

## Growing Up Saudi

In a strict Islamic society like Saudi Arabia, segregation of the sexes is almost total.

Part 2: The Boys By *Michael Slackman in Riyadh*

Nader al-Mutairi's cell phone beeps, signaling a text message. The phone flashes the words "My Love" over two interlocked red hearts. The message is from his 17-year-old fiancée, Sarah, who is also his cousin. But according to Saudi tradition, Nader, 22, and Sarah are not allowed to see one another or spend time together until their wedding.

"I have a connection," Nader says, as he reads the message, explaining how Sarah manages to communicate with him in a country where any contact between unmarried men and women—even a phone call—is forbidden.

His "connection" is his 20-year-old cousin, Enad, who has secretly slipped his sister, Sarah, a cell phone that Nader bought for her. These conversations are taboo and could cause problems between the two families.

In the West, young people often challenge authority. But in Saudi Arabia, most young people seem to accept the religious and cultural demands of the Muslim world's most conservative society. They may chafe against the rules and try to evade them at times, but they generally believe in them and say they intend to continue them with their own children.

Young men like Nader and Enad are taught that they are the guardians of the family's reputation, expected to shield their female relatives from shame, and avoid dishonoring their families by their own behavior.

"One of the most important Arab traditions is honor," Enad says. "If I call someone and a girl answers, I have to apologize. It's a huge deal. It is a violation of the house."

Enad and Nader are more than cousins; they are lifelong friends and confidants, as is often the case in Saudi Arabia, where families tend to be large and insular. (Both men have parents who are married to cousins.) Each has the requisite mustache and goatee, and they usually wear the traditional Saudi robe known as a *thobe*.

They are part of an enormous group of Saudi youth: 60 percent of the population is under 25 years old (compared with about 30 percent in the U.S.). They are average young Saudis, not wealthy, not poor. They live in the capital, Riyadh, a city of 5 million that gleams with oil wealth and has roads clogged with S.U.V.'s. But it has very little entertainment for young men—no movie theaters and few sports facilities. If they're single, they can't even go into malls where women shop.

## Religious Police

Saudi Arabia is one of the most powerful nations in the Middle East and an important U.S. ally in the region. Its influence stems largely from its oil wealth—Saudi Arabia has more than 25 percent of the world's known oil reserves—and its position as the birthplace of Islam and the guardian of its two most sacred sites, in Mecca and Medina.

A strict fundamentalist interpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism governs all aspects of life in Saudi Arabia, with the Koran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad effectively serving as a constitution.

Unrelated men and women are completely segregated from one another. Girls and boys attend separate schools, and separate classes in college. Women must wear black head-to-toe coverings called abayas in public, and they're not allowed to drive. Religious police enforce these rules, arresting and sometimes flogging those caught violating them.

The nation is a near-absolute monarchy led by King Abdullah, a member of the al-Saud family that has ruled Saudi Arabia since 1932. Oil was first discovered in 1938 by an American company that became known as Aramco (Arabian American Oil Company). The United States and Saudi Arabia have been dependent on each other ever since.

### **A Woman Alone**

Nader and Enad are concentrating on eating with forks and knives in a Riyadh restaurant (at home they use their right hands) when they notice that a woman has entered alone. She is completely draped in a black abaya, her face covered by a black veil.

Still, they are appalled to see a woman alone in public, and Enad pretends to toss his cigarette at her. "Thank God our women are at home," he says. Nader and Enad pray five times a day, often stopping whatever they are doing to head to the nearest mosque. Prayer is mandatory, and the religious police force all shops to close during prayer times.

Enad believes *jihad*, or holy war, "is a duty," and that Muslims should go to fight in places like Iraq or Afghanistan.

"If someone comes into your house, will you stand there or will you fight them?" he asks. "Arab or Muslim lands are like one house."

Enad is a police officer; Nader works as a communications officer for the military. Each earns about \$1,200 a month. It's not nearly enough to become independent from their parents, but it's not a big concern because Saudi fathers are expected to provide for even their grown children.

There are eight other children in the home where Enad lives with his father, his mother, and his father's second wife. (Islam permits men to have up to four wives.)

The apartment is a haven for Enad and his cousins, who often spend their free time sleeping, watching *Dr. Phil* and Oprah with Arabic subtitles, and drinking coffee or tea. The women have a separate living room behind closed doors.

Enad and Nader were always close, but their relationship changed when Enad's father agreed to let Nader marry one of his four daughters. Nader picked Sarah, in part because he saw her face when she was a child and recalled that she was pretty.

They quickly signed a wedding contract; Nader expects to see his new wife for the first time when they are photographed as husband and wife after the ceremony—which will also be segregated by sex.

"If you want to know what your wife looks like," Nader says, "look at her brother."

### **'Numbering'**

If there is one accessory that allows a bit of self-expression for Saudi men, it's their cell phones. Nader's is filled with pictures of women taken from the Internet, tight face shots of singers and actresses. His ring tone is an Arabic love song. Many of his cousins have the *Titanic* theme as their ring tones.

Cell phones and the Internet are also what allow young Saudis to evade some of their country's social rules. For Nader, his phone is how he illicitly communicates with Sarah.

But some young men are more brazen. A common practice known as "numbering" involves driving around with friends, chasing cars that contain black-draped figures, and then trying to give the girls their cell phone numbers. Bluetooth allows them to send their phone numbers directly to the phones of the girls being driven by—a technique that's replacing the low-tech approach of writing their numbers on pieces of cardboard and holding them up to the window.

"Maybe 3 out of 10 nights we get one phone number," says a teen named Fahad.

"Getting a girl to actually talk to you on the phone is much rarer. But it happens, so we're always hoping."

Many young Saudis struggle to reconcile the Western concept of romance, which they see in movies and videos, with the social restrictions of their religion and their culture. One weekend, Enad and Nader get into an argument about romance.

"I am a romantic person," Nader says. "There is no romance." He means that Saudi traditions do not allow for romance between young, unmarried couples, but the more traditional Enad objects.

"How is there no romance?" Enad asks angrily. "When you get married, be romantic with your wife. You want to meet a woman on the street so you can be romantic?" It is a conflict with no resolution in this deeply conservative country. But whatever ambivalence young Saudis may feel, most end up doing what is expected of them.