

## The issue of women driving in Saudi Arabia



Abdullah al-Alami

On November 6th, 1990, at about 4pm, 13 cars left a parking area of a shopping mall in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. In the vehicles were 47 Saudi women representing all walks of life: University teachers and students, elementary school administrators and teachers, businesswomen and housewives.

There were no male drivers. Behind the wheels were the women.

We all know the epilogue to that episode. Still, it was a gutsy move by women insisting on their rights. In November of 1990, the Saudi mufti declared driving by women unlawful. Based on his *fatwa*, the Saudi Interior Ministry enacted several regulations forbidding women to drive.

In 2005, an initiative to legalise driving by women was submitted to the Shura Council but the council refused to consider it. That year, however, the late king Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud told US journalist Barbara Walters that the day would come when Saudi women would be allowed to drive in their country.

Some were already doing so in the desert and rural areas. In

January 2011, a *Petition for Women to Drive* was handed to Najeeb az-Zamel, who presented it to the president of the Shura Council. A total of 136 people had signed the petition. In a few days, that number was 3,500.

The initiative suggested solutions, such as restricting driving by women to certain hours of the day and to some cities or counties along with enacting strict regulations protecting female drivers from any harassment.

The initiative included a study highlighting the benefits to society at large when women were allowed to drive, in addition to eliminating having hundreds of thousands of foreign drivers in the kingdom. The initiative involved other practical solutions to administrative and technical obstacles.

The study touched on the religious point of view and concluded that there was no sacred text against women driving. It insisted on educating society that the decision to allow women to drive would in the end be a formal government decision protecting and enabling those who wish to drive.

In short, allowing women to

drive made sense from economic, social and even security considerations.

The Shura Council is an advisory institution and, as such, must be trustworthy and truthful. We have requested that it look into the question of allowing women to drive because it would ease people's lives.

On March 11th, 2011, Mishael al-Ali, head of the council's petitions committee, invited me to a meeting with the committee to discuss our initiative. Sadly, he called back an hour later and politely cancelled the meeting. I do not doubt the good intentions of the committee head but he must have been subjected to pressure from extremist groups.

On May 25th, 2011, Ahmed bin Abdelaziz, deputy Interior minister, said at a news conference in Medina that "people have the right to demand authorising women to drive." A week later, Abdullah al Sheikh, Shura Council president, declared that the "council was willing to examine the [issue] when requested to do so".

The debate raged on. Prominent figures stepped up and courageously defended women's right to drive. They agreed that there

was nothing in Islamic jurisprudence to deny women this right; it was just a matter of observing tradition and majority views.

Where would we be now had we followed the extremists' views when the first schools for girls were inaugurated? Would we have had outstanding ladies of the likes of Khawla al-Khuraya, Ghada al-Mutairi, Hayat Sindi, Lubna al-Ansari and Thoraya Obaid?

I share Suad al-Mana's view that "the political authority must put an end to this debate and decide what is long overdue namely, allowing women to drive".

The political authority has taken such courageous decisions before when it authorised girls' education and issued personal identity documents to women.

The women driving project in Saudi Arabia has been making waves but has not moved forward and 26 years have passed without progress on the issue.

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Abdullah al-Alami is a member of the Saudi Economic Association.

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## What follows after ISIS retreat may be far worse



Claude Salhani

Change is under way in Iraq where the Islamic State (ISIS) is losing ground in the battle for Mosul to the US-backed coalition supporting government forces. That is the good news. The bad news is what comes next.

Various intelligence reports indicate ISIS has indoctrinated and trained about 4,000 people to carry out suicide attacks throughout the region and in Europe. It is a frightening thought when one considers the damage even a single such attacker can cause.

There is no concrete evidence to that report however; if there is any truth to it, probably a small percentage of the 4,000 would actually carry out attacks. It is hard to imagine an army of several thousand jihadists marching through Europe undetected but even if only 5% reach their intended targets, that is still 200 bombs.

Perhaps just as worrisome as the hundreds of suicide bombers roaming around Europe is the uncertainty of what is likely to

replace the void created by the ISIS defeat.

It is hard to imagine something that does not exist. Imagining the future, be it in politics or other domains, requires much creativity. Who could have predicted the fall of communism and the rise of extremist religious fanatics? Indeed, when the Iron Curtain fell and many countries wasted little time in joining free market economic systems, radical Islamism rose to fill the socio-economic-political void created by the absence of an ideology.

Political voids come with uncertainty. It cannot be known what will replace what has been pushed aside. Change can be for the better or it can create chaos and violence.

As recent history demonstrates, trends in the Middle East have followed a consistent path: Every period of violence in the Middle East wielded a crop of more radicalised and more violent groups.

What can we expect this time? A rare message from ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi reveals the

self-proclaimed caliph's preoccupation with defections from ISIS ranks with large numbers of militants abandoning the battlefield in the face of the assault on Mosul by Iraqi government forces and the US-supported coalition.

Baghdadi, in his first audio address to followers in more than a year, called on his fighters to show discipline in battle. This "suggests that the group's leadership is increasingly concerned about defections", wrote Ludovico Carlino, senior analyst at IHS Country Risk.

Carlino reported morale among ISIS troops in Mosul is very low. The troops are reluctantly forced to fight by a hard core of more ideologically committed fighters. Ironically, senior leaders of the ISIS have been leaving Mosul for Raqqa for some time.

As ISIS fighters retreat from the battlefield, they are expected to punish Western countries that participated in their forced exit from Iraq. To that effect, US intelligence sources alerted security officials in New York, Texas and Virginia. No specific

targets were mentioned but the FBI warned those states to be extra vigilant.

What is far more worrisome than a crop of passing suicide bombers is what will fill the political void left by departing ISIS.

Just as al-Qaeda appeared after the Afghan wars and ISIS made its appearance following wars in Iraq and Syria – each was a notch more radical than the previous group – so too will there very likely be some new wave of fanaticism that will rise from the ashes of ISIS.

Unless there is serious undertaking by the Iraqi government in a massive reconciliation programme to help the warring parties realise that there is no future in fighting.

The antagonists need to realise that if they want to ensure the future for their children, they must get beyond the point of seeking to settle every score with blood.

Claude Salhani is a regular columnist with The Arab Weekly.

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## Sirte battle offers lessons for larger fight against ISIS



Lamine Ghanmi

The offensive against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Sirte by Libya's most powerful militias, backed by US air strikes and

Western intelligence support, came six months before the massive assaults on the terror group in Iraq's Mosul and in Syria's Raqqa, its *de facto* capital.

The drive to recapture the ISIS stronghold in Libya may offer lessons for the larger fight against the extremist group in Mosul and Raqqa, despite differences in scale of the force and the higher regional stakes for the powers engaged in the war.

ISIS captured Sirte in February 2015 from the powerful Misrata militias. It was not a direct invasion as the capture of Mosul was. It was a confluence of local Ansar al-Sharia jihadists declaring their allegiance to ISIS and later joined by fighters fleeing the assault of the forces of General Khalifa Haftar, who commands the rump of Muammar Qaddafi's Libyan National Army in Benghazi.

The Misrata militias were shocked when ISIS fighters cap-

tured the crossroads in Abu Guarein area in April. They launched a swift offensive against ISIS in May without careful planning.

There was a lengthy period of planning in Iraq, including using special forces to spearhead the assault on Mosul. Central government forces, Kurdish peshmerga and Shia militias – backed by US-led air strikes – are all taking part. The varying aims of each Iraqi force involved in the offensive might emerge when victory is near.

In Syria, US-backed Kurdish-led fighters pushed ahead with an offensive aimed at besieging Raqqa. Warplanes from the US-led coalition gave air cover for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters.

Libya's ragtag militias recaptured Abu Guarein from ISIS and then barrelled towards Sirte. However, only after the offensive was launched in earnest by Misrata militias did Tripoli's Government of National Accord give the operation its legitimacy. It also left the militias' leaders complaining about lack of support to sustain

the fighting.

Not once was there an indication that a true anti-ISIS coalition had been cemented to unite different anti-ISIS groups, which had various tribal and ideological backgrounds.

While Libya, as a whole country, needs to defeat ISIS as a military and ideological force to sustain its stability and build a decent working political system, Misrata militias seek to extend their territory for national recognition.

Most of the initial advance by anti-ISIS fighters in Libya came after an artillery bombardment and air strikes by ageing Libyan warplanes from Misrata Air Base.

The military operation, named Bunyan Marsous, promised ISIS's defeat within weeks.

Facing snipers, suicide car bombings and booby-trapped buildings, the military effort ground to a halt in July after ISIS had reclaimed parts of the battlefield. On August 1st, the United States began air strikes.

There were 356 sorties in three months, underlining US caution to avoid killing civilians despite the fact that most of Sirte's

population had left months earlier because of the extremist group's rule.

An assessment by Libyan officials determined that 80% of the city's buildings lay in rubble and the limited number of air strikes reflected the balance of forces in the battlefield, with entrenched ISIS fighters willing to die for their cause.

Bunyan Marsous fighters, as young as 17, showed courage and dedication in the fight but they lacked coordination and modern weaponry. As Misrata militias moved through the rubble they found networks of tunnels that allowed ISIS to survive the air strikes and move unobserved around its shrinking area of control.

At least 560 fighters on the Libyan side have been killed and more than 2,400 wounded. With ISIS sharing the area with the Misrata militia, Haftar's spokesman, Ahmed Mesmari, advised its members to step back to allow air strikes.

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Libya as a whole would need to defeat ISIS as a military and ideological force to sustain its stability.