

# LLC Syllabus

## Inside the Kingdom: The Life of Women and Girls in Saudi Arabia

### Fall 2016

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**When?** Tuesdays, 1:00-3:00 pm at Temple Beth-El  
September 13-December 6, 2016

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**Course Description** This course will look at the lives of women and girls in contemporary Saudi Arabia (aka KSA, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), where the situation is fluid—there is rapid change and also entrenched tradition. We will look at political rights, education, economic and social roles, and the influences of religion, culture, the media, and technology in their lives. We will explore such topics as polygamy, child marriage, the guardianship system, Sharia law, women’s rights activism, sports, and the labor market. We will aim for understanding, not judgment!

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**Readings** We will read the following two books and discuss them in class. They are both quick reads.

- Sasson, Jean. *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*. Windsor-Brooke Books, 2012. (This book was published in 1992 and exists in different editions. But this edition contains useful appendices, and it makes the discussion easier if we all have the same version.)
- Alsanea, Rajaa. *Girls of Riyadh*. Translated by Rajaa Alsanea and Marilyn Booth. Penguin Books, 2007.

We will also read one chapter from *On Saudi Arabia* by Karen Elliott House, Vintage Books, 2012. The chapter “Females and Fault Lines” was emailed during the summer, and a limited number of paper copies will be brought to the first class for anyone who had trouble downloading or reading the electronic version.

In addition, some session leaders may ask you to read or view something before class.

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**Film Shown in Class**

The film we will watch in class is entitled *Wadjda*. It was made in 2012 by a Saudi director, Haifaa al-Mansour, and is the first feature length film by a female Saudi director, and the first shot entirely within the KSA. It won numerous awards throughout the world.

In each of the last two classes we will view half of the movie (about an hour), take a break, and then have a discussion of that half of the film.

Here is the Wikipedia summary of the plot: "Wadjda, an 11-year-old Saudi girl living in the capital Riyadh, dreams of owning a green bicycle that she passes in a store every day on her way to school. She wants to race against her friend Abdullah, but riding bikes is frowned upon for girls and Wadjda's mother refuses to buy one for her daughter. Wadjda tries to find the money herself by selling mix tapes, hand-braiding bracelets for classmates, and acting as a go-between for a teacher. Her mother, meanwhile, is dealing with a job with a terrible commute and a husband who is considering taking on a second wife, because Wadjda's mother can no longer have children."

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**Format**

Participants will be expected to read the books and other readings and to participate actively in the discussions. They will also be asked to report on one aspect of life for Saudi Arabian women and girls OR to lead a book discussion OR to lead a discussion of the film which will be shown in class. See the detailed schedule below for dates and topics. NOTE: Both books and the movie will each be discussed during two classes. You may sign up to lead both weeks of discussion, or only one.

In addition, we'll spend a few minutes at the beginning of each class where you may wish to share something you've read or observed during the week—there are news and feature articles about Saudi Arabian women appearing in the popular press on a regular basis.

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## Guidelines for Presentations

You are welcome to present by yourself or in a team of two. Your session (whether individual or team) should be no longer than 45 minutes in length (including at least 20 minutes of class discussion time).

There are many different formats you may use for your session. You are welcome to do a PowerPoint presentation, or to use flip charts or handouts. Or you may wish to point the class ahead of time to an article or video that helps to illustrate your topic, and then manage a discussion of it. Or you may wish to send some discussion questions out to the class ahead of time. If your topic offers clearly contrasting points of view, you and a classmate may choose to use a debate format in class, or to manage a debate within the class. You may show a video in class, as long as it's no longer than 15-20 minutes.

Please use relevant research material from a variety of sources—not just a Wikipedia article. Use your own words. And please try not to read your presentation. It's OK to work from notes, but be sufficiently familiar with the material that you can take a breath and make eye contact with the class!

Please have a plan for involving the class, and stimulating discussion, whatever format or topic you've chosen. If you want to send material to the class ahead of time, you can send it yourself, or you can send it to me and I will forward to the class. If you plan to do this, please try to get this information to your classmates as early as possible (ideally at least a week ahead).

Remember that the most important focus is on what life is like today for girls and women in Saudi Arabia. Please don't take on the whole Middle East or all of Islamic culture! And make sure you look at the dates of your sources; the situation in the KSA is fluid, and something that was true 2-3 years ago may not be true today.

If you wish to help lead the discussion on the film, please obtain a copy through Netflix or some other source so that you can view it ahead of time.

I encourage you to consult LLC's guidelines for session leaders which you can find on this page:

<https://www.lifelonglearningcollaborative.org/classmemberssessionleaders.html>

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Optional  
Readings/  
Research  
Sources

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Books

Coleman, Isobel. *Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women Are Transforming the Middle East*. New York: Random House, 2010. Chapter 6, "Channeling Khadijah: Saudi Arabia," has some good material on the slow but steady progress women are making in education, careers, and public life.

Articles

*NOTE: These are sequenced with the most recent first.*

Hubbard, Ben. "A Saudi Morals Enforcer Called for a More Liberal Islam. Then the Death Threats Began." *New York Times*, July 10, 2016.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/11/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-islam-wahhabism-religious-police.html>

Differing opinions from religious officials and scholars.

Addario, Lynsey. "The Changing Face of Saudi Women." *National Geographic*, February 2016.

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2016/02/saudi-arabia-women-text>

Addresses careers, education, voting, political power, the guardianship system, and modernity vs. tradition. Includes a number of very nice photographs—and photos of Saudi women in their country are difficult to obtain—especially ones in which their faces are not covered.

"Eleven Things Women in Saudi Arabia Cannot Do." *The Week*, February 4, 2016.

<http://www.theweek.co.uk/60339/eleven-things-women-in-saudi-arabia-cant-do>

Addresses the guardianship system and various religious and/or legal restrictions against women.

Zoepf, Katherine. "Letter from Jeddah: Sisters In Law." *The New Yorker*, January 11, 2016.

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/01/11/sisters-in-law>

Women's legal rights, women studying law, women lawyers.

Zavis, Alexandra. "Saudi Women Find Ways Into the Workplace." *LA Times*, July 20, 2015.

<http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-saudi-arabia-women-20150720-story.html>

Changing attitudes about women in the workplace.

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Easton, Nina. "Saudi Women Find a Way." *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, February 4, 2014.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2014-02-04/saudi-women-find-way>

Addresses issues of education, employment, tradition vs. modernity, social media, and the pace of change.

Fisher, Max. "The Real Roots of Sexism in the Middle East (It's Not Islam, Race, or 'Hate')." *The Atlantic*, April 25, 2012.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/04/the-real-roots-of-sexism-in-the-middle-east-its-not-islam-race-or-hate/256362/>

A reaction to the Eltahawy article below.

Eltahawy, Mona. "Why Do They Hate Us?" *Foreign Policy Magazine*, April 23, 2012.

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/04/23/why-do-they-hate-us/>

This article says that "until the rage shifts from the oppressors in our presidential palaces to the oppressors on our streets and in our homes, our revolution has not even begun." While the article addresses issues of misogyny that face women across the Middle East, there are numerous Saudi-specific examples. The article has been praised; it has also been criticized by some Arab Muslim feminists as reinforcing Western perceptions of Arabs as particularly and innately barbaric.

Al Nafjan, Eman. "What Do Saudi Women Want?" *Foreign Policy Magazine*, November 28, 2011.

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/11/28/what-do-saudi-women-want/>

Some Saudi women fear a change in their status.

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Class	Date	Topic	Reading	Presenters/ Discussion Leaders
1	Sept. 13	Introduction of class members (Why did you select this class? What do you know about the topic?) Introduction to class Introduction to Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabian history		<u>Cathy Hurst</u>
2	Sept. 20	TOPIC: Patriarchy, the guardianship system, the family, polygamy, child marriage, widowhood/divorce (just changed this year)	Karen Elliott House, "Females and Fault Lines." (This chapter will be distributed to you, and will serve as a jumping off point for many of the topics dis- cussed in subsequent weeks.)	<u>Cathy Hurst</u> will lead a discussion on the reading and the topic  <u>Faith Fogle</u> will discuss her time living in Saudi Arabia
3	Sept. 27	TOPIC: Sharia law, laws of Saudi Arabia, gender politics, women's rights and activism, voting and running for office (just changed in 2015)	<i>Princess</i> , Appendix A: "The Koran on Women" and Appendix B: "Laws of Saudi Arabia"	<u>Betty Havrylik</u> and <u>Isabel Kushner</u> will lead a discussion on this topic
	Oct. 4	NO CLASS		
	Oct. 11	NO CLASS		
4	Oct. 18	TOPIC: How is life different for women in Saudi Arabia, depending on whether they are royals/wealthy, upper/middle class, poor, or foreign? Or on the part of the country in which they live?	<i>Princess</i> , Introductory material and chapters 1-11	<u>Carol Traynor</u> will lead a discussion on the topic  <u>Barbara Ruttenberg</u> will lead a discussion on the first half of the book

5	Oct. 25	TOPIC: Sexual harrassment and abuse, domestic violence	<i>Princess</i> , chapters 12-20 and Epilogues	<u>Francine Robbins</u> will lead a discussion the topic  <u>Faith Fogle</u> will lead a discussion on the second half of the book
6	Nov. 1	GUEST SPEAKER  TOPIC: The pace of change (what changes occurred under King Abdullah (2005-2015)? King Salman (2015-present)? What is the prognosis regarding future kings?		<u>Sara Al-Salem, Brown '17</u>  <u>Donna Lancaster</u> will lead a discussion on the pace of change
7	Nov. 8	TOPIC: The role of technology and media in women's lives	<i>Girls of Riyadh</i> , chapters 1-23	<u>Bonnie Cunningham</u> will lead a discussion on technology and media  <u>Marilyn Kaplan</u> will lead a discussion on the first half of the book
8	Nov. 15	TOPIC: Careers for women	<i>Girls of Riyadh</i> , chapters 24-50	<u>Jan Thibodeau</u> on careers  <u>Paula Sigal</u> will lead a discussion on the second half of the book
	Nov. 22	NO CLASS		
9	Nov 29	This film addresses many of the topics we have discussed in class so far, including patriarchy, education and sports, careers, religion and law, women's rights, tradition vs. modernity, and the pace of change. So there should be lots to discuss!	We will watch the first half of the film <i>Wadjda</i> in class	<u>Susan Gordon</u> will lead a discussion on the first half of the film
10	Dec. 6		We will watch the second half of the film <i>Wadjda</i>	<u>Cathy Hurst</u> will lead a discussion on the second half of the film

