Women and regime stability in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi regime's use of women's rights and gender politics as a means to maintain regime stability

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Image: Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) greeting unidentified women before a meeting in the Saudi Red Sea resort of Jeddah (AFP). Retrieved on 1 April 2020 from: https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-arrests-two-more-women-activists

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1. Introduction

In his first television interview since Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah (r. 2005-2015) ascended the throne, he made a famous statement: "I believe strongly in the rights of women… my mother is a woman, my sister is a woman, my daughter is a woman, my wife is a woman. I believe the day will come when women drive" (ABC News, 1 November 2005). Indeed, fifteen years after this statement, the lift on the driving ban, a policy that dictates that women are not allowed to drive (Doumato, 1991, p.41), can now be celebrated by Saudi women. For over decades, Saudi female activists have protested for their right to drive – starting with the protests in Riyadh in 1990[1] to the social media campaign *Women2Drive*[2] during the Arab Spring in 2011 (Smith-Park, 22 June 2018). Hence, it was a particular eye-catching moment when the current de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) – who has been portraying himself as a reformist leader and whose career moved into high gear reaching its momentum in 2017 when his father decided to assign MbS the title of Crown Prince thus thereby replacing the former Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Nayef (Gardner, n.d.) – issued a royal decree in September 2017 that would allow women to drive (Black, 25 October 2017). Because the Kingdom is often viewed as the poster child of women's oppression where women are forced to be fully veiled in black gears and where driving cars is illegal for women (Tønnessen 2016, p.1), this decision was considered a historic moment for women's rights in Saudi Arabia and therefore it was welcomed and praised worldwide (Al-Khamri, 24 June 2018; Smith-Park, 22 June 2018).

1.1. Repression and reform

Yet, MbS' campaign as reformer of the country sharply contrasts with the recent intensifying repression and crackdown on women rights advocates (Human Rights Watch, HRW 2 August 2019). Just a couple of days before the royal decree was issued, many of the women who had in fact campaigned for their right to drive were arrested and imprisoned (Wintour, 25 May 2018). According to Amnesty International, these women were tortured and abused whilst in detention (Amnesty International 25 May 2018). This persecution of Saudi female activists

[1] On 6 November 1990, around 50 women met in the parking lot of a supermarket in Riyadh. The women dismissed their drivers and drove their cars in tandem through the streets of the capital city, publicly defying what was then still an unofficial yet strictly observed ban on women's driving. This demonstration was considered as revolutionary. Within days, the Ministry of Interior made the driving ban on women, which was previously just a custom, official; they banned all future political activity by women; and together with the country's religious establishment, the *ulama*, they called for deterrent punishment (Doumato, 1991).

[2] Encouraged by the Arab Spring protests that started to unfold in 2011, Saudi female activists launched the Women2Drive campaign on social media, by posting videos on YouTube of themselves behind the wheel in order to protest against the driving ban on Saudi women (Begum, 29 September 2017).

however is not particularly new. Throughout the years, women have been subjected to smear campaigns; have lost their jobs; have been expelled from universities; have had their passports confiscated; and they have been harassed, intimidated, arrested and imprisoned (Begum, 29 September 2017; Al-Khamri, 24 June 2018). The incongruous actions of the regime regarding the lift of the driving ban – reform and repression – reflect a longstanding polarity of the Saudi regime (Doumato, 2001, p.166). While the Saudi government claims to be determined to initiate reforms, the regime in fact persists to arrest and harass those who demand for reform (International Crisis Group, ICG, 2004, p.i). Interestingly, the lift of the driving ban is done in the name of reform, yet its methods remain repressive (Stephens, 6 November 2017). Due to this paradoxical behavior of the regime, experts and observers question the Kingdom's motivations behind the initiatives in the field of women's rights (Human Rights Watch, 2 August 2019). Hence, the question that lies at the crux of this illustration of the lift of the driving ban is how can this paradoxical behavior towards women be explained.

1.2. Authoritarian regimes as champions for women's rights

According to the academic literature, the use of repression is considered as one of the defining features of an authoritarian regime (Gerschewski, 2013, p.21). Therefore, the political regime type of Saudi Arabia could possibly explain the regime's use of repression. Indeed, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with its religion being Islam and the Quran and the Sunnah as its constitution, is considered as one of the most conservative monarchies in the world, and the country's regime is often characterized as a very repressive and authoritarian one (Kapiszewski, 2006, p.459). In 2018, the Freedom House democracy scale announced that Saudi Arabia, of the 47 countries labelled as 'not free', is one of the few countries in which civil liberties and political rights are almost entirely lacking (Freedom House, 2018). Political parties, trade unions, and public demonstrations are prohibited; no officials at the national level are elected; Saudi dissidents and human rights activists are maltreated through repression and forced silencing; minorities are discriminated; freedom of expression, association, belief and press are extremely limited; and due process and fair trial rights are systematically violated (HRW, 2020). Ever since the Kingdom was officially founded in 1932, the Al Saud royal family has ruled the country with an iron fist. In this context, the Saudi regime's use of repression towards the Saudi female activists indeed seems to be in line with the overall oppressive and authoritarian character of the regime. While it may seem counterintuitive, these type of regimes are also known for pursuing women's rights. In fact, research has demonstrated that authoritarian regimes, sometimes even more than democracies, are highly invested in advancing

women's rights (Donno & Kreft, 2018; Adams, 2007). Even the most repressive regimes have pursued policies to enhance the status and position of women, and Saudi Arabia seems to be the living proof thereof. Indeed, the lift of the driving ban demonstrates that the Saudi regime is willing to pursue reforms for women. In fact, for over decades, the Saudi regime has structurally prioritized issues surrounding Saudi women as an important policy field to invest in. Ever since the 1960s, with the introduction of education for girls, women's issues have been pushed to the forefront of the country's political agenda (Hamdan, 2005, p.43; Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.6). Yet, the question of why the Saudi regime is willing to implement women's rights remains unanswered.

1.3. Not having the women's best interests at heart

A lot of academic research has already been done in order to explain the phenomenon of so-called state feminism – initiatives taken by the state aiming to improve the status of and opportunities for women (Randall, 1998, p.201) – in authoritarian regimes. In general, scholars warn that such efforts taken by authoritarian regimes in the field of women's rights should be approached with "a healthy dose of skepticism" (Adams, 2007, p.180). While, at first sight, those states might seem willing to better the position of women, the motivations behind adopting women-friendly policies are often "for other purposes than those of gender equality" (Tripp, 2013, p.530). The notion of "other purposes" can refer to different kind of purposes. Authoritarian regimes might implement women-friendly policies because they experience a high level of international pressure stemming from transnational advocacy networks such as the United Nations to do so (Cherif, 2010, p.1144; Adams, 2007, p.179) or these initiatives might serve as some kind of fig-leaf to cover up serious ongoing violations of human rights (Al-Rasheed, 10 January 2012). In essence, the general assumption is that those authoritarian states that adopt legislation and policies for women do not have the women's best interests at heart thus undermining their commitment to pursue gender equality (Adams, 2007, p.180). Due to the Saudi regime's paradoxical behavior towards women, which was demonstrated with the illustration of the lift of the driving ban, it is indeed believed that the regime's motivations behind the initiatives in the field of women's rights are meant to serve other purposes than achieving gender equality (HRW, 2 August 2019).

1.4. Women's rights and regime stability

From the previous paragraph follows that there are multiple explanations available that could explain the conflicting attitude of the Saudi regime towards women. In the Kingdom, reforms in general are viewed to hardly qualify as a paradigm shift away from authoritarianism. In fact, it is believed that reforms occur within the overall framework of the authoritarian rule (Boserup, Woertz, Hassan, Rósza & Zaccara, 30 January 2019). Therefore, reforms in the Kingdom can be understood in light of that they contribute to the status quo, thus the regime's stability (ICG, 2004, p.12). Hence, this thesis is interested in one particular motivation that might explain the efforts of the Saudi regime in the field of women's rights, namely that of *regime stability* – the idea is that authoritarian regime use women's rights and gender politics as a means to maintain power (Lorch & Bunk, 2016). So far, this link between women's rights and regime stability, in authoritarian contexts, has received little scholarly attention (Lorch & Bunk, 2016). Within this nascent strand of literature, there are some scholars who argue that authoritarian states adopt policies beneficial to women because the regime considers advancing women's rights (i.e. economic and political rights) as less politically costly than providing so-called "coordination goods" such as civil liberties and press freedom, which is believed to pose a direct threat to the regime's survival (Bueno de Mesquita & Downs, 2005). In fact, studies have demonstrated that providing coordination goods considerably decreases a regime's survival prospects. As a result, this body of literature suggests that there is indeed a positive connection between initiatives in the field of women's rights and gender politics, and the stability and survival of the state (Bueno de Mesquita & Downs, 2005; Hudson, Ballif-Spanvill, Caprioli & Emmett, 2012; Lorch & Bunk, 2016). Therefore, investing in women's rights can have a stabilizing effect for authoritarian regimes (Donno & Kreft, 2019, p.724). While these studies mainly focus on the causal link between the authoritarian states' deliberate use of women's rights and its contribution to regime stability, they seem to fall short in addressing *how* the authoritarian regime's use of women's rights manifests in such a way so that it contributes to their regime stability.

1.4.1. Synthesizing women's rights and gender politics into the regime's survival strategies

So far, the research paper *Gender Politics, Authoritarian Regime Resilience, and the Role of Civil Society in Algeria and Mozambique* (2016), written by Jessica Lorch & Bettina Bunk, both researchers at the German Institute of Global Area Studies (GIGA), is one of the initial studies that has been able to identify *how* authoritarian regimes employ women's rights in order

to maintain regime stability. Lorch & Bunk indeed argue that, so far, *whether or not* and if yes, *how* authoritarian regimes may use women's rights and gender politics to preserve their rule has attracted insufficient academic attention. Therefore, they have attempted to fill this research gap by synthesizing women's rights and gender politics into the so-called survival strategies. There is a lot of academic literature on survival strategies that authoritarian regimes usually employ when their rule is challenged or threatened (Maerz, 2020, p.65). These strategies are often referred to as constituting the "three pillars of stability": legitimation, repression and co-optation (Gerschewski, 2013, p.14). While these are the strategies to which the academic literature most frequently refer to, there are in fact other strategies that authoritarian regimes can use in order to maintain their stability. Reforms such as economic liberalization, expansion of political spaces, diversification of international networks and integration into global economies are also considered to be strategies regimes can use in order to prolong their rule (Al-Rasheed, 2015, p.7). So, regime stability is ensured through the use of survival strategies, by synthesizing women's rights and gender politics into these strategies, this indeed allows to research how those two are used as a means to maintain regime stability.

1.4.2. Theoretical framework of Lorch & Bunk (2016)

Lorch & Bunk (2016) assume that women's rights and gender politics are indeed used by authoritarian regimes to maintain regime stability. In their research, they have developed a theoretical framework in which they theorize women's rights and gender politics as part of three survival strategies. Correspondingly, the three patterns they have identified, according to which authoritarian regimes can instrumentalize gender politics and women's rights for the purpose of maintaining power and stability, are the following: the use of women's rights and gender politics as an authoritarian legitimacy strategy; the use of women's organizations as mechanisms of co-optation; and the use of women's rights as a means to instrumentalize existing social divisions in society. Hence, it is suggested that the efforts taken by an authoritarian regime in this policy area form part of one of these strategies. In the subsequent paragraphs, I will explain the three patterns.

Pattern 1: using women's rights and gender politics as an authoritarian legitimation strategy

When the rule of an authoritarian regime is directly challenged by the people, the regime has to renew or restore its legitimacy in order to maintain its overall regime stability (Josua, 2011, p.2). Legitimacy is often defined as "the capacity of the system to engender and maintain belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society" (Niblock,

2006, p.9). In essence, legitimacy refers to the process of gaining support, and even the most oppressive and coercive regimes cannot survive without some kind of support (Von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017; Gerschewski, 2013). Strategies the regime can employ in order to maintain or restore its legitimacy often include the use of political ideology; religion; reforms; historical narratives on the country's traditions and identity; nationalist discourses; the establishment of quasi-democratic institutions; or international engagement (Kailitz, 2013; Hoffmann, 2011). Hence, this means that there are different sources from which rulers can obtain their legitimacy to rule. Claiming legitimacy based upon one of those sources is important for authoritarian regimes because it validates and justifies the regime's right to rule (Von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017, p.288). In Lorch & Bunk's framework, it is thus suggested that women's rights and gender politics can be used as a means by the regime to provide the regime its legitimacy.

Pattern 2: women's organizations as mechanisms of co-optation

Another strategy that authoritarian regimes can employ to reassure their stability is co-optation. Co-optation can be understood as a process in which the state ensures to strategically include and tie important segments of the population into politics, in order to avoid a situation in which actors gain too much power thus challenging the regime's stability (Gerschewski, 2013, p.22). In essence, the main function of this tactic of co-optation is the silencing of dissent by giving certain individuals or groups a stake in the status quo (Josua, 2011, p.2). Consequently, the second pattern Lorch & Bunk have identified is that authoritarian regimes use women's organizations as mechanisms of co-optation. The co-optation of women can manifest in different ways as some authoritarian regimes for instance create their own mass women's organizations in order to mobilize popular support for their rule, whereas other regimes co-opt their women in existing channels controlled by the state such as media, democratic institutions and civil society (Lorch & Bunk, 2016, p.9). The rationale behind this strategy is that it contributes to preventing the emergence of more autonomous women's movements (Al-Ali, 2002, p.24), which can be considered to affect the regime's stability.

Pattern 3: the instrumentalization of social divisions and the duality of women's status

The coincide of co-optation is the technique of exclusion. It is believed that this strategy, to which scholars refer to as the divide-and-rule strategy, is characterizing for authoritarian regimes particularly in the Middle East (Thorp, 2014). In their research, Lorch & Bunk (2016, p.10) synthesize women's rights into this tactic by arguing that women's rights are used as a tool to accommodate different (sometimes opposing) social groups thus thereby they

instrumentalize the existing social divisions in society. It is believed that authoritarian regimes usually apply this tactic to maintain the social division between the secularists and the Islamists (Tripp, 2013). Hence, employing this tactic results in the duality of the women's status due to regime's deliberate promotion of women's rights in the *public sphere* and the intentional neglect of women's rights in the *private sphere* (Tripp, 2013; Salhi, 2010; Al-Ali, 2002). This duality in the women's status for instance translates into the introduction of women-friendly policies in the public sphere to please the secularists, but at the same time, in order to accommodate the conservative Islamists, upholding the personal status laws that treat women as minors in the private sphere (Salhi, 2010, p.49-50; Al-Ali, 2002, p.9-10).

1.5. Research gap

While studies have indeed demonstrated that there is a positive connection between initiatives in the field of women's rights and gender politics, and the stability of an authoritarian state, *how* this connection manifests has so far attracted insufficient academic attention. In fact, Lorch & Bunk (2016) are the first researchers who theorized how this dynamic of authoritarian regimes using women's rights and gender politics as a means to preserve their rule unfolds, by connecting this finding to the broader literature on regime resilience (i.e. survival strategies). In their research, Lorch & Bunk encourage future research to examine whether their framework is also applicable in other types of authoritarian regime, in addition to their case studies of the Algerian post-revolutionary authoritarian regime and the Mozambican post-socialist regime. As a result, this thesis attempts to fill this research gap by testing Lorch & Bunk's theoretical framework in one of the *monarchical* authoritarian regimes, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The authoritarian monarchical regimes in the Middle East are unique because they function differently compared to the remaining monarchies in the world.[3] These regimes are particularly known for their unique staying in power and stability, which was endorsed by the Arab Spring when almost all of the monarchical regimes (with the exception of Bahrain) were able to avoid the threats and problems stemming from the mass protest movements and social upheavals and unrest that characterized the Arab Spring, (Guzansky, Goldman & Steinberg, 2019, p.8-9). Thus, in contrast to their authoritarian counterparts in the region whose leaders were removed from power, mass movements failed to develop and mobilize accordingly and the monarchies

[3] The Middle East knows eight monarchies: Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Whereas the remaining monarchies are constitutional in effect, meaning that the royal families are assigned a rather symbolic and ceremonial role while their governments operate as democratic republics; the Arab monarchies are absolute, which means that the royal family holds all the political, executive, and often legislative power (Lucas, 2004, p.104; Guzansky, Goldman & Steinberg, 2019, p.25).

remained intact (Al-Rasheed, 2015, p.6; Lawson & Legrenzi, 2017, p.76). From the monarchical regime's unique resilience follows that those regimes are an interesting genre of authoritarian regimes to research. Hence, the research gap lies in examining how and to what extent women's rights and gender politics are deliberately employed in order to maintain regime stability, by one of those exceptional regimes. As a result, this thesis will contribute to the nascent literature on women's rights and regime stability by testing Lorch & Bunk's theoretical framework, which is still in its infancy and thus in need of more academic support, in the case of the monarchical authoritarian regime of Saudi Arabia.

1.6. Research question

The paradoxical behavior of the Saudi regime towards women raises ambiguity on the meaning of their reforms in the field of women's rights and the regime's intentions behind it. The aforementioned bulk of academic literature provides a context in which the Saudi regime's reforms in the field of women's rights can be evaluated. While there could be other explanations for the regime's efforts, this thesis is particularly interested in the link between the regime's use of women's rights and regime stability. As a result, this thesis hypothesizes that the Saudi regime uses women's rights and gender politics *as a means to maintain regime stability.* Yet, as I mentioned before, so far, little research has been done into the manifestations of this particular link between the use of women's rights and regime stability. Therefore, this thesis will answer the following main research question:

> ***"How and to what extent does the Saudi regime use women's rights and gender politics as a means to maintain regime stability?"***

In order to answer this research question, I will use Lorch & Bunk's framework, which I explained in paragraph 1.4.2., by analyzing to what extent their three patterns are applicable in the case of Saudi Arabia.

1.7. Methodology

In the next paragraphs I will discuss the key methodological considerations of this research. First, I will conceptualize some of the key concepts from the main research question. Then, I will explain the reason for selecting Saudi Arabia as the case to be studied. Thereafter, I will describe how I have collected and analyzed the data. The last section will address the limiting conditions or restrictive weaknesses of this study.

1.7.1. Conceptualization

In order to avoid confusion about the key concepts as formulated in the main research question, I will explain and clarify this research' understanding of the "Saudi regime", "regime stability", and "women's rights and gender politics".

Saudi regime

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, which means that the royal family holds all political executive and often legislative power (Lucas, 2004, p.104; Guzansky, Goldman & Steinberg, 2019, p.25). As a result, the Al Saud royal family is present and involved in all the government institutions. First of all, the King is both the head of state and the government, thus he is also acting as Prime Minister. He is assisted and advised by the members of the Council of Ministers[4] (also referred to as the Cabinet), who are appointed by the King through royal decree. The Cabinet advises the King and they are responsible for drafting and overseeing the implementation of financial, economic, education, and defense policies as well as the general affairs of the state (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, n.d.). In addition, the country's Consultative Council, the *Majlis al-Shura* also referred to as the Shura Council, is a legislative body consisting of 150 members. They are appointed by the King and advise him on all government regulations, treaties and international agreements before they are promulgated through royal decree; discuss and evaluate economic and social development programs; and discuss annual reports. However, the Council cannot initiate these debates on its own; it has to get permission from the government or the King to do so. In addition, the verdicts of the Council are neither binding on the King nor the government (Kapiszewski, 2006, p.462). Due to this dominant presence of the royal family in country's government institutions, this study considers the "Saudi regime", as well as concepts such as "state" and "government", to constitute as the royal family.

Even though this research makes a distinction between the royal family and the country's religious establishment, the *ulama*, it is important to note that the decisions made by the royal family are on the basis of consultation with ulama.[5] Subsequently, even though the royal family

[4] The Cabinet consists of the Prime Minster (the King), the Deputy Prime Minister (the Crown Prince, who is currently also a Minister with portfolio), 21 other ministers with portfolio, and seven ministers of state (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, n.d.).

[5] It is important to mention that the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia is not particularly a homogenous group. In fact, some rough distinctions can be drawn between official clerics and unofficial/informal clerics. The former constitutes a key source of legitimacy for the ruling family, whereas the latter enjoy widespread popularity and therefore they play a major role in shaping public opinion (ICG, 2004, p.6). In general, however, the concept of

holds all the power, they do in fact rule with the support of the religious authorities (Kapiszewski, 2006, p.463). In one of her studies, Madawi Al-Rasheed (2007, p.57), a London-based anthropologist specialized in Saudi Arabia, described the present Saudi monarchy as "politically secular" and "socially religious". She argues that the Wahhabi ulama have taken on the role of guardians of the social order thus dominating the religious, social and cultural affairs, while leaving the political authority to the ruling royal family. Consequently, the ulama's influence resonates through the religious state institutions such as the Council of Senior Ulama, the particular body that indeed has to approve the decisions made by the Saudi government, and the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, the country's religious moral police who are charged with implementing and enforcing the Islamic rules (Doumato, 2001, p.168). In reality, the ulama also exerts power over the regime's political authority because their *fatwas* justify the policies of the regime (Kapiszewski, 2006, p.460). Hence, in today's political context, no Saudi ruler can contemplate a significant policy shift without taking into account the likely reaction of the country's religious establishment (ICG, 2004, p.6).

Regime stability

The notion of regime stability means that a regime maintains its main characteristics – values, norms and authority structures – over a certain period of time (Stenslie, 2012, p.7). In the case of Saudi Arabia, it is believed that ever since the ascendance of King Faisal (r. 1964-1975), the monarchy has maintained its characteristics features. Under his leadership, the values, norms and authority structures underlying contemporary Saudi politics were cemented. King Faisal initiated the establishment of the modern state institutions, balanced the power of the various royal family branches and sought to maintain the Kingdom's traditional Islamic values, while continuing the process of rapid modernization. While there are multiple indicators available to measure "regime stability", this research considers a stable regime as a regime that has not experienced a fundamental change (e.g. from authoritarian regime to democracy) in the system of government (Stenslie, 2012, p.7). Based on this understanding of regime stability, the main research question refers to the status quo: the Al Saud royal family in power. The Kingdom is considered as one of the most stable countries in the region (Stares & Ighani, 15 May 2017). Their survivability can be contributed to specific conditions that foster their resilience (Al-Rasheed, 2015, p.7), which I will elaborate in the next chapter.

"religious establishment" refers to the clerics whom the government has officially appointed and employed, and individuals who belong to religious organizations that receive state support (HRW, 2008, p.7).

Women's rights and gender politics

It is important to emphasize that this study does not intend to judge or make any claims regarding Saudi women's rights or their position, or to portray them in any way that is contrary to their personal feelings. Rather, this study aims to explain how women's rights and gender politics – both as a means or a tool – are used by the regime to achieve a certain goal. In this light, I will analyze the initiatives in the field of women's rights. However, there are some implications that are inherently linked to studying this topic of women and their rights in Arab countries. In particular, the concept of cultural relativism comes into play.[6] What follows from this idea of cultural relativism is that it is hard to use concepts such as "improvement, advancement, emancipation" of women in Arab countries, because this is relative. As a result, scholars who aim to study this topic find themselves in "the deep blue sea of cultural relativism" which leads them into a conceptual trap when it comes to defining the aforementioned concepts (Moghadam, 2003, p.8). Therefore, an alternative approach is needed in order to be able to use the discourse of "improvement, advancement, emancipation" in this study. One rationale that could, to a large extent, justify this discourse is that it would be useful to assume the various universal declarations and conventions formulated within the UN and agreed upon by the world community as the yardstick. Examples of those universally agreed-upon norms are the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Because people from diverse cultures, religions and nationalities have ratified or acceded to them, those conventions can thus be considered culturally neutral and universal in their applicability (Moghadam, 2003, p.8). Indeed, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia ratified the CEDAW and therefore this set of international human rights standards can be used as the yardstick in this thesis. Again, it is not the aim of this study to make any claims in this respect, as the goal is just to analyze the regime's use of women's rights and gender politics, however, the study does in fact use the discourse of concepts like "improvement, advancement, emancipation".

[6] Lila Abu-Lughod, a Palestinian-American anthropologist, argues for instance that the premise of women in the Middle East in need of liberation is relative. In one of her articles, she explains the concept of cultural relativism with the example of the burqa. According to her, "we" might consider the burqa as the ultimate sign of oppression, whereas "they" might consider it as a liberating invention – women are able to move out of segregated living spaces, while still living up to the moral religious requirements of separating and protecting women from unrelated men (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p.794-785).

1.7.2. Case selection

It is believed that that *relevance* of the case is the most important criterium for its selection (Bleijenbergh, 2010). In my opinion, the relevance of doing research into the case of Saudi Arabia particularly emanates from the recent reforms initiated by MbS in the field of women's rights, which has received worldwide attention. Hence, MbS' recent efforts demonstrate and re-emphasize that there is a major structural discrepancy in the regime's behavior towards women: they initiate policies under the name of reform, yet their methods remain repressive. In the years following MbS' revolutionary step to lift the longstanding driving ban on Saudi women, as I mentioned in the introduction, the Crown Prince continued this course towards 'modernity' by implementing additional reforms that were aimed at transforming the women's position in the Kingdom: he allowed women to enter cinemas and sport stadiums (Topal, 2019, p.1); restaurants were no longer required to have separate entrances segregated by sex thus partially moving away from the traditional policy of public gender segregation (BBC, 9 December 2019); and MbS announced to relax the country's strict male guardianship laws by allowing women above the age of 21 to travel without permission; to register births, marriages and divorces; to be issued official family documents; and to be guardians to minors – all of which was previously not possible for Saudi women without the permission of their male guardian (Rashad & Kalin, 5 August 2019; McKernan, 11 July 2019). Nevertheless, these reforms are in stark contrast with the Kingdom's reputation for violating women's rights and its continuous discrimination of women (HRW, 18 October 2019). As I mentioned in paragraph 1.1., this repressive methods are common practice to the Saudi regime (Amnesty International, 2011). Thus, this paradoxical behavior, in which reform and repression go hand in hand, is most evident and debated in Saudi Arabia, especially recently. From this worldwide attention for the situation of women in the country follows the relevance of this research because doing research into the dynamic of the regime's use of women's rights and the use thereof contributes to the regime's stability, might contribute to better understanding of the contemporary events in the Kingdom.

1.7.3. Data collection

The research method this study employs is the collection and qualitative analysis of multiple sources, being texts and documents (Bryman, 2012, p.383; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p.10). The sources from which the data is obtained were predominantly: academic journals, reports and documents from both governmental and non-governmental institutions, and online news

articles. On this matter, it is important to mention that I am aware of the ambiguity stemming from some of the sources, especially with regard to the Saudi government documents. In general, researchers warn for the quality and credibility of the documents that are publicized by authoritarian regimes (Janenova, 2019, p.3-4). Therefore, these documents are treated with great caution; at the same time, precisely these biases are interesting as they reveal the regime's interpretation of their reality (Bryman, 2012, p.550). However, this awareness about the author of the documents and texts basically applies to all the individual sources. Hence, in general, all the data will be carefully and attentively assessed and interpreted. Subsequently, the data will be analyzed by reviewing and extracting the information that was considered relevant to the problem of interest (Cooper & Hedges, 2009). Making sense of all the information stemming from the aforementioned sources is a recursive process. This implies that there is no fixed end to the data collection period, instead, the examination and interpretation of the data is ongoing throughout the entire research process (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p.56).

1.7.4. Limitations of the research

As it is the aim of this research to examine the Saudi regime as an actor, in particular their behavior with regard to their use of women's rights and gender politics as a means to maintain regime stability, by using Lorch & Bunk's (2016) framework, this study can be characterized as a theory-testing case study. While the advantage of this type of study is that it allows for an in-depth understanding of the topic (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p.11), yet, there are also some limitations connected to the use of a case-study (Yin, 2003). Hence, a great deal of the critique mostly centers around the external validity of a case study as one cannot generalize findings from one single case to other cases (Bryman, 2012, p.69). In this research, I do not attempt to generalize my findings as they will explicitly concern and apply to Saudi Arabia, however, I will examine whether the results of the research of Lorch & Bunk are generalizable to the case of Saudi Arabia. In addition, another concern is that case study researchers cannot guarantee the quality of the research, which depends on the reliability and validity[7] of the research (Bryman, 2012, p.389). In order to ensure the research' reliability, this study will be as transparent as possible with regard to the manner in which the data are gathered and analyzed (see paragraph 1.7.3.). Being transparent about the different steps in the research process might help to replicate this study and arrive at similar findings, however, it is important to note that the object under study, the Saudi regime, does not operate in social isolation thus they are

[7] The concepts of reliability and validity respectively refer to the consistency of measurements and measuring what is supposed to measured (Bryman, 2012).

subjected to their social environment and to specific developments. Therefore, it is in general hard for case study researchers to guarantee the research' reliability due to the dependency on the social settings (Bryman, 2012, p.390). The research' validity will be safeguarded by constantly focusing on the research question while assessing the data (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). In doing so, this study makes sure to keep in mind that it is researching what it is supposed to research. So, by including this section, this research acknowledges and accepts the limitations and weaknesses that arise when using a case study design.

1.8. Structure of the research

The structure of this study is as follows. First, I will contextualize the particular playfield in which the Saudi regime has to operate. This chapter will demonstrate that the Saudi regime is not immune to internal and external pressure and that there are indeed specific factors that can ultimately challenge the regime's stability. In this chapter I will also explain the general structure and characteristics of the Kingdom's gender politics. In essence, this chapter will provide a profound and solid understanding of the position of the Saudi regime towards the two concepts from the research question, that of *regime stability* and *women's rights and gender* politics thus resulting in the playfield for the Saudi regime. After the contextual chapter, I will move to the analysis chapter in which I will analyze *how* the Saudi regime uses women's rights and gender politics as a means to maintain regime stability, by testing *to what extent* the framework of Lorch & Bunk (2016), who have identified three different manners according to which authoritarian regime can thus instrumentalize women's rights and gender politics so that it contributes to their regime stability, in the case of Saudi Arabia. Thereafter, in the conclusion, I will summarize my findings, reflect on Lorch & Bunk's framework, and I will make some suggestions for future research.

2. Playfield for the Saudi regime

Because the Saudi regime is the unit of analysis in this research, it is first and foremost necessary to contextualize the particular playfield in which the regime has to operate. In the first part of this chapter, I will present the factors that foster the Saudi regime's resilience: the royal family, Wahhabi Islam, oil revenues, foreign relations in particular with the United States (US), and civil society. It is essential for the Saudi regime's survivability to ensure these pillars and to make efforts that keep these pillars intact. Thereafter, in the second part of this chapter, I will explain the factors that form the basis of the Kingdom's gender politics. These factors together determine the framework in which the Saudi regime can initiate policies in the field of women's rights and gender politics. Thus, the playfield of the Kingdom's regime is determined on two levels: the vital level, in which the regime has to maintain its stability and the pragmatic level, in which the regime is bound by the gender politics framework.

2.1. Regime survival in Saudi Arabia

Quite often it is assumed that the Saudi regime operates in an environment where there are no checks and balances in place (Kapiszewski, 2006, p.474). Indeed, the country has shown to be almost immune to regime breakdown (Schlumberger, 2007, p.1). This resilience of the Saudi monarchy was endorsed by the Arab uprisings in 2011 when the regime seemed to be able to prevent mobilization of mass protests, which their neighboring countries could not avert (Al-Rasheed, 2015, p.6). Due to the Saudi regime's unique and prolonged staying in power, the assumption that their persistent rule is a given, was corroborated. However, in contrast to popular belief, their rule is not self-evident and there are indeed factors that can threaten the regime's power (Aarts, 2007, p.252). An extensive body of academic research has demonstrated that the Kingdom's regime maintaining in power rests on four "stability pillars": the House of Saud, Wahhabi Islam, oil revenues, and the country's relation with the West, the US in particular (Stenslie, 2018, p.62-63). Because the Arab Spring has demonstrated that the mobilization of citizens in general can effectively challenge the regime's power, the pillar of 'Saudi citizens' has been added to this list of stability factors (Mabon, 2012, p.452). Thus, the Saudi state is committed to safeguard and balance all of these factors because they determine their stability. In the subsequent paragraphs, I will explain these stability pillars.

2.1.1. House of Saud

Even though there is little known about the inner dynamics of the royal family, there is a conventional wisdom among scholars that there exist deep cleavages within the royal family (ICG, 2004, p.5). According to Al-Rasheed, " (…) the royal family itself is best seen as a headless tribe within which several groups have connecting claims to leadership" (Al-Rasheed, 2005, p.192). While these internal divisions often cause for political conflict and the paralyzing of decision-making, the royal family has nevertheless shown to be, up until the present, remarkably united. This unity can be attributed to both informal and formal mechanisms that are in place that indeed foster the elite unification and therefore prevent fragmentation. Subsequently, the royals were able to deal with successions to the throne, which is arguably the most acute challenge faced by family dynasties (Stenslie, 2018, p.65). This was endorsed when scholars in fact expected that divisions within the royal family would strengthen after the death of King Fahd (r.1982-2005), however, his succession occurred without any trouble (Alsultan & Saeid, 2016, p.60). Thus, the Saudi royal family has established a strong state apparatus in which these mechanisms are in place – smooth succession to the throne and securing high positions in government institutions – that can prevent and limit the opportunities for potential opponents of the regime to fill a power vacuum or to build a power base (Herb, 1999, p.7-10). Therefore, elite unification among the Saudi royal family is considered to be an important factor in determining the Kingdom's regime stability (Stenslie, 2018, p.65).

2.1.2. Influence of the ulama

In the introduction I already explained that the royal family cannot rule without the support of the country's powerful ulama, who legitimize their power. This power balance between the royal family and the ulama is also referred to as the "basic formula of rule" (ICG, 2004, p.4). Hence, the Saudi regime has to sustain a friendly relationship with the ulama, in order to maintain regime stability (Guzansky, Goldman & Steinberg, 2019, p.87-88). It is important to understand the origins of the regime's commitment to the religious establishment. The power of the ulama dates back to the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which was officially established in 1932 by Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud. The country was and still is home to disparate communities holding various religious and politics belief, and of different tribal backgrounds. Prior to the Kingdom's formation went several attempts to unify the Arabian Peninsula. However, none of these efforts were able to succeed due to the tensions between different tribes operating within the country. Indeed, the main hinderance to be overcome was

the unification of those tribes (Mabon, 2012, p.533). Historically, the population of the nascent Saudi state "had been divided by regional and tribal differences that militated against national unity" (Al-Rasheed & Al-Rasheed, 1996, p.99). Hence, what was needed was an unifying factor that could unite these tribes. Muhammed Ibn Saud ultimately succeeded, because in 1744 he forged an alliance with the religious leader Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, pursuant to which the clerics of Wahhabism[8] legitimized the rule of the Al Saud family, who, in turn, guaranteed the Islamic character of the state (ICG, 2004, p.3; Mabon, 2012, p.533). As a result, Wahhabism enabled the consolidation of the diverse tribes and vast territories under the centralized Saudi rule (Topal, 2019, p.2). The state was thus founded and unified under the banner of Wahhabi Islam – a process which is also referred to as "religious nationalism" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.14). This doctrine basically serves as the glue that holds the Kingdom together because the royal family has used Wahhabism as an identity marker in the nation-building process (Doumato, 1992, p.37). As a result, religion is deeply embedded in Saudi politics and society and it is indeed, up until today, that the country's religious establishment legitimizes the power of the royal family (Stenslie, 2018, p.65).

2.1.3. Oil-dependent economy

The discovery and production of oil in 1930s was a major occurrence in the Kingdom. In the years following, Saudi Arabia experienced a steep rise in its oil revenue, reaching its peak in the early 1970s (Hamdan, 2005, p.43). The 1970s oil boom in Saudi Arabia resulted in a steep rise of the Kingdom's revenue (ICG, 2004, p.10). Nowadays, the country owns almost one-fifth of the world's proven oil reserves, and it is the world's second largest producer and largest exporter of oil thus being the world's sole "oil super-power" (Stenslie, 2012, p.7; Stenslie, 2018, p.66). In general, oil accounts for 90% of the export earnings, 45% of GDP, and 75% of the government revenues (Montagu, 2015, p.7). These major oil incomes have resulted in a distinct regime form, "the rentier state".[9] Hence, Saudi Arabia is a rentier state *par excellence* (Stenslie, 2012, p.7-8). Throughout the country's history, the regime has promoted a narrative in which

[8] Even though "Wahhabism" has not always been an acceptable term among the ulama in Saudi Arabia, it is argued to be the most suitable term to describe the particular variant of Salafism that is predominant in the country (Niblock, 2006, p.23)

[9] In rentier states, the state's revenue is primarily, or sometimes exclusively, derived from the export of natural resources such as gas or oil. These revenues are used to provide citizens with extensive social and material benefits. The rentier state distributes a significant portion of those incomes to its citizens thus exempting them from most or all forms of taxation. In exchange, however, citizens have to accept the absolute rule of the monarch and denounce their rights to political representation (Guzansky, Goldman & Steinberg, 2019, p.81). As a result, a social contract is established in which the government guarantees the citizens' material comfort, while in return the citizens accept the ruler's right to rule (Stenslie, 2018, p.66).

the ruler cares for and guarantees the citizens' material needs; the welfare arrangements are presented as gifts rather than rights, and in return, the citizens are expected to obey their ruler and benefactor, thus a "social contract" between the state and the Saudi population has been established (Stenslie, 2018, p.66). As a result, the state has taken up the role of the provider of welfare, in the form of offering free or heavily subsidized education, healthcare, housing, consumer goods, and other services. Therefore, Saudi citizens are in essence turned into clients of the regime (Stenslie, 2012, p.8-9). However, the regime can only maintain this role based on the scale of natural resources and the capacity of the Saudi national economy to withstand this financial burden (Mabon, 2012, p.533). The oil price crash in the late 2014s, in addition to the large youth unemployment, have affected the Kingdom's economy. As a result, MbS has adopted a strategic framework, so-called *Vision2030*, in which he announced his plans to diversify the economy and to create more jobs in order to become less dependent on oil revenues (BBC, 22 October 2018; Topal, 2019, p.4). Hence, this demonstrates that the country remains vulnerable to external shocks affecting the oil prices and thereby affecting the regime's stability (Al-Rasheed, 2015, p.6).

2.1.4. Relations with the US

The military, economic and political relations with the US in particular are considered to be an important determinant for the Saudi's regime stability. The Kingdom's relationship with the US dates back to the Second World War (WWII), when the royal family was challenged by its neighboring states, who had expansionist ambitions. As a result, the royal family sought for protection from the US. Ever since the end of WWII, Saudi Arabia has been a key ally for the US in the Middle East (Stenslie, 2018, p.67). Their relationship is also referred to as "the oil-for-security pact" (Aarts, 2007, p.256). Hence, the Kingdom has for decades been an important supplier of oil to the US, while Saudi Arabia is the world's largest buyer of US weapons (Stenslie, 2018, p.68). Even though there is a strong anti-Western sentiment in Saudi Arabia and Saudis have a bad name among Americans due to religious extremism, which especially heightened in the aftermath of 9/11 when it became apparent that 15 out of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals, the relationship is still considered worth pursuing by both regimes (Aarts, 2007, p.255). Nowadays, their joint interests are linked to oil prices and trade; security issues; fighting militant Islamism; stabilizing Iraq and containing Iran; and securing the Kingdom's prominent place within the Arab and Islamic world (Stenslie, 2012, p.13; Guzansky, Goldman & Steinberg, 2019, p.103; Aarts, 2007, p.256). Thus, for over decades, the Saudi-US relations have remained pretty robust, occasional sharp tensions notwithstanding (Aarts, 2007, p.255).

Therefore, it is thanks to the alliances with the US that the Kingdom has the capacity to resist both internal and external threats. Maintaining a friendly relationship with the US is thus considered to be an important determinant for the Saudi regime's stability (Stenslie, 2012, p.8).

2.1.5. Saudi citizens

Due to the oil boom during the 1970s, the Kingdom's rapid transformation to a consumer society and welfare state coincided with massive population growth. Government services have been unable to keep up with this demographic expansion and the accompanying youth explosion thus resulting in a high rate of unemployment and poverty. Over time, insufficient job creation, an badly adopted educational system, outdated economic structures, lack of social justice, the regime's corruption, lack of financial transparency – coupled with the royal family enjoying highly privileged luxurious lifestyles – have resulted in major discontent among Saudi citizens, the youth in particular (ICG, 2004, p.10-12). Despite this large discontent, Saudi citizens have so far not been able to develop grassroots solidarities to demand political reform. This can be largely explained due to lack of an independent civil society in the Kingdom. Even though political engagement and civil society in Saudi Arabia has expanded since the end of the 20th century, and charitable organizations and the Kingdom's formal and informal associations have moved forward (Montagu, 2015, 6); still, up until the present, civil society in Saudi Arabia does not exist independent from the state: it is controlled by the state and is forced to be in support of, or in partnership with, or in the best case in dialogue with the state. The regime's involvement in the civil society can be explained because the Saudi regime fears that allowing independent civil society organizations might ultimately challenge their rule (Kanie, 2012, p.38;54). Even though Saudi citizens have limited means to influence the decision-making, they are nonetheless considered a relevant factor for the survivability of the Saudi government. Especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the Saudi regime became aware of the effects of not pleasing citizens who are extremely discontent with their country (Guzansky, Goldman & Steinberg, 2019, p.77-78).

2.2. Gender politics in Saudi Arabia

In this section, I will elaborate the factors that largely determine and characterize Saudi Arabia's gender politics. This particular policy field is guided by Islamic principles, which resonates in the country's gender ideology and which ultimately manifests in the country's unique policies of gender segregation and the male guardianship system. In essence, these constituents altogether form the playfield in which the Saudi state is able to initiate policies concerning

Saudi women. In the next paragraphs, I will first explain the emergence of this policy field and thereafter I will discuss Islamic framework of the country's gender politics.

2.2.1. Emergence of the policy field

Even though the issue of women in Saudi Arabia is currently one of the most hotly and controversial debated topics in the Kingdom (Hamdan, 2015, p.43), this has not always been the case. In fact, for over decades, Saudi Arabia has largely ignored the so-called "woman question" meaning that the political and economic issues related to women did not have an important place on the country's political agenda (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.2). This changed during the 1940s when the women's role for the first time became a focus of contention over the question of public education for girls (Hamdan, 2005, p.48). From this point in history onwards, issues related to Saudi women were increasingly prioritized by the Saudi regime and the ulama (Doumato, 1992, p.33). As a result, the state has ever since oscillated in its gender policies between severe restrictions and partial liberalization (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.6). However, despite the regime's efforts of partial liberalization, it is the regime's general policy attitude towards Saudi women, which is particularly characterized by male supremacy and state-sanctioned discrimination depriving women of their basic rights, which is the dominant direction of the country's gender politics that has been hard wired in the Saudi state institutions, and social and politics culture (Al-Rasheed, 24 January 2019; Topal, 2019, p.1-2).

2.2.2. Islamic framework

Article 1 of the Kingdom's Basic Law, which was enacted in 1992, dictates that the country shall be an Islamic state in which government is based on *Sharia* (Stenslie, 2018, p.65). The religious basis of the Saudi rule is confirmed in Article 7, which states that the Quran and the Hadith "are the sources of authority of the government" and that "they are the arbiters of this law and all other laws" (Mtango, 2004, p.49). Sharia is the thus the prevailing law in the country, and its sources are considered as the constitution of the Kingdom (Van Eijk, 2010, p.157; Kapiszewski, 2006, p.459). From this religious nature of the overall political system follows that the country's gender politics should also be in accordance with Sharia. Hence, the status and position of Saudi women is determined by traditional and religious practices, such as veiling and sex-segregation, that are claimed to be required by Sharia (Mtango, 2004, p.51). The country's adherence to Sharia law is often considered as the main reason for the discriminatory and oppressive laws against Saudi women (Mtango, 2004, p.49). However, the main problem with the Kingdom's Basic Law is not that it is based on Sharia, but that the

interpretation thereof is left to the powerful government-appointed Wahhabi religious scholars (Mtango, 2004, p.53). Because the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia has a major influence on the decision-making process concerning the policies related to women, the role and rights of Saudi women are thus disproportionately affected by their opinions, which is considered to be a restrictive and conservative interpretation of Islam from which it is believed the oppressive and discriminatory practices thus emanate (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.44).

2.2.3. Gender ideology

Of all the countries in the Middle East, the gender ideology in Saudi Arabia is believed to be the most restrictive (Doumato, 2003, p.240). According to Posusney & Doumato (2003, p.8), gender ideology refers to socially ascribed attributes assigned to sex difference that shape public opinion and drive social policies regarding women. The particular gender ideology promoted within the political culture of the Saudi Arabia constructs an ideal type, also referred to as the "ideal Islamic woman" (Doumato, 1992, p.33). According to this idea, Saudi women have an important task in protecting the family as mother or wife, and safeguarding the traditional values and Islamic morality. This ideology has been expressed and reiterated in royal decrees; official government statements and policy decisions; fatwas from the ulama; and it is deeply embedded and nurtured in the state-institutions (Doumato, 1992, p.33-34). Yet, it is important to note that gender ideologies are not fixed and they are subjected to changing economic and social conditions (Posusney & Doumato, 2003, p.8). Therefore, the Saudi's gender ideology should be understood as some sort of idiom through which policies with regard to women's issues are articulated. This means that the ideology of the idealized Islamic woman can serve as a justification for the regime to pursue both progressive and restrictive policies in the field of women's rights (Doumato, 1992, p.34-35).

2.2.4. Politics of women's rights: sex segregation and male guardianship

Following the conservative religious character of Saudi Arabia's overall political system, this has brought about "a deep-rooted exclusion of women and their subordination at the legal, social, political and economic levels (…)" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.1). Their exclusion and subordination respectively translates into the policies of sex segregation and the male guardianship system, which form the cornerstones of the Kingdom's traditional society (Tønnessen, 2016, p.6). Despite the fact that MbS has recently relaxed both these conservative policies, as mentioned in paragraph 1.7.2., these two systems are still largely intact and applicable. With regard to gender segregation, this quite well-respected policy of separating

women from men in public areas has been part of the regime's gender polity for over decades. This policy has led to the development of a separate female sphere in public areas, first starting in educational institutions, but later also in hospitals, restaurants, government offices, and other public spaces (Le Renard, 2008, p.610; Meijer, 2010, p.81). Furthermore, another defining feature of the country's gender politics regarding women's rights, is the male guardianship system. This system entails that a woman cannot participate in politics, gain education, work, or travel without the permission of a *mahram*, a male guardian (closest male relative). Therefore, women's rights in the private domain (e.g. marriage, divorce, custody) as well as within the public domain (e.g. education, work, health) are restricted by her male guardian. Hence, under this system, women are considered as legal minors and they are subjected to legal restrictions that do not apply to men (Tønnessen, 2016, p.8-9).

2.2.5. Initiatives only within "thawabit shar'iyya"

From this Islamic framework, which is characterizing for the country's gender politics, stems that the reforms the Saudi state wants to initiate in the field of women's rights and gender politics have to occur within the so-called *thawabit shar'iyya*, the established parameters of Sharia (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.20). The meaning of this concept can be best explained with an example. Subsequently, the Saudi government kicked off the 21st century with an "unprecedented move", as the Deputy Foreign Minister of that time stated that "human rights are a non-negotiable objective for the achievement of which we must all strive together" thus signaling the regime's belief in the universality and indivisibility of human rights (Amnesty International, 2001, p.206). Following this statement, the regime embarked on a number of legislative initiatives related to human rights, including the ratification of CEDAW, in September 2000 (Amnesty International, 2001, p.206). However, the Kingdom ratified the Convention with the general reservation that it would not be obliged to adhere to the provisions that were contrary to Islam.[10] This general reservation of the Kingdom reflects both the importance of religion in the country and the boundaries for the Saudi regime in this policy field: state initiatives in the field of women's rights can only be pursued within the *thawabit shar'iyya* (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.20).

[10] The Kingdom made two additional reservations. First, that it would not be bound by Article 29(1), which concerned bringing disputes with other states to the International Court of Justice. The second reservation was that the country would not be bound by Article 29(2), which granted women equal rights with men with regard to the nationality of their children (Alwasil, 2010, p.1080).

2.3. Recap

This chapter served to contextualize the playfield in which the Saudi regime has to operate. It has demonstrated that this particular playfield is determined on two levels. On a more essential level, the regime is forced to make efforts in order to balance and safeguard the different factors, which are decisive for the Saudi regime's stability. Hence, would the regime neglect those pillars thus not keeping the royal family united; not compensating the country's religious establishment; not ensuring the country's financial incomes; not maintaining a friendly relationship with the US; and not containing the discontent among the Saudi population – the regime's stability would then indeed be threatened. Therefore, in contrast to popular belief, the Saudi regime's persistent rule is not a given, instead, they actively have to ensure their staying in power. In addition, the playfield of the regime is also determined on a more pragmatic level: the regime's decision-making within the gender policy field is bound by the country's deeply embedded Wahhabi Islam. From the country's constitution and its gender ideology epitomized by the two policies of the male guardianship system and gender segregation stems that the regime can only operate within the so-called *thawabit shar'iyya* meaning that the regime is bound to act within the parameters of the Islamic framework. All in all, this chapter has contextualized the Saudi regime's position towards both the key concepts in the research question, *regime stability* and *women's rights and gender politics*. This will be helpful for better understanding the Saudi state initiatives in the field of women's rights, and how these efforts relate to the Kingdom's regime stability, which I will thus analyze in the next chapter by using Lorch & Bunk's framework.

3. Women's rights and gender politics as part of the Saudi regime's survival strategies

In this chapter, I will examine *how* and *to what extent* the Saudi regime uses women's rights and gender politics as a means to maintain regime stability. In doing so, I will analyze to what extent the theoretical framework of Lorch & Bunk (2016), which I explained in paragraph 1.4.2., is applicable in the case of Saudi Arabia. From their theoretical framework follow three patterns according to which authoritarian regimes can use women's rights and gender politics as a means to maintain regime stability as these constituents form part and parcel of the regime's survival strategies of legitimation, co-optation, and divide-and-rule strategy. Thus, first, I will explain how the Saudi regime uses women's rights and gender politics as a legitimation strategy. Then, I will discuss how the regime is using women's rights as a mechanism of co-optation. Lastly, I will explain how the regime instrumentalizes social divisions, which results in the women's dual status.

3.1. Pattern 1: Using women's rights and gender politics as a legitimation strategy

When an authoritarian regime's rule is challenged, in order for the regime to maintain its stability, it has to restore its legitimacy. Lorch & Bunk argue that through the use of women's rights and gender politics regimes can fix this default in their legitimacy. Thus, regimes employ the women's rights and gender politics as a means to reclaim their legitimacy. In order to examine whether this pattern is present in the Saudi case, it is first and foremost necessary to identify the components that provide the Saudi regime the support that is needed to rule in the first place. In doing so, I will look at how women's rights and gender politics are used by the regime to ensure the legitimacy from those particular sources.

3.1.1. Regime as the protector of the Islamic faith

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the regime's legitimacy heavily relies on religion, Wahhabi Islam in particular. As I already mentioned in paragraph 2.1.2., the importance of religion in the Kingdom dates back to the 1744 alliance between the Al Saud royal family and Wahhabi clerics, pursuant to which the clerics legitimized the rule of the royal family, who, in turn, guaranteed the Islamic character of the state. This bargain and concomitant relationship between the ulama and the royal family still persists to this day (ICG, 2004, p.3). From this particular relationship, which is deeply embedded in the country's politics and society, stems that in order for the Saudi

regime to maintain its legitimacy, it has to protect, guarantee and commit to the Islamic faith. In effect, the Kingdom's legitimation is largely based on the ability to uphold Islamic values and principles. As a result, the monarchy has presented itself as "protector of the Islamic faith" (Niblock, 2006, p.10). Hence, the burden that is placed on Islam – as being all things to all people – is cultivated and promoted by the Saudi leadership, who legitimize their rule over the Kingdom by claiming to be committed to safeguard the Islamic government and society (Doumato, 2001, p.167).

3.1.2. Demonstrating commitment to Islam by using Saudi women

In the Saudi regime's efforts to embody the role of the protector of Islamic faith, women have assumed a place of unprecedented importance in defining the Islamic values and behaviors because women are considered to represent a symbolic value that is so visible, and there is no other group in society whose behavior can be so easily controlled (Doumato, 1991; Doumato, 2003, p.243). Policies for Saudi women are of critical importance in demonstrating the regime's commitment to its Islamic identity and should therefore be understood as a source of legitimacy for the regime (Doumato, 2001, p.169). In addition, the Saudi regime is also continuously challenged by the ulama to take on and adhere to this role of the protector of the Islamic faith. In doing so, the ulama seem to have selected issues related to women as the axis along which they thus challenge the Saudi state (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.25). As a result, women's rights have been placed at the center of potential struggle between the ulama and the royal family, both historically and presently (Tønnessen, 2016, p.5; Van Geel, 2012). Thus, Saudi women remain at the center of a decades-old national contest over culture and the role of the Saudi regime as its guardian (Doumato, 2001, p.174; 166). In the next paragraphs I will present two illustrations that will demonstrate how the Saudi regime uses women's rights and gender politics to show its commitment to Islam.

3.1.3. Challenged by the ulama

The following illustration of the introduction of girls' education will demonstrate how the Saudi regime uses its gender ideology of the "ideal Islamic woman", which I explained in paragraph 2.2.3., to please the ulama and thus obtaining their support. One of the first disputes between the ulama and the royal family, in which women took a central role, dates back to the 1960s when the education for girls was introduced thus dismissing the fatwa that previously forbade

girls' education, which was considered a landmark[11] in the progress of women's rights (Topal, 2019, p.2). King Faisal (r.1964-1975) believed that the introduction of education for women was needed in order to modernize the country (Al-Sudairy, 2017, p.31). Indeed, the gradual increase of oil-generated wealth in several merchant families in the country's developing areas increased the pressure for girls' and women's right to participation in social life (Topal, 2019, p.2). The ulama, however, opposed this announced reform, because it would result in Saudi women becoming actors in the public sphere – something they strongly resist (Doumato, 2003, p.243). Realizing that this educational reform could only be completed with the approval and the support of the ulama, Faisal tried to sell the introduction of girls education, to both the people and the religious establishment, by justifying this initiative on religious grounds: "Is there anything in the Holy Quran which forbids the education of women?" (Lacey, 1981, p.368). Despite the ulama's fierce objection, they ultimately approved their education, but only under certain conditions and restraints (Hamdan, 2005, p.49). As a result, the girls' education was put under the religious authority, the Department of Religious Affairs. Moreover, the traditional gender paradigm – "to bring her up in a proper Islamic way so as to perform her duty in life, be an ideal and successful housewife and a good mother, ready to do things which suit her nature as teaching, nursing and medical treatment" (Hamdan, 2005, p.49-50) – was incorporated into the mandatory religious studies curricula thus in order to satisfy the religious establishment (Doumato, 2003, p.240). Thus, this illustration demonstrated that when the Saudi regime wanted to pursue a rather progressive policy for women in the field of education, they used its gender ideology to justify this reform in the eyes of the ulama, who constantly challenge the state by calling them out for neglecting their religious leadership (Doumato, 1992, p.34-35).

3.1.4. Quest for Islamic leadership

When Faisal was succeeded by Khalid (r. 1975-1982) in 1975, internal matters were challenging the regime's stability. As a backlash to the modernization efforts starting during the 1960s, characterized by the "landmark reform" of girls education, together with the implementation of other social reforms and Faisal's pro-US attitude, the Saudi regime received mounting critique from Islamist voices (Doumato, 1991; Kechichian, 2008, p.230-231). The wave of partial liberalization under the leadership of Faisal was considered as a symbol of Western penetration and subjugation thus endangering the Islamic values of the Kingdom (Al-

[11] This educational reform was indeed considered a landmark in the progress of women in the Kingdom (Al Rawaf & Simmons, 1991, p.288), because the introduction of girls' education disrupted the paradigm of women as belonging at home just by virtue of giving girls a legitimate destination outside their homes (Doumato, 2003, p.240).

Rasheed, 2013, p.4). Therefore, the Al Saud family became concerned about their legitimacy fearing Islamist opposition as they might have given too much concession to the modernizers and liberals (Kinninmont, 28 September 2017; Topal, 2019, p.3). As the number of women working increased, as well as other developments such as the introduction of television, cinemas and sports, the critique on the Saudi regime was particularly voiced by a group of rebels led by Juhayman al-Utayba, who claimed that the Saudi society had become immoral because of these "Western influences" and that King Khalid had done little in countering these developments. As a result, in 1979, Juhayman and his followers laid siege to the Grand Mosque of Mecca, which posed a direct challenge to the Kingdom and the legitimacy of the regime (Van Geel, 2012, p.61; Doumato, 1992, p.41).

Adding to the severity of this siege to the regime's stability were additional events that also put pressure on the Saudi regime to reaffirm its religious leadership. From the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Saudi regime could witness the overthrow of the Shah by the religious clerics, which revealed the power of a country's religious establishment. Also, the Saudi regime was facing problems due to the growing US' visible presence in the Kingdom. The American presence in Saudi Arabia increased due to the establishment of Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) and the growing oil production. Increasingly, American engineers and oil executives, together with their families, moved to the Kingdom and started to build Western-style houses, schools and compounds. Saudi women were able to witness how their Western counterparts were shopping, unveiled, and driving cars – which they were not allowed to do (Hamdan, 2005, p.43). In addition, the US' military presence in the country due to the first Gulf War during the 1990s made it possible for Saudi women to see the female soldiers driving freely through the military bases (Begum, 29 September 2017). Thus, the Americans brought their 'Western' lifestyle to the Kingdom and this encouraged Saudi women to ask for the same rights as their American female counterparts, which was endorsed by the Riyadh protests in 1990, as I mentioned in the introduction (Hamdan, 2005, p.43).

3.1.5. Targeting women to show respect for Islam

The regime responded to the aforementioned events by pursuing restrictive policies in favor of the ulama: women's access to public spaces was limited; women were obliged to dress more conservatively; and female presenters disappeared from Saudi television screens (Van Geel, 2012, p.61). Indeed, the main goal behind the articulation and strict enforcement of these rules was to undermine and appease those powerful Islamist voices, who resented what they

considered as Western influences (Doumato, 1992, p.41-42). Thus, the situation for women changed during the 1980s as the state had to respond to internal challenges stemming from Islamism. Consequently, the opportunities that were granted to women in the previous decade were limited, if not reversed. In fact, the Saudi state imposed greater restrictions on women again in order to boost its Islamic credentials and to demonstrate its respect for Sharia (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.20). By focusing on the Saudi women's role in society and defining these as Islamic, the regime was able to show its readiness to act with vigor to uphold the Kingdom's Islamic morality (Doumato, 1992, p.41-42). Thus, as I mentioned earlier, the regime's legitimation is predominantly based on its ability to uphold Islamic principles. Hence, it seems that the Saudi regime has selected women's rights and gender politics as the particular policy field in which they are able to demonstrate their strong commitment to religious leadership (Doumato, 1991).

3.1.6. Regime's role as a modernizer

In addition to religion as an important source for the regime's domestic legitimacy, Saudi Arabia is also actively seeking legitimacy from abroad (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.21). Maintaining a friendly relationship with the US in particular is crucial to the Kingdom's stability, as I explained in paragraph 2.1.4. The US has an important role in securing and guaranteeing the success and durability of the Saudi regime. Therefore, much of the reforms, including those in the field of women's rights, are directed to the outside world. That is why, for instance, it is believed that the announcement of the lift of the driving ban on women was done in Washington (Al-Rasheed, 18 May 2018). Subsequently, the Saudi-US relationship was put to the test due to the 9/11-attacks when it was discovered that 15 out of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals (Niblock, 2006, p.163; Aarts, 2007, p.255). As a result, the Kingdom came under increasing international scrutiny, and the international discourse that emerged was that the Saudi society was a breeding ground for radicalization and an incubator for terrorism (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.26). Confronted with pressing and critical questions surrounding security, conservative religion, tradition, and terrorism, the Saudi state sought to "soften" its reputation through women (ICG, 2004, p.8; Sawaf, 2018). Thus, the regime has singled out women as an important criterion to show its path towards modernity and in doing so, it was hoping to please the international community (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.135; 154). In essence, the Kingdom embodied the role of a modernizer while using Saudi women and their rights as a means to restore their international legitimacy.

3.1.7. Saving its face through the use of women

Prior to the attacks, the Kingdom carried the international reputation as being the country least favorable to women's emancipation. In light of the overall critical attitude towards Saudi Arabia, the regime's oppressive and conservative policies towards women became too embarrassing (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.21). As a result, the government believed that Saudi women could be an important weapon in countering both the negative images of Saudi Arabia as an entrepot of radicalism, extremism and terrorism, and the stereotypical images that circulated in the media about Saudi women (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.138). Therefore, in the aftermath of 9/11, the Saudi regime started to launch its "charm offensive through women" in an attempt to prove the state's modernity (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.40). This charm offensive meant implementing women-friendly policies that were favorable to the advancement of the position of Saudi women, which was in accordance with Western standards, and it also meant taking measures that would restrict the control of the religious authorities, who were extremely criticized for their radical and conservative interpretation following 9/11 (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.147). As a result, the Kingdom adopted policies that increased the women's visibility, economic opportunities, and their contribution to public debates (Van Geel, 2012, p.62).

3.1.8. Restoring international legitimacy through reforms

Yet, the international pressure on the Kingdom following 9/11 to reform the country was withering away, and it was particularly losing its momentum by 2006 when the US' Bush Administration reconciled with Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, a new wave of international pressure on the Kingdom to pursue modern policies started with the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011 (Olimat, 2013, p.7-8). Just like the reforms that were pursued in the aftermath of 9/11, the events of the Arab Spring had a similar effect on the regime's behavior towards Saudi women. As the Arab Spring unfolded throughout the region, the Saudi regime feared a spillover of the mass protests and social upheaval. In fact, the Kingdom was facing similar problems that marked the popular uprisings in its neighboring countries, namely youth bulge; unemployment; accusations of corruption; the luxurious lifestyle of the ruling family; a changing society; and an increasing population that wanted greater freedom and political participation (Quamar, 2014, p.141; 143). Responding to this regional instability, in September 2011, the King announced that women would be nominated in the Majlis al-Shura, they were allowed to vote, and they could run for election in the municipal council elections scheduled for 2015 (Quamar, 2014, p.146; Kanie, 2012, p.40). According to Al-Rasheed, in essence, these announced reforms are

just " (…) token openings that are primarily meant to seek international legitimacy at a point in time when mobilized citizenries are clamoring for more democratic participation (Al-Rasheed, 10 January 2012)".

3.1.9. Balancing domestic and international legitimacy

In their efforts to balance both domestic and international legitimacy, the Saudi regime is constantly facing the dilemma: how to modernize the country without losing its Islamic identity (Montagu, 2010, p.82). On the one hand, the Saudi state has a desire to obtain legitimacy from the international community, while on the other hand, the regime's right to rule heavily depends on its commitment to the Islam. It seems that the state has selected issues related to women as being able to simultaneously please both actors. The state deliberately alludes to both expectations, of the ulama and the international community, in order to maintain their regime stability. With regard to the former, the Saudi claims to be, and is challenged to be, the one and only protector of the Islamic faith. There is this pressing need for the Saudi monarchy to maintain its legitimacy as an Islamic government in order to sustain itself at the center of contemporary politics in the Kingdom. In doing so, the Saudi regime deliberately uses women's issues to demonstrate and confirm its commitment to Islam for example, by enforcing the wearing of the veil or by preserving the principles of the male guardianship system and the gender segregation in public spaces (Yamani, 2000). Towards the international community, however, the Saudi regime presents itself as a modernizer and a champion in the field of women's rights. Especially in the aftermath of 9/11, but also after the Arab Spring, the regime has taken several measures to advance the position of Saudi women, in accordance with 'Western' standards. According to Lorch & Bunk's theoretical framework (2016), authoritarian regimes claim legitimacy based upon different foundations thus giving the regimes the right to rule. Because the Saudi regime claims legitimacy based on the foundation of being both the protector of the Islamic faith and the champion of modernity – by using women in the process – they remove the grounds on which respectively the ulama and the international community could possible question and challenge the regime's legitimacy. The state's promotion of and claim on these two roles, strengthens their argument that the regime is the most appropriate actor that can ensure both the "ideal Islamic woman" and the empowerment of women. Interestingly, the regime, in essence, maintains a two-track policy, to please both the ulama and the international community. This seems to manifests in a contrasting status for Saudi women. This dual status will be elaborated in paragraph 3.3.4.

3.2. Pattern 2: Women's organizations as mechanisms of co-optation

According to Lorch & Bunk's framework (2016), authoritarian regimes often employ women's organizations as mechanisms of co-optation. The rationale behind this tactic is that those organizations might otherwise become too powerful, in a way that they can challenge the regime's stability. The next section will examine how and to what extent this pattern is present in Saudi Arabia. In doing so, I will discuss the different manifestations in which the Saudi regime ties women to their rule.

3.2.1. Lack of bottom-up women's organizations

It is first and foremost necessary to address the notion of an independent civil society in the context of Saudi Arabia. As I already mentioned in paragraph 2.1.5., independent civil society organizations, thus including women's groups, are not allowed in the Kingdom (Tønnessen, 2016, p.1). Therefore, many of the Saudi women, who are seeking change for their cause, do not work in groups or organizations. Because the majority of women do not act through coordinated collective action, the Saudi regime rarely views their demands and actions as constituting a serious threat (Al-Dabbagh, 2015, p.236). Nevertheless, there are some organizations that work on women's issues operating in Saudi Arabia, but it remains unclear how many women's organizations there are exactly (Kanie, 2012, p.54). One possible explanation for this uncertainty regarding the number of women's organizations could be that most of the organizations do not label themselves as a "feminist" or "activist" organization, instead, they try to avoid these terms. This has to do with the fact that "using language strategically is an important way for groups to retain their independence from entrenched state control (…) for influence (Al-Dabbagh, 2015, p.237)". Therefore, civil society in Saudi Arabia can only exist within the limits of the state, meaning that organizations and groups can only survive as long as they do not make any immediate democratic claims and distance themselves from having direct influence on the Kingdom's political life (Kanie, 2012, p.54-55). It is believed that eventually all women's organizations are either co-opted or put under royal patronage and/or state bureaucracy (Al-Dabbagh, 2015, p.237).

Yet, at first sight, one of the few organizations that are believed to be financially independent from the state are the Saudi Chambers of Commerce, organizations for the private sector's business community (Kanie, 2012, p.46). These Chambers are viewed as the most powerful non-governmental organizations in the Kingdom (Montagu, 2010, p.75). Over the years, women have been allowed and appointed in high position in these Chambers (Teitelbaum, 9

October 2011; Meijer & Aarts, 2012, p.81). The women's active participation in the different Chambers is interesting, particularly in the Chamber of Jeddah.[12] They have advocated for women's emancipation in the private sector and they have succeeded in some aspect. Nevertheless, according to a woman from the Chamber of Commerce in Jeddah,

> "Change in my country does not work through protest but through dialogue with the state and the officials. We cannot force change; we can only reach change through working with the government and not against it." (Kanie, 2012, p.54).

Despite their financial independence from the state, which might suggest that the Saudi government is not involvement, these Chambers are nonetheless not independent from state involvement with regard to their lobbying. Thus, this endorses the argument that Saudi Arabia indeed does not have an independent civil society whatsoever.

3.2.2. Broaden the notion of "women's organizations"

In Lorch & Bunk's framework (2016), co-optation is understood as a tactic in which an authoritarian regime strategically selects those organizations of the civil society it wants to tie to the regime and those it wishes to isolate – with the intent to prevent that organizations gain too much power thus challenging the regime's stability. From the aforementioned paragraph follows that in the case of Saudi Arabia, however, this pattern is difficult to apply because there is no such thing as an independent society from which the regime can carefully select particular organizations. The previous paragraph showed that all women's organizations are per definition co-opted by the Saudi regime. In fact, as I already addressed in paragraph 2.1.5., organizations are controlled by the state and are forced to be in support of, or in partnership with, or in the best case in dialogue with the state (Kanie, 2012, p.38). Therefore, it is almost impossible for organizations and/or associations to exist without some degree of involvement of the Saudi regime (Kanie, 2012, p.54). Due to the lack of an independent civil society in Saudi Arabia, the pattern of "women's organizations as a mechanism of co-optation" automatically manifests differently than is suggested in Lorch & Bunk's framework. Hence, close examination of the literature suggests that there are other forms of co-optation that the Saudi regime employs with regard to Saudi women. As a result, it seems that the notion of "women's organizations" should broadened to *female individuals* and *Saudi women in general.*

[12] There are also women's sections of the Chamber of Commerce in other parts of Saudi Arabia, however, their share in the Chamber of Jeddah is significant compared to for instance, the Eastern Province Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Kanie, 2012, p.46).

3.2.3. Co-opting women in channels controlled by the state

The Saudi state is the critical actor, who determines what female voices they are willing to offer a platform and in what institutions they are co-opted (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.19). Consequently, the regime ties Saudi women to their rule by offering them rights and opportunities – which, at first glance, may appear to remove them from state control – but, in essence, only puts them under stricter state control because women are co-opted in channels that are in fact controlled by the state. Because the state is in control of these channels, they can closely monitor and regulate women. Therefore, women are allowed to act 'freely' within the system of the state. In the next paragraphs I will explain how and in what channels the Saudi state co-opts women.

Women in national media outlets

Responding to the international criticism following 9/11, as explained in paragraph 3.1.6., the Saudi state decided to allow for greater leeway for discourses that promote tolerance, flexibility, openness, and acceptance of pluralism (Meijer & Aarts, 2012, p.81). Inherently connected to the regime's role as a modernizer of society was the allowance of critical voices. Hence, in the aftermath of 9/11, the Saudi state offered a platform to women and their issues in the Saudi official media outlets (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.154-155). However, the regime carefully selected what type of women and voice they were willing to grant this platform. The Saudi regime was able to identify this group of highly educated Saudi women, who were known for being critical of the religious restrictions on their lives. These were the voices that were co-opted, by giving them more visibility in the state-controlled media. By virtue of their education and employment, these women are vocal in their denunciation of the strict religious controls: they call for the adoption of a moderate view on issues regarding gender segregation, driving, employment in non-segregated places, travel, and legal representations (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.135;141). The state-owned media disseminated these ideas to the Saudi public, because they coincided with the ideas of the Saudi regime: the regime wanted to curb the influence of the religious scholars and marginalize them (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.147). Offering the educated women a platform to spread their thoughts thus served the state's modern reformist agenda.

Participation in 'democratic' institution

Also following 9/11, in 2003, King Abdullah established a new, what was presented as a, democratic platform, the National Dialogue Forum (Van Geel, 2012, p.62). Carefully selected intellectuals and professionals would engage in 'open' debate on pressing social, religious and cultural issues (Al-Rasheed, 2010, p.243). Subsequently, the third edition of the National Dialogue centered around women's affairs in the Kingdom. The broad topics that were discussed during this meeting were women's rights and duties; women and work; women and education; and women and society (Hertog, 2004, p.6). However, this meeting received critique from the female participants. They argued that even though half of the 70 participants were women, the meeting was still dominated by men. Sensitive topics such as lifting the ban on women driving and their legal status were avoided (Kapiszewski, 2006, p.467). And, almost no input from "society itself" was allowed. Indeed, the representatives that were allowed to speak were selected by the regime and it was predetermined what was to be said and discussed (Hertog, 2004, p.6). Therefore, the National Dialogue Forum is viewed as an institution that the regime has set up in order to allow people to let off steam and even be critical towards the Saudi regime, yet, in confined and controlled contexts. As a result, the regime channels the frustration in a harmless dialogue that does not, in any way, challenge the regime's stability (Wagemakers, 2012, p.28). Thus, these sessions are considered to be "essentially gimmicks meant to *co-opt critics* [emphasis added] and project a more acceptable face of the regime both domestic and international audiences" (ICG, 2004, p.18).

3.2.4. Co-opting women's mobilizations during Arab Spring

The previous paragraphs have demonstrated that the Saudi government indeed uses the tactic of co-opting Saudi women. Yet, the urge for the regime to co-opt them did not emanate from bottom-up pressure, but instead, the regime's actions were more or less the result of the international pressure following 9/11. In fact, bottom-up pressure became particularly visible during the Arab Spring. Thus, fearing a spillover-effect from the neighboring countries, who saw their persistent rulers being dismissed, the Saudi government was forced to implement further and wider reforms (Kanie, 2012, p.40). Even though Saudi Arabia has 'survived' the Arab Spring, it did not leave the country fully immune to changes (Karolak, 2013). In fact, the Kingdom's social climate was altered to an extent in which different groups within the society were able to present their demands, including Saudi women (Altorki, 2014, p.92). As a result, Saudi women were encouraged and energized to ask for change and reforms (Kanie, 2012, p.40;

Montagu, 2015, p.8-10). Women started to mobilize and organize campaigns, for instance, a campaign by female teachers working on a contract basis wanting their contracts to be recognized as permanent, and a campaign for lifting the driving ban for women. The regime responded by co-opting women's mobilizations, with King Abdullah portraying himself as the champion of women's rights, in order to maintain regime stability (Al-Rasheed, 10 January 2012). This form of co-optation was translated in offering Saudi women more political rights (Topal, 2019, p.3).

As already mentioned in paragraph 3.1.8., in September 2011, King Abdullah announced a decree that would allow women to vote for the for the municipal elections, which were scheduled for 2015, and that they would also be allowed to run as candidates for those seats (Quamar, 2014, p.146; Kanie, 2012, p.40). Ultimately, 130.000 Saudi women voted for the first time. They became candidates, 21 of whom eventually won the municipal council seats in the 2015 elections (Topal, 2019, p.3). Moreover, in January 2013, the King issued another decree allowing women to be members of the Shura Council. Previously, the Council has always been an complete male-body and this decree stipulated that at least 20% of the members should be female. Soon after, 30 Saudi women – out of the 150 members – were appointed by the King to join the Shura Council (UN Women, 2015). Hence, it is believed that without the Arab Spring, women would not have gained these political rights (Topal, 2019, p.3). Thus, the regime co-opted women's mobilizations by offering Saudi women the aforementioned rights in order to prevent further mobilization that could threaten their regime stability

3.2.5. Tying Saudi women to the economy

Recently, it seems that the Saudi regime employs one specific form of co-optation, which includes Saudi women, that relates directly to the regime's survival. This arguably stems from the Kingdom's large dependency on oil income that is considered essential to the stability of the regime, as I explained in paragraph 2.1.3. Since a couple of years, the era of plentiful oil incomes is coming to an end. The income deriving from this natural resource is significantly challenged in the long run, both from a global overproduction and from the low cost of solar power. In addition, the Kingdom is experiencing a steep increase in the population. As a result, the old model of rentierism, in which the regime was able to secure Saudi citizens with high incomes and a comfortable lifestyle through its oil revenues, cannot be sustained anymore (Hvidt, 2018, p.2). Thus, the low oil prices have put a strain on the state budget and the regime has had to cut government jobs that many Saudi citizens have long relied on (Al-Khamri, 24

June 2018). Indeed, MbS has noticed and acknowledged this economic development. Consequently, in 2016, the Crown Prince presented an ambitious and wide-ranging plan, *Vision2030*, to bring economic and social change to the Kingdom, which was aimed at ending the country's dependence on oil and to place the economy on a more solid and economically sustainable footing (BBC, 22 October 2018; Topal, 2019, p.4). In order to achieve this, the economy needs to be diversified (i.e. more sources of income, and be brought into balance) through reforms. A key element in these reforms is that larger segments of the Saudi population need to be integrated into the workforce thus migrant labor needs to be reduced and jobs have to be created for nationals (Hvidt, 2018, p.2). Thus, the Saudi government has taken increasing steps to adopt woman-friendly policies such as incorporating them into the workforce as an attempt to rebuild their national economy (AlMunajjed, 2010, p.2).

Women in Vision2030

The Saudi government sees an important role for women in the diversification of the country's economy. Therefore, Vision2030 states that the government wants "to increase women's participation in the workforce from 22% to 30%" (Vision2030, n.d., p.39). In order to achieve this, the regime implemented some historic reforms to advance women's economic participation (Hvidt, 2018, p.3; The World Bank, 11 March 2020). As I already mentioned in the introduction and paragraph 1.7.2., in 2019, the Crown Prince issued a royal decree stating that after a long-standing prohibition Saudi women were finally able to drive legally (Al-Khamri, 24 June 2018). One month later, the Saudi government additionally announced its plans to relax the country's strict male guardianship laws by allowing women over the age of 21 to leave the country without the need of permission from a male relative (McKernan, 11 July 2019). The idea behind the former reform for instance, is that the government hoped that the lifting of the ban would make it possible for the Saudi women to enter the workforce and revitalize the country's economy in line with Vision2030 (Al-Khamri, 24 June 2018). Therefore, these recent pro-women reforms appear to be part and parcel of the country's economic opening. The Crown Prince is aiming to improve the investment profile of the country by using women's empowerment as a code word (Topal, 2019, p.5). Thus, women are co-opted by the Saudi regime by offering them rights and opportunities, which serve to increasing their participation in the workforce, which is considered needed to maintain regime stability. Moreover, besides the fact that these economic reforms are thus tying the women to the regime's national economic program, the co-optation of women also seem to serve another goal. In fact, the Kingdom needs foreign investments in order to end the country's dependency on oil

and in order to attract these investments, MbS had to change the country's image (Ulrichsen & Sheline, 2019, p.6). At that time, the regime was facing its biggest 'crisis' in terms of international criticism since the 9/11 attacks due to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi[13] inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in October 2018 (France24, 23 December 2019). Hence, engaging women into the workforce would also serve to brighten up the image of the state thus they acted as a fig-leaf to, in essence, cover this murder.

3.3. Pattern 3: The instrumentalization of social divisions and the duality of women's status

In the subsequent paragraphs, I will first examine to what extent the divide-and-rule strategy is employed by the Saudi regime. Then, I will assess how women's rights and gender politics form part of this particular strategy which according to Lorch & Bunk's framework manifests in the instrumentalization of social divisions and results in the duality of the Saudi women's status.

3.3.1. Tactic of fostering cleavages

It is believed that a fragmented, polarized and divided population is conducive to the tactic of divide-and-rule (Al-Rasheed, 2015, p.19). Indeed, it is believed that deliberate fragmentation is an aspect of the Kingdom's policy of divide-and-rule (Montagu, 2010, p.78). Accordingly, it is assumed that Saudi Arabia's stability is dependent on, and even thrives on the fragmented – along tribal, sectarian, regional, social and ideological lines – Saudi population (Al-Rasheed, 2015, p.10). Hence, despite the regime's rhetoric on Saudi national identity, which is anchored in the Wahhabi doctrine, and its efforts to promote this unity, the Saudi state in fact seems to deliberately foster the existing divisions within the society in order to prevent opposition movements that cut across social and ideological cleavages (Freer, 2019, p.88; 94). In effect, the Saudi regime enhances those cleavages by creating separate platforms for these groups, selectively sponsoring them, and fueling an ideological war among their adherents (Al-Rasheed, 2015, p.10-14). As a result, Saudi citizens are unable to develop broad grassroots solidarities to demand for political and social reform due to the regime's efforts, which are aimed at maintaining and fueling the entrenched divisions (Al-Rasheed, 2015, p.8-10). Thus, the absence of strong opposition movements contributes to the Kingdom's regime stability.

[13] Jamal Khashoggi was a prominent journalist and a critic of the Saudi government. For decades, he was close to the Saudi royal family and he served as an advisor to the government. However, he fell out of favor and went into self-imposed exile in the US in 2017. There, he wrote monthly columns for The Washing Post in which he criticized the policies of MbS (BBC, 19 June 2019).

3.3.2. Islamists versus liberals divided over women's issues

The Saudi regime does in fact allow discussion on "social issues" because it serves to deflect the attention from political dirigisme or stagnation. The rationale behind this is because it is believed that whereas debate on political issues would create greater cohesion among groups, regardless of their social or ideological differences, discussion on social issues tend to divide citizens more fundamentally into two camps: liberals and conservatives (Montagu, 2010, p.78) – this division respectively coincides with the terminology of modernists and traditionalists (Al-Rasheed, 18 May 2018). Because this cleavage is so deeply anchored in the Kingdom, this is arguably the most visible division in the country. Subsequently, most members of the royal family and also the western-educated Saudi citizens predominantly belong to the modernists minority, while 60-70% of the Saudi population, including religious clerics, tribes, constitute to the conservative majority (Al-Rasheed, 18 May 2018; Montagu, 2015, p.5). Both groups have their own agenda and they disagree on the majority of the social issues. Their disputes by and large originate from their different opinions on the role of religion in the Kingdom: conservatives strive for a traditional Islamic society, whereas modernists strive for democratic changes in accordance with 'Western' standards, albeit within an Islamic framework (Lacroix, 2004). Accordingly, they also have conflicting views with regard to the role of Saudi women in the Kingdom. In general, conservative Islamists strongly resist initiatives that allow Saudi women to become actors on the public stage (Doumato, 2003, p.243). To them, allowing women in the public sphere (i.e. allowing them to enter the workforce) would mean that their primary task, which lies at home in taking care of the Islamic family as a mother and wife, would be abandoned (Doumato, 1991). This sharply contrasts with the opinion of the liberals, who want to move away from the Kingdom's religiously conservative and traditional society thus wanting democratic change beneficial to Saudi women (Lacroix, 2005, p.35; Al-Rasheed, 18 May 2018)

3.3.3. Taking advantage of this cleavage

The Saudi government exacerbates the entrenched division between liberals and conservatives by using their fundamental dispute on women issues thus diverting attention from calls for serious political reform (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.171), which can in fact threaten the regime's stability. Both the liberals and the conservatives respectively consider the Saudi state as the savior from strict religious control and the protector against conservative social tradition (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.135-138). Because they both look at the Saudi state as the central actor that

can realize their demands, this indeed allows the Saudi regime to act as the mediator between the two (Montagu, 2010, p.78). In doing so, the regime maintains a delicate balance between those who seek modernization and reforms and those who want to preserve the Islamic society, while using women's rights and gender politics as a means to foster this particular cleavage (Doumato, 1991). Using this particular cleavage appears to be most suitable and effective for the Saudi regime to pursue its own political agenda. Interestingly, the dispute between liberals and conservatives on issues related to women seem to coincide with the state's agenda. On the one hand, the regime has a desire to modernize the Kingdom thus thereby curbing the religious powers (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.134-135), which is quite similar to the demands of the liberals. Thus, those demands that serve this component of the regime's agenda are pursued. Yet, on the other hand, the Saudi state does not want to grant women too much freedoms and liberties as this might threaten their rule in the long run. Therefore, the regime uses the narrative of the conservative voices in order to justify delaying urgent changes such as the ban on women's driving, mixing between the sexes, and dismissing all the calls for a representative government and political participation. In effect, the Saudi leadership has frequently used the argument that "Saudis are not ready for such drastic and revolutionary change". Thus, in order to limit the reforms in the field of women's rights thus preventing that Saudi women obtain too much rights and freedoms, the regime uses the argument that the conservative nature of the Kingdom forms the impediment to modernization and progress (Al-Rasheed, 18 May 2018). Indeed, putting a halt to these liberal reforms from time to time is, on its turn, beneficial for the conservative majority of the Kingdom, whose deeply rooted character in society cannot be neglected by the regime.

3.3.4. Dual status of the Saudi woman

The regime's deliberate fostering of the cleavage between conservatives and liberals along the axis of women's rights and gender politics seems to result in a dual status of the Saudi woman: conservatives are compensated in the private sphere and liberals are accommodated in the public sphere. Accordingly, Al-Rasheed illustrates how the instrumentalization of this social division and its outcome, the duality of the Saudi woman's status, manifests in reality:

> " (…) a Saudi prince like Muhammad Bin Salman can fully support lifting the ban on women driving and allow his wife to drive, but can, at the same time, oppose his daughter choosing to marry a Saudi commoner and be content to keep his wife away from the public gaze" (Al-Rasheed, 18 May 2018).

In the following paragraphs I will describe the Saudi woman's dual status, to which Doumato (2001) appropriately refers to as the "breadwinner and domestic icon" in respectively the public and private sphere.

Status of breadwinner in the public sphere

Viewed historically, there is no doubt that since the reign of Abdullah, the situation for Saudi women has significantly progressed, although at an agonizingly slow pace. Over the years, the Saudi regime has continued to grant women more rights and freedoms that allow them to participate in public life (e.g. education, economy) thus resulting in the increase of women's public visibility (Teitelbaum, 9 October 2011; Topal, 2010, p.3). As a result, Saudi women have penetrated into the public sphere by being for instance allowed as broadcasters on national television and in government institutions such as the Shura Council (Teitelbaum, 9 October 2011; UN Women, 2015). With regard to education, Saudi women have experienced significant progress due to the regime's efforts to increase girls' access to education and to reduce the gender gap at different educational levels (HRW, 2008, p.13; AlMunajjed, 2009, p.1). According to the UN, while in 1970 only 16.4% of Saudi women (over the age of 15) were literate, by 2017, 92.7% within that age bracket were estimated to be literate (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.). It is believed that the rising education level is a major contributor to the increase of female participation in the labor force (AlMunajjed, 2010, p.3). As a result, the Saudi female labor force participation has increased from 14,22% in 1992 to 22,11% in 2019 (The Global Economy, n.d.). While this number remains rather low, the government has in fact made continuous efforts to encourage women's employment opportunities. In 2007 for instance, the Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al Saud announced his plans to allocate one-third of government jobs to Saudi women. Accordingly, over the years, the regime has taken steps to oblige government agencies to create special women's sections (AlMunajjed, 2010, p.7; UN Women, 2015). The regime's efforts in this area are currently reaching its momentum with MbS' *Vision2030*, in which it is stated that the Kingdom aims to increase the women's participation in the workforce from 22% to 30% (Vision2030, n.d., p.39). Thus, because Saudi women are increasingly being educated and they are entering nearly every field of employment, the status of Saudi women in the public sphere has been referred as being the "breadwinner" (Doumato, 2001, p.166).

Status of domestic icon in the private sphere

Even though the regime's efforts in the field of women's rights and gender politics have to some extent paved the way for a transformation in the women's position in the Kingdom, especially in the public sphere, there are still some barriers for women that are hindering them in being able to fully partake in the public life (Topal, 2019, p.3). Indeed, the Kingdom remains to be one of the worst performing countries when it comes to closing its gender gap, and the country still ranks 146 out of the 153 countries in *The Global Gender Gap Index 2020* thus indicating that there is hardly no equality between men and women in the field of health, education, economy and politics (World Economic Forum, 2019, p.9). The gender inequality, according to international standards, in the Kingdom can largely be explained due to the restrictions Saudi women still experience in the private spheres – marriage, family, divorce, and decisions related to children such as child custody – of their lives (HRW, 2008, p.3-4). As long as the main gender policies of male guardianship and gender segregation are still present in the country, Saudi women will continue to face discrimination in the private sphere that hinder them to fully participate in the public sphere (HRW, 2008, p.3-4; Topal, 2019, p.3). Accordingly, the modernization efforts in the field of women's rights thus including MbS' recent efforts to relax both of the aforementioned policies do not loosen the existing social controls Saudi women are constantly experiencing. In fact, Saudi women must still obtain a male guardian's approval to get married, leave prison, or obtain certain healthcare. Men can still file cases against their female relatives under their guardianship for "disobedience", which can lead to forcible return to their male guardian's home or imprisonment (HRW, 2020). It will be highly likely that the Saudi regime will completely abolish these two policies because it reflects the state's commitment to Islam and thereby its adherence to the deeply embedded culture that validates the idea of the "domestic icon" of Saudi women as stay-at-home wives and mothers (Doumato, 2001, p.174). Thus, the political culture of the country, which emphasizes Islam as nation and domesticated women as the symbol of Islamic values, remains in a state of self-perpetuation (Doumato, 2001, p.167;175).

3.3.5. Significance of this pattern

From the aforementioned paragraphs follow that evidently, the dual status of Saudi women is present in the Kingdom and the regime frequently employs the tactic of divide-and-rule to deliberately foster the social divisions that are present within the Saudi society, between liberals and conservatives in particular. Yet, it remains puzzling whether the connection between this

tactic and the women's dual status is related. According to Lorch & Bunk, the existence of a duality in the status of women is a strong indication for the regime's use of the divide-and-rule policy. The previous paragraphs demonstrate that it is indeed plausible to assume that the deliberate fueling of the entrenched division between liberals and conservatives, which is arguably the most fundamental division in the country when it comes to social issues thus including the role of Saudi women in the Kingdom, results in the dual status of the Saudi woman. However, it could also be argued that the dual status of Saudi women is the outcome of the first pattern – the regime's use of women's rights and gender politics as a legitimation strategy. In the context of Saudi Arabia, the country's legitimacy depends on religious factors (i.e. Wahhabi Islam as the unifying factor on which the country is build, and the religious scholars) and on the international community. Hence, these are the actors that have an important significance in providing the Saudi regime the necessary legitimacy, and the regime has carefully selected the woman issue as the policy field that is most effective in pleasing both actors. As a result, the regime's efforts to ensure and maintain this legitimacy from both sources also seem to result in the dual status of Saudi women.

On the one hand the Saudi regime is constantly seeking international legitimacy, which was particularly endorsed in the aftermath of 9/11. Responding to the mounting pressure following the attacks, the Saudi state seemed willing to reverse decades of restrictions and promote itself as a champion of women's emancipation. The regime saw the necessity to pursue a gender policy agenda that was in accordance with Western standards and they initiated reforms to achieve this. Thus, the reforms that the Saudi regime has taken over the years in order to please the international community seem to have contributed to the status Saudi women currently have in the public sphere: increasingly receiving education and entering the working force – all of which are standards of gender equality that are promoted by the West. Yet, as I already mentioned in paragraph 2.2.5., the regime has to take these reforms within *thawabit shar'iyya* as their domestic legitimacy might otherwise be challenged. Therefore, the regime is bound to act within the Islamic framework because they are constantly challenged by the religious establishment that they are leaning too much towards the West and therefore neglecting the Islamic nature of the Kingdom. As a result, it could be argued that, in order for the Saudi regime to maintain its domestic legitimacy, they choose to restrict Saudi women and strictly apply Islamic principles in their private lives. Thus, what follows from the first pattern is a two-track policy, which indeed seems to coincide with the dual status of Saudi women: women in the public sphere are free and liberated thus pleasing the international community, but they are

restricted and subjected to Islamic principles in the private sphere thus pleasing the religious scholars. This raises the question as to whether the dual status of Saudi women is evidence of the regime's use of the divide-and-rule tactic or whether it is the outcome of the regime's use of women's rights and gender politics as part of the regime's legitimation strategy. The answer to this question depends on the regime's perception on what they deem to be more essential to their stability: maintaining legitimacy or fostering the fragmentation of society.

3.4. Saudi women and their contribution to regime survival

In sum, the previous paragraphs have demonstrated that all three patterns of Lorch & Bunk's framework are indeed present in the case of Saudi Arabia. Thus, this analysis has demonstrated that Saudi women and their rights are of significant importance to the regime's stability because they form part and parcel of the three survival strategies. Indeed, it seems that the Saudi regime's use of the these strategies, in which women's rights and gender politics have a significant role, are all aimed to balance and safeguard most of the stability factors that the literature has identified as contributing to the survivability of the Kingdom's regime, which I explained in paragraph 2.1.. The only stability factor that has not received much attention in this thesis is the House of Saud. The reason for this is because this thesis considered the Saudi regime as one entity and therefore the disputes within the royal family have not been taken into account. Nevertheless, it seems that for the remaining stability factors – the powerful ulama, oil revenues, relations with the US, and Saudi citizens – the Saudi regime is indeed using women and their rights to balance and safeguard these factors. First of all, because the regime is constantly challenged by the ulama to commit to the Islamic faith, the Saudi regime seem to have deliberately selected women and their rights as the particular policy field to demonstrate their Islamic leadership. Secondly, in their efforts to rebuild the Kingdom's national economy by making it less dependent on oil revenues, the regime considered women as an important group that can facilitate the stability of the economy. Thirdly, in order to demonstrate to the US that Kingdom is committed to modernize and that their oil-for-security pact is worth pursuing, the Saudi regime has pushed for women-friendly reforms in order to demonstrate their path to modernity. Lastly, in order to respond to the challenges stemming from the Saudi citizens, which became particularly apparent during the Arab uprisings, the regime has offered women more rights and opportunities thus in order to appease the discontent among the population. All in all, we can thus say that the Saudi regime indeed uses women's rights and gender politics as a means to maintain regime stability.

4. Conclusion

This research examined the question, "How and to what extent does the Saudi regime uses women's rights and gender politics as a means to maintain regime stability?". This question was formed in light of the recent reforms in the field of women's rights initiated by the Saudi Crown Prince MbS, which endorse the Saudi state's structural paradoxical behavior towards women. This behavior, which is characterized by reform and repression presents a puzzle: why would the Saudi regime pursue woman-friendly reforms such as the lift of the driving ban on women, while simultaneously crack down those activists that demand these particular reforms? While the authoritarian character of the Saudi regime seems to explain the state's use of repression, as this is considered a defining feature of such a particular regime type, it seems counterintuitive to assume that in these contexts the regimes are committed to advance women's rights. Yet, Saudi Arabia is living proof of an authoritarian state that seems to prioritize issues related to women. Indeed, the academic literature agrees that authoritarian regimes might appear to be champions for women's rights, but the discrepancies in their behavior towards women reflect the ambiguous motivations that lie behind implementing those rights. Therefore, it is believed that authoritarian regimes do not have the women's best interests at heart.

There is one strand of literature that argues that authoritarian regimes invest in women's rights because it contributes to regime resilience. Whereas most of the studies have just assumed this link, Lorch & Bunk (2016) are the first researchers that have studied *how* the use of women's rights and its contribution to regime stability manifests. In their research, they have synthesized women's rights and gender politics into the survival strategies that authoritarian regimes employ when their rule is challenged: legitimation, co-optation, and divide-and-rule strategy. As a result, they have established a theoretical framework in which they have identified how authoritarian regimes use women's rights and gender politics as part of these three survival strategies: the use of women's rights and gender politics as a legitimation strategy; use of women's organizations as mechanisms of co-optation; and the use of the divide-and-rule strategy which results into the duality of the women's status. From this literature review followed that this thesis aimed to focus on analyzing the paradoxical behavior of the Saudi regime towards women, from the perspective that behind the regime's motivations to implement rights for Saudi women lies the true purpose of maintaining regime stability.

In fact, in contrast to popular belief, the Kingdom has to make efforts to maintain their stability. In the second chapter of this thesis, I contextualized the playfield for the Saudi regime, which is basically determined on two levels. On the more critical level – decisive for the regime's stability – the Saudi regime has to balance and safeguard specific factors: the royal family has to maintain elite unity; they have to please the country's powerful ulama; they have to safeguard their national income which is largely dependent on oil revenues; they have to maintain a friendly relationship with the US; and they have to monitor society's social mood. On a more pragmatic level – decision-making within the policy field of the country's gender politics – the regime is bound by the country's deeply embedded religion, Wahhabi Islam. Hence, from this follows that the Kingdom's gender politics is guided by Islamic principles, which is evidenced by the gender ideology that is based on Islamic values and the two policies that form the cornerstones of Saudi Arabia's gender politics, the male guardianship system and gender segregation. Contextualizing this playfield for the Saudi regime was necessary because it allows for a better understanding of this research' unit of analysis, the Saudi regime, in relation to both the concepts of *regime stability* and *women's rights and gender politics*, which is necessary in order to examine how the Saudi regime uses women's rights and gender politics as a means to maintain regime stability. Hence, in the previous chapter I indeed researched this by testing to what extent Lorch & Bunk's framework was applicable in the case of Saudi Arabia.

4.1. Summary of the findings

The previous chapter has demonstrated that all three patterns of Lorch & Bunk's theoretical framework are indeed present in the case of Saudi Arabia. The first pattern of the framework dictates that an authoritarian regime uses women's rights and gender politics as a legitimation strategy. What was first and foremost necessary was mapping the particular sources that provide the Saudi regime with legitimacy – these sources are religion and the international community. As I have emphasized throughout this thesis, Wahhabi Islam is incredibly important in the Kingdom and it is deeply embedded within the country's politics and society. Accordingly, the royal family's right to rule stems from the 1744 alliance, which regulated that in return for Al Saud's commitment to Islam, the Wahhabi clerics would legitimize their rule. This concomitant relationship is still present in the Kingdom. As a result, it seems that when the Saudi regime's rule is questioned based on their disregard towards religion, the Saudi regime uses women's rights and gender politics as a means to restore their legitimacy, which I demonstrated with the illustrations of the girls' education and the Islamists opposition during the 1980s. In embodying and claiming the role of protector of the Islamic faith, the regime wants to demonstrate its

commitment to Islamic leadership by targeting women and taking restrictive measures that apply to them, which are in accordance with Islamic principles and values. Furthermore, the Saudi regime is also actively seeking legitimacy from the international community, the US in particular. The Saudi-US' "oil-for-security" relationship came particularly under pressure following the 9/11-attacks. As a result, the regime had to fix their relationship with the US. In the Saudi regime's efforts to show the US that they were extremely committed to combat terrorism and other security-related issues, they used women and their rights to endorse the Kingdom's path to modernity, which was in accordance with the Western standards. Thus, by keeping both these two sources satisfied through the use of women and their rights in accordance with their respective standards, the Saudi regime limits the grounds on which those sources can question and challenge the Saudi regime's legitimacy thus ensuring their regime stability.

The second pattern of using women's organizations as a mechanism of co-optation was evaluated in a different light due to the lack of an independent Saudi civil society. In the Kingdom, all women's organizations are per definition co-opted by the regime, which means that the regime does not carefully select those organizations it wants to tie to their regime and those it wants to isolate, thereby making the notion of co-optation not applicable in this context. Yet, the regime does seem to co-opt Saudi women in different ways. In order to examine this, it was needed to broaden the notion of "women's organizations" to *female individuals* and *Saudi women in general* because these two are indeed co-opted by the regime. As a result, it seemed that the Saudi regime co-opted female individuals by allowing them in channels which were controlled by the state (e.g. national media outlets and 'democratic' institutions). The regime carefully selected those female individuals, with an acceptable critical voice – those that coincided with the regime's agenda – that were allowed in these channels. While this form of co-optation more or less stemmed from international pressure following 9/11, the Saudi regime also used this tactic in their response to bottom-up pressure in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. As the government was fearing a spillover of mass mobilization and social upheaval from the neighboring countries, the regime decided to co-opt the women's mobilizations, who saw in the Arab Spring their window of opportunity to voice their demands, by offering them new political opportunities and rights. In addition, recently, the regime seems to have adopted a new form of co-optation. Because the Saudi regime considers it necessary for its survival to diversify the Kingdom's national economy, they have co-opted women-friendly policies. Hence, Saudi women are given more rights and opportunities that are meant to promote and facilitate their

entering and participation in labor markets, which can be exemplified by the national economic development plan *Vision2030*. Thus, the regime has identified a significant task for women to 'save' the country's national economy.

The last pattern of instrumentalizing social divisions along the axis of women's rights and gender politics thus resulting in the dual status of women is also present in Saudi Arabia. In fact, the Saudi regime is known for deliberately fostering existing social cleavages. A fragmented society is considered to be essential in order to prevent mobilization of opposition groups and therefore this contributes to regime stability. It appears that the Saudi regime allows discussion on social matters because on these issues citizens seem to fundamentally be divided into two groups: liberals and conservatives. This entrenched social cleavage is basically divided on all social issues, including the role and status of Saudi women. As a result, the Saudi regime is responding to two camps, by on the one hand pursuing rights for Saudi women which allow them to enter the public sphere thus pleasing the liberals, while on the other hand they uphold the existing restrictions on Saudi women in their private lives so they fulfill the idea of the "ideal Islamic woman" thus pleasing the conservatives. From this policy emanates the dual status of the Saudi woman: the breadwinner in the public sphere and the domestic icon in the private sphere. Lorch & Bunk's framework suggests that the women's dual status is an indication of the regime's use of the divide-and-rule tactic through the fostering social cleavages. While this indeed seems plausible in the case of Saudi Arabia, the duality of the women's status can also be the outcome of the first pattern, due to the regime's maintaining of a two-track policy in order to uphold its legitimacy. Thus, the visibility of Saudi women in the public sphere can be the result of the reforms the regime has initiated to please the international community and the women's subjection to Islamic traditions in the private sphere can be the result of pleasing the ulama.

In sum, the previous chapter has demonstrated that women's rights and gender politics can indeed be synthesized in the Saudi regime's survival strategies. In all of the three patterns women and their rights are used in such a way that it ensures at least one of the stability factors: oil-dependent economy, Wahhabi Islam, Saudi citizens, and the US. When the economy is in danger; when the regime is challenged by the powerful ulama and the conservative Islamists; when the regime fears popular uprisings from the Saudi citizens; or when their relationship with the US is under pressure – in all cases, the Kingdom appears to use Saudi women and their rights as important tools to limit and compensate these threats thus in order to ensure regime stability. Yet, none of the Saudi regime's efforts in the field of women's rights and gender

politics seem to be aimed at ensuring the stability factor of maintaining elite unity among the royal family. This is perhaps due to this thesis' understanding of the Saudi regime. While this research indeed acknowledged that there exist disputes within the royal family, it evaluated the regime as one entity. As a result, the analysis has not covered for efforts in the field of women's rights, if any, that were aimed to ensure elite unity among the royal family.

4.2. Reflecting on Lorch & Bunk's framework

In this part, I will discuss and reflect on Lorch & Bunk's theoretical framework. First of all, I would like to reflect on the universality and applicability of their framework. Lorch & Bunk have only included three survival strategies in their framework, legitimation, co-optation and the divide-and-rule strategy. While their decision to incorporate these particular survival strategies seem to follow from the academic literature – these strategies are the most frequently employed by authoritarian regimes – they, to some extent, seem to fall short in the case of Saudi Arabia. As I already mentioned in paragraph 1.4.1., there are indeed other survival strategies that authoritarian regimes can use in order to maintain their stability. For instance, strategies that center around the country's economy such as economic liberalization or integration in the global economies (Al-Rasheed, 2015). Based on the previous chapter, I would argue that these tactics are also employed by the Saudi regime in order to preserve their rule. Indeed, one of the stability factors that determine the regime's stability is the large income deriving from oil production. Over the years, the Kingdom is increasingly facing serious problems regarding the oil price fluctuations. As a result, the regime wants to make the country less dependent on oil revenues through diversification of the country's national economy and economic integration with global markets (Topal, 2019). In their efforts to do so, the regime is using Saudi women and their rights to achieve this, endorsed by the plans laid out in *Vision2030.* Hence, due to the significant importance of oil within the Kingdom, these economic tactics seem to be more suitable for explaining the Saudi regime's initiatives in the field of women's rights.

Furthermore, Lorch & Bunk have not clearly defined and conceptualized their patterns. While they have indeed succeeded in linking the academic literature on state feminism in authoritarian regimes to the literature of authoritarian regime resilience, they fail to clarify and address *their* understanding of some of the concepts. Due to this particular lack of transparency, some implications emerged when applying their theoretical framework to the case of Saudi Arabia. For instance, it remains unclear what Lorch & Bunk understand to constitute to the tactic of co-optation. They address different understandings of the concept, yet, they do not clarify what

particular understanding they adhere to. Hence, this results in ambiguity. For instance, one can consider the regime's use of co-optation as co-opting Saudi *women*, however, one can also evaluate co-optation as co-opting *other groups* such as the ulama, in which women and their rights are in fact used as a tool. This thesis decided to analyze the tactic of co-optation in accordance to the former understanding. Hence, Lorch & Bunk's shortcoming of not explaining the three patterns, its concepts and its mechanisms more extensively leaves room for interpretation.

4.3. Suggestions for future research

What follows from the previous paragraph is that future research is indeed needed to support and improve Lorch & Bunk's theoretical framework. Hence, in this section, I will make some suggestions for future research. In their research, Lorch & Bunk examined two authoritarian regimes, the post-revolutionary Algerian and the post-socialist Mozambican regime. This thesis examined their framework in another type of authoritarian regime, the monarchical regime of Saudi Arabia. Yet, as I mentioned in paragraph 1.7.4., it is not possible to draw any generalizable findings from a case study. While this was indeed not my intention, instead, this thesis was meant to provide an in-depth understanding of the Saudi regime and their use of women's rights and gender politics as a means to maintain stability; it would be interesting to research whether the patterns manifest in a similar fashion in the remaining authoritarian monarchies in the region. In fact, the monarchies in the Middle East have some similarities: the dominant role of Islam (Dalay, 28 July 2017); oil-dependent economies (Herb, 2019, p.3); and their regime resilience (Al-Rasheed, 2015), which was particularly endorsed by the Arab Spring (with the exception of Bahrain). Therefore, future comparative research into these monarchical regimes would be interesting because it enables generalizable statements with regard those regime's use of women's rights and its contribution to regime stability. In addition, this comparative research is relevant because it might reveal whether the variable of authoritarian regime type is of any significance in the link of using women's rights and regime stability.

Moreover, the dynamic between women's rights, regime stability, and the Saudi regime in general need more scholarly attention. First of all, this thesis hypothesized that the Saudi regime uses women's rights and gender politics *as a means to maintain regime stability*. However, there are also other motivations that might lie behind the Saudi regime's efforts to take initiatives in the field of women's rights and gender politics. For instance, there are some observers and experts who argue that the Kingdom is pursuing these reforms and policies for

the purpose of 'distracting' the public from its more severe violations occurring in the country (Al-Rasheed, 10 January 2012). Hence, it would be interesting to evaluate the regime's initiatives in the field of women's rights from a different perspective, regarding the Saudi regime's motivations. Moreover, the previous chapter seem to suggest that the Saudi regime is more willingly to implement economic reforms for women than social and political reforms. Because this thesis did not discuss in detail the distinction between the *type* of reforms and policies, it might be interesting for future research to analyze the reforms more on its content thus taking into account their nature (e.g. social, cultural, economic, political reform) in order to detect whether there are particular reforms the regime neglects and prioritizes. Lastly, it would be interesting to compare Saudi women to other segments of the Saudi population. This thesis has indeed demonstrated that Saudi women form part and parcel of the regime's overall strategy to maintain its stability. As I mentioned in paragraph 3.4., Saudi women are of significant importance to the Saudi regime. Yet, it is hard to make any claims on how important exactly women are compared to other groups, as those groups (e.g. Shia population) have not been included in this thesis. Hence, it would be interesting for future research to examine whether there are other groups within the Kingdom, whose rights are employed by the regime in the same way. Thus, there are multiple perspectives and contexts available in which women's rights and the regime's use thereof, and its contribution to regime stability, can be assessed in Saudi Arabia. All in all, regardless of the perspective one might select to research the dynamic between women's rights, regime stability, and the Saudi regime, there is no doubt that throughout the Kingdom's history but also in contemporary Saudi Arabia, " (…) women will remain a reliable barometer of stability in the Kingdom" (Doumato, 1991).

5. Bibliography

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