulf Affairs should be utilized as a model as it advocates for full legal, political, social, and economic rights of women in Saudi Arabia. In 2009, it worked to ban the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from participating in the Olympic Games, due to the fact that the Kingdom bans women from competing, thus violating the official charter of the International Olympic Committee that forbids discrimination based on gender or race. Campaigns such as these are crucial to the empowerment of women in the Kingdom.

One of the first steps of the health campaign should be to work with organizations such as the World Health Organization and USAID to fund sports clubs and physical education programs for girls in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the health campaign should also work to educate young women on the importance of good health and physical activity, debunking myths preventing them from doing so. Athlete scholarships should also be offered by the United States in order to further create an incentive for young women to participate in sports and join sports clubs, offering the possibility for them to travel abroad for higher education.

Lastly, to increase awareness for women's participation in sports, the State Department should organize an event to send female American athletes to these sports clubs in the Kingdom. These women would be able to educate young Saudi women of the importance of physical activity and benefits of playing on a sports team. An event should also be organized for an American women's sports team, collegiate or professional, to go to the Kingdom and play a game with a Saudi women's sports team. This would work to establish a sisterhood program between American and Saudi sports teams and encourage a commitment of Saudi women's participation in sports.

All of these actions align with Obama's Global Health Initiative that has spent more than \$50 billion in achieving its health goals.⁴³ Some of this money should be designated towards women's

⁴³ "U.S. Global Health Programs." *Global Health Initiative*. United States Government, 03 Aug. 2014. Web. 23 June 2015. <<http://www.ghi.gov/about/index.html#.VYmrsIK2B8E>>.

health in Saudi Arabia, as this would provide the best return investment. As mentioned in the Institute for Gulf Affairs' report entitled, "Killing Them Softly," obesity rates for women ages 30-70 reached 44% in 2010 while 720,000 suffered from diabetes and 12.5% suffered from hypertension in 2014.⁴⁴ These are serious health concerns that are affecting a large portion of the population that can be prevented if enough action is taken. Such health problems are all consequences of sedentary lifestyles, which are encouraged by the current legal and cultural restrictions against women in sports in Saudi Arabia.

9. Offer scholarships for subject areas deemed "inappropriate" for women

The United States should offer scholarships to women to promote the study of engineering, law, media, architecture, and drama - the subject areas to which they currently have limited access. By creating more educational opportunities for women, this would then open up more work fields for women, result in higher employment rates for women, and give them more of a leadership role at home since they are bringing in some of the income.

In 2005, the Bush administration and King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud launched the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program. The program was created to allow Saudi students to study abroad in the United States on scholarships paid for by the Saudi government. However, US News reported in 2013 that only 24% of these scholarship recipients were female.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the scholarship program requires that a male companion must accompany her until her studies are finished and she returns home, which further limits how many women are able to study abroad.⁴⁶ The scholarship program that the Institute for Gulf Affairs is proposing differs from the King Abdullah scholarship program as it offers scholarships solely to women in order to allow more women to travel abroad to seek more education opportunities. This program would be funded by the United States, not require a mahram's presence, and would be targeted at enabling women to major in subjects they are typically barred from studying, such as engineering, law, media, architecture, and drama.

10. Promote female entrepreneurship and create economic incentives for women

The United States should promote female entrepreneurship and create economic incentives for hiring women in order to increase women's access to capital and the market. There are already a number of women's businesses starting up in Saudi Arabia, but many are required to list a male's name as one of the managers. Creating and investing in more women's businesses would ultimately work to eradicate this stipulation since many times the male's name is only listed as a technicality. If the United States began investing in women's businesses, this would also create more jobs for women.

⁴⁴ Mohamud, Ossob, and Ali Al-Ahmed. "Killing Them Softly: How Saudi Ban on Women's Sports Is Harming Their Health." *Gulf Institute*. Institute of Gulf Affairs, Dec. 2014. Web. 23 June 2015. <<http://www.gulfinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Killing-Them-Softly.pdf>>.

⁴⁵ LeBaron, Richard, and Stefanie Hausheer. "Americans Must Do More to Welcome Saudi Scholarship Students." *US News*. U.S. News & World Report, 1 Mar. 2013. Web. 29 June 2015. <<http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/world-report/2013/03/01/americans-must-do-more-to-welcome-saudi-scholarship-students>>.

⁴⁶ Saudi Arabia Ministry of Education. "Conditions for Acceptance in the Scholarship Program." *The Ministry of Education: Higher Education*. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2015. Web. 30 June 2015. <<http://3A%2F%2Fhe.moe.gov.sa%2Fen%2Fstudyaboard%2FKing-Abdulla-hstages%2FPages%2Fconditions-for-acceptance-in-the-scholarship-program-a.aspx>>.



The United States should also consider microfinance, which is found to be very successful in helping people start up their own businesses, especially women. Microfinance is a term given to the process of giving loans to individuals who do not earn enough money to qualify for traditional bank loans. In Saudi Arabia, women are most likely to have the lowest incomes since most have limited access to the work force. Typically, success stories involve small operations and startup businesses.

Lastly, implementing economic incentives for hiring women should also be utilized to fight gender stereotypes and empower women to enter the work force. Investing in larger corporations with the stipulation that they hire more women can achieve this. Installing quotas would also be beneficial, as it would require that women would also need to work in the same field as men and compete with men for the same job titles.

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About IGA

The Institute for Gulf Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan, tax exempt organization that disseminates reliable information about the Gulf region (the Gulf Cooperation Council countries plus Iraq) and produces thoughtful analyses of Gulf politics and international relations. Based in Washington, DC, the Institute is at the center of a global network of reliable individuals, some of whom, due to the closed nature of the Saudi and Gulf political systems, have no other outlet for their views. In order to fulfill this mission, the Institute:

- Convenes conferences in Washington, where informed analysts debate major issues concerning the Gulf countries and US-Gulf Relations.
- Conducts independent research and investigations, reports of which are posted on this website: www.gulfinstitution.org
- Fosters a deeper understanding of the Gulf countries among Washington and international policymakers and members of the press corps by providing them with up-to-date and exclusive information, and by putting them in contact with reliable analysts.
- Sponsors task forces whose reports help define the foreign policy agenda.