New Islamic Urbanism

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Preface

In the conservative cultural climate in Saudi Arabia of the 1980s and 1990s, a specific architectural style emerged: New Islamic Urbanism. The emphasis on privacy protection and the blocking of views characteristic of this architecture, although originally derived from a conservative Islamic imagination of social coexistence, enables, as I argue throughout this book, a broad variety of alternative social practices. Some of these may even be in conflict with the prevailing attitudes to gender relations, piety and moral conduct. New Islamic Urbanism thus facilitates both a conservative and a liberal way of life. Moreover, it allows for the constitution of counterpublics that challenge and renegotiate the boundaries between the public and the private.

Although the notion of societal change is essential to the research presented in this book, returning to Jeddah seven years after finishing my fieldwork I was surprised at how different life in this city had become. The present described in the last chapters of this book had become history, and it struck me that some of the forces of change described there must in fact have been more powerful than I had unconsciously assumed. Since the demise of King ʿAbdullāh in 2015 and the rise to power of crown prince Muḥammad bin Salmān, gender segregation had been abolished in many places, such as cafes and shopping malls. As an unaccompanied man, I was no longer denied access to the food courts and upper floors of shopping centres. At the Medd Cafe and Roastery, Jeddah's first 'third wave' coffee shop which opened at the northern edge of the corniche in 2015, where half a pound of coffee beans cost 77 Saudi riyal (approximately 18 euros), a mixed crowd of students, artists and hipsters gathered every night. They enjoyed a lifestyle and an atmosphere of freedom previously known only from trips abroad. On the occasion of Medd Cafe’s third anniversary, a programme of events had been set up in March 2019, including public talks on topics such as 'healthy living', a stand-up comedy show and a speed networking event, in which 10 men and four women spontaneously participated while others were watching.
All events, attended by mostly young men and women, took place on the upper floor of the café, which normally served as the women’s or family section, in contrast to a largely, but not exclusively, male downstairs section. The concept of gender segregation still survived here and elsewhere in Jeddah, but it had become more of a choice, resulting in blurred boundaries between what were formerly two strictly divided spheres. Women had officially been granted the right to drive cars and work in a large variety of jobs, from saleswomen and waitresses to customs officers. In spring 2019, driving schools were booked out half a year in advance, and the first women could already be seen driving. At the recently finished expansion of the corniche walkway – a new recreational area of a size and quality unprecedented in Jeddah – women riding bicycles had become a common sight, and so had mixed groups of young men and women, chatting, going for a walk, spending time together. Several art exhibitions, galleries and an annual art festival, called ‘21,39’, had been established, providing forums of exchange and inspiration for a thriving art scene. In January 2019, the first cinema in town was inaugurated, following one on the campus of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) and three in Riyadh, after a 35-year ban on cinemas. Two months later, the movie Roll’em, set and shot in Jeddah, was the talk of the town, or rather of the educated elite. It tells the story of a young filmmaker struggling to make a film about Jeddah, and his encounter with an old cinematographer whose filmmaking career ended in the 1970s in a country without cinemas.

It may appear tempting to correlate the recent opening of the country with the country’s new unofficial ruler, crown prince Muḥammad bin Salmān (whose father, King Salmān, is in his mid-eighties and purportedly suffering from ‘mild’ dementia). Only 31 years old when appointed crown prince in June 2017, Muḥammad bin Salmān soon made it into the global news by arresting some 200 princes, ministers and wealthy businessmen for corruption charges, confining some of them in the Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh and not treating them gently for several weeks. Corruption is an odd accusation in a country where the king rules by decree and appoints all ministers and other key offices in the state, traditionally favouring members of his own family. The ruling family has amassed tremendous wealth over the past decades, neglecting and exploiting significant parts of the population while sedating others with well-paid public sector jobs in a blown-up state apparatus. Although the real driving force behind the 2017 purge seems to have been a demonstration of power and the seizure of control over a political system based on nepotism, the buying of loyalty and unhindered personal enrichment, rather than the fight against
corruption, the crown prince managed to portray himself as a reformer destined to propel his country into a direction often described as ‘forwards’ – as if any possible other position was either wrong or ‘behind’. He was celebrated as such not only in the self-censored local news, but also by US president Donald Trump,1 the New York Times (e.g. Friedman 2017) and the Independent (e.g. McKernan 2018), to name only a few influential voices of our time.

Muḥammad bin Salmān has indeed reduced the power of the religious police, established an Entertainment Authority and promoted reforms that paved the way for the changes described above. Among his major projects is the ‘Vision 2030’ plan, which is based on a McKinsey report. Seeking to diversify the Saudi economy, its main goal is to end the country’s dependency on oil (Khashan 2017). While the crown prince might well have a ‘vision’, this arguably entails first and foremost a strategy for securing the Āl Saʿūd’s, i.e. the ruling clan’s, hold on power by appeasing the Saudi populace. Rather than actually granting civil liberties, such as freedom of expression or political participation, the crown prince’s reforms allow certain parts of the population to breathe the air of a liberal lifestyle. In fact, many political activists, among them several women’s rights activists, have been detained during Muḥammad bin Salmān’s reign. The significant number of such cases, the ill-treatment of political prisoners and their families, and especially the brutal murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi on the premises of the Saudi consulate general in Istanbul spread fear among Saudis of being spied upon, persecuted or arrested on unpredictable allegations. It may seem contradictory that the crown prince persecutes activists who advocate the kind of reforms he himself is pushing forward with. Yet it is not the first time in history that the Saudi regime has applied a twofold strategy of silencing dissenters while meeting some of their demands, thus trimming its sails to the wind. In the early 1990s, for example, this policy led to a number of conservative reforms serving to demonstrate the Saudi government’s concern for the public implementation of Islamic law and the religious principle of Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong (see chapter 4). So far, this strategy has proved successful for the Saudi rulers, and it is hence unsurprising that it is once more vigorously deployed.

The recent reforms address primarily a generation of the under thirties, who constitute more than 50 per cent of the population, according to a 2016 survey of the Saudi General Authority for Statistics. They have affected, in the first place, a relatively small group of middle- and upper-class Saudis – those who can afford a hand-brewed drip coffee at prices comparable to those in Paris or London, who have often studied abroad,
are fluent in English and do not share any of the anti-Western sentiments that nurtured the Islamic Revival movement one generation ago. It is the same milieu that I describe in more detail in chapter 6 as proponents of a lifestyle which, until recently, was in conflict with the official gender policy and, until today, challenges prevailing moral standards.

The fact that the Saudi regime, under the leadership of Muḥammad bin Salmān, adapted its gender policy to the desires of the cultural elite of the younger generation does not make the crown prince a pioneer of liberalisation. In contrast, it shows how powerful the counterpublics described in this book are. They have been enacting, often in the shelter of the architecture of New Islamic Urbanism, alternative gender roles and concepts of publicness and privacy for years. By ceaselessly promoting, through particular bodily practices and public displays, their own visions of social order, appropriate behaviour and male–female relationships, they have caused the Saudi state to respond. Rather than being at the forefront of social renewal and liberalisation, as the crown prince likes to see himself, Muḥammad bin Salmān should be regarded as the first powerful member of the royal family who understood that the demands of the younger generation should no longer be ignored.

The reforms that took place in recent years are relevant in the first place, as mentioned above, to a relatively small group of liberal-minded Saudis and expats of the middle and upper classes. They have by no means altered the entire picture as I describe it in this book. This is due to the fact that gender segregation in Saudi Arabia is not simply imposed on the Saudi people by the government or religious leaders, but supported by large parts of the society, by conservatively minded men and women alike. Even if gender segregation is now abolished in certain places, many unwritten rules regulating men’s and women’s interactions and movements are still valid. I experienced this in spring 2019, when I visited one of the most popular shopping malls in Jeddah, the Mall of Arabia. No longer was I, as a single man, prevented from entering the central food court, which previously used to be demarcated as a ‘families only’ space, i.e. accessible only to women, or men accompanying female relatives. Yet, while looking for a vacant table in one of the self-service restaurants there, carrying my meal and a cup of tea on a tray, I noticed that navigating gendered spaces had not become much easier. When I placed my tray on the first vacant table, a woman sitting at the next table wearing an ‘ābāya and a niqāb lifted her head, as if troubled by the prospect of me facing her. Her husband, sitting opposite to her, noticed this and turned around to see who was attempting to sit down behind him. In anticipated respect of their feelings, I lifted my tray again to look for a better place.
Unable to find a place where I would not have faced a woman at a neighbouring table, I opted for a table next to three unaccompanied women, not entirely sure whether they accepted me sitting there because they did not mind, or only tolerated my presence because they barely had another choice. In other instances, I observed one man asking another not to look at his wife or daughter or to sit down elsewhere. The mutual caution required of men and women to avoid visual contact described in what follows has thus not become obsolete, but rather spread to formerly gender-segregated places where the principle of *ikhtilāṭ* (mixing of men and women) has recently been introduced.

Whereas the case study provided in this book ends approximately with the demise of King ʿAbdullāh, its purpose is not only to document the societal changes that took place until then, but also to challenge widespread assumptions about public and private spaces in Saudi Arabia and other Muslim contexts where gender segregation is an important principle of social order, as well as to contribute, by presenting an analytical framework and a case study, to academic debate on public and private spaces in non-Western societies (cf. Qian 2014).

Note

1. Donald J. Trump on Twitter: ‘I have great confidence in King Salman and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, they know exactly what they are doing … Some of those they are harshly treating have been “milking” their country for years!’ 6 November 2017.