

The Fuss over Headscarves
Posted On:December 31, 1969

When President Ronald Reagan stood at the Berlin wall and said: "Mr. Gorbachev, Take Down This Wall." Some of the President's advisers were horrified that he said this, considering it very undiplomatic. The President was very lucky---that shortly after his challenge, events converged, resulting in the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the USSR.

The PBS program Frontline recently did an investigative report on Saudi Arabia, not an easy thing to do considering how paranoid and closed off that fanatical Muslim country is. What has changed is that many Saudis have mobile phones with cameras that provide "citizen journalism" that the state cannot suppress. Almost the entire Frontline broadcast relied on these pictures. (We see the same in confrontations between authorities and the American inner-city Black population. Black bystanders and the police themselves have the means to document these confrontations.)

An older documentary on Saudi Arabia (1980) was Death of a Princess, a British film that created an international furor. The Saudis briefly cut diplomatic relations with the UK; but the damage was done. This was the story of a young royal woman who tried to flee the country with her lover. She was caught and was executed (shot) in a parking lot, and her lover was decapitated (very badly) by a clumsy executioner.

In the current Frontline, Saudi Arabia appears much more wobbly than most analysts acknowledge. Many experts say that the country is stable, that the Royals have a firm hold, and that the Religious Police cannot be challenged. The Saudis have had money enough to buy off disgruntled sectors in their country. But now, oil money is in meltdown.

The Saudis are paranoid about Iran because 25% of the Saudi population (living in the eastern Arabian oil fields) are Shiite and badly treated. Eastern Arabia borders on Iran, their Shiite (and non-Arab) neighbor, whom the Saudis fear. Saudis regard even the most peaceful demonstrations as a threat to their power and use draconian punishments. A popular Shiite cleric, much respected by his people, was arrested and, despite global protests, decapitated as a traitor.

Moreover, it is not only Shiites or poor Saudis currently grumbling because their generous benefits have stopped (blame oil prices), but educated young elites using a new medium, blogging, on the Internet. One young man who suggested that Wahhabi Islam needed liberalization was arrested and sentenced to 1,000 lashes and a long prison sentence for his "crime." His wife and young children fled the country and were given refuge in Canada.

What struck me was the demeanor of his wife, who was extensively interviewed for this program. She was radiantly beautiful, articulate, and a loving mother to her three youngsters. She wore no hijab! The minute she left oppressive Saudi Arabia, the veil came off. The same is true for Saudi women artists, filmmakers, and others who find it impossible to work in that country. It is even true for most upper-class Saudi women when they fly from Saudi Arabia to London. The oppressive clothes come off, replaced by blue jeans and a face open to the world.

The most potent symbol of Islam's stranglehold on people without choices is the mandatory hijab. Saudi women must not be seen or heard. In the Frontline film, a totally veiled woman was shopping in a supermarket. A man approached her, punched her in the head and knocked her to the ground. He then walked off. He did it because he could.

My favorite scene, however, was a group of women harassed by a bullying religious cop with a whip. The women had had enough. They beat him and left him on the ground.

Something new is being born in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Women are no longer accepting their culture's oppression submissively. At great risk, some take off their veils and drive their cars.

Even ISIS, which used to flog women for not wearing a burqa, now forbids it near any of their own security zones. The burkatini is just silly, not dangerous. But wearing hijab defies the reasons for moving to the West, freedom from oppression.

681
Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of God's Law or Man's Law. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.