

Warning: call_user_func_array() expects parameter 1 to be a valid callback, no array or string given in /home2/landl/public_html/wp-includes/class-wp-hook.php on line 298



LIFE AND LEGENDS

"Love the handful of earth you are!" - Pablo Neruda



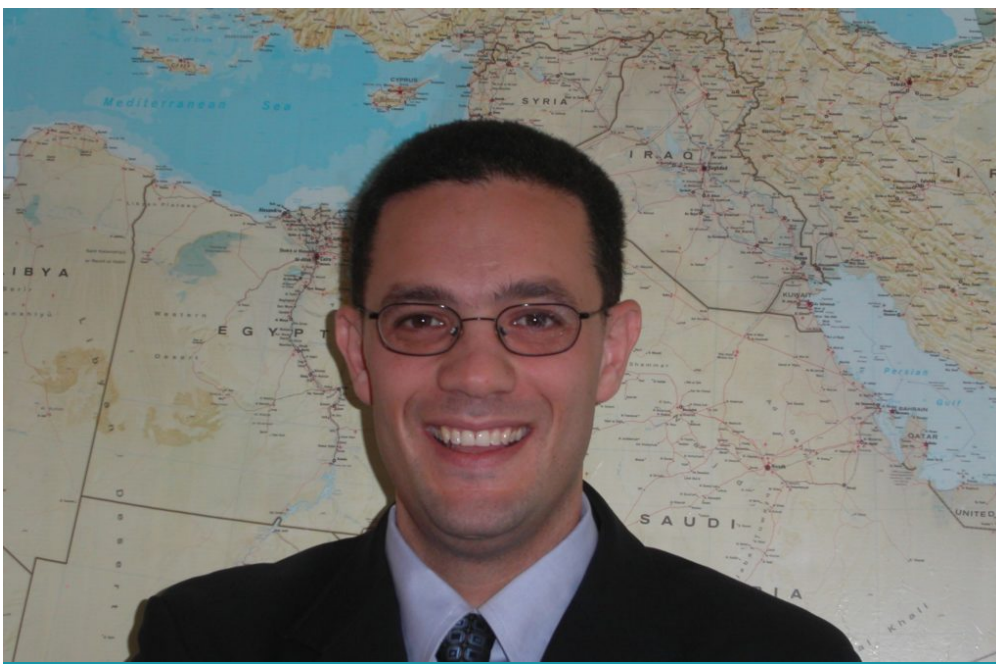
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Article

Artists of Change: Saudi Arabia in 2017

by Sean Foley.



In his landmark text *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, the British author, diplomat, and soldier T.E. Lawrence observed that the peoples who lived in the Arabian peninsula had no creativity and “so little art” that “they could almost be said to have had no art.”¹ Nearly a century after Lawrence penned those words, the Briton’s vision of Saudis and their art persists among Western intellectuals and journalists. In 2012, Noah Feldman, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, asserted that the small Arabic-speaking states of the Persian Gulf have no “indigenous tradition of visual or plastic arts” and are situated “next door to Wahhabi, art-

despising Saudi Arabia.”²

Yet the same culture which Westerners have dismissed as “devoid of art and enjoyment of beauty”³ has produced one of the Arab World’s most vibrant creative movements over the past sixteen years. That movement reflects the intersection of two social forces that have emerged in Saudi Arabia since the turn of the twenty-first century: (a) men and women of various ages who saw the value of promoting group instead of individual approaches to producing art; and (b) new technologies that allowed artists and other creative actors to produce culture that simultaneously reflected global and local norms and could win an audience. From the start, Saudi artists looked to mass culture as a potent vehicle to promote a broader discourse on gender and other sensitive social issues.

Today one can find Saudi creatives working in genres as different as conceptual sculpture, paintings, stand-up comedy, YouTube videos, and feature-length films—even though movie theaters have been prohibited in Saudi Arabia for decades. Multiple films, two of which were directed by Saudi women,⁴ have already been released, including *Barakah meets Barakah*.

The film, which made its U.S. premier on January 7, 2017 at the Palm Springs International Film Festival, explores gender and public space in Saudi Arabia.⁵

Both the director, Dr. Mahmoud Sabbagh, and the film's two stars, Saudi comedian Hisham Fageeh and women's activist Fatima Albanawi, are U.S. educated and reflect the experience of hundreds of thousands of Saudis, who took advantage of generous Saudi government grants over the last decade to study in American colleges and universities.⁶ Albanawi, Fageeh, and Sabbagh have defined themselves as social activists and are active on Twitter and other social media. In multiple settings, they have also portrayed their movie as part of the discussion about the need for peaceful cultural and social change in the Kingdom.

Set in contemporary Jeddah, *Barakah meets Barakah* focuses on the relationship of a young lower middle-class municipal official, Barakah, played by Fageeh, with a wealthy Instagram fashion star, Bibi, played by Albanawi; it shows the difficulties facing Saudi youth in a country in which there is little public space or opportunities for unrelated men and women to meet—even in the age of social media. There is also a scene set in an art gallery, and "Illumination," a piece by Ahmed Mater, one of Saudi Arabia's most famous conceptual artists, appears hanging in Bibi's house in Jeddah.

Through the skillful use of comedic episodes, rhetorical questions, references to historic Arab singers and to classic Egyptian cinema, the film also seeks to raise the consciousness of the generation that imposed these restrictions after 1979 and start a social dialogue among Saudis of all ages about the future of their society. Fageeh even asks his male relatives why their generation "abandoned us" to conservative forces and did not fight to retain the more open society they enjoyed in their youth.

By unfavorably comparing life in contemporary Saudi society to life in the country in the 1960s and 1970s, *Barakah Meets Barakah* also implicitly echoes the calls of Saudi artists for their society to undergo reform by readopting the norms of a previous era. One can find this message in the Twitter biography of Abdunasser Gharem, a leading Saudi visual artist whose work has sold at auction at Christie's in Dubai for hundreds of thousands of dollars.⁷ The biography is in both English and Arabic and alludes to religious and to secular visions of reform: "Abdunasser Gharem's (1973) mission is to restore behavior al-Fann nūfūz [through art we succeed]." ⁸ Notably, the expression in English—"to restore behavior"—is an allusion to the Islamic principle that Muslims should periodically revive (Tajdīd) and reform (Iṣlāh) society to conform to the behavior and ideals of the Prophet's society in seventh-century Medina.

For their part, Saudi leaders have signaled that they understand the power of this Kingdom's creative movement and movies like *Barakah Meets Barakah* to promote the Kingdom's interests at home and abroad. Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, who has emerged as a key figure in government since his father became King in January 2015, has signaled his support for the arts. Not only did the Saudi government nominate *Barakah meets Barakah* to compete for the foreign language Oscar Award in 2017,⁹ but Prince Muhammad bin Salman has also spearheaded the creation of state agencies to supervise and to promote the arts.

In spring 2016, the Deputy Crown Prince included language promoting both the arts and entertainment in Vision 2030. The initiative, which received considerable attention when it was unveiled in April 2016, seeks to end the Kingdom's dependence on oil exports, modernize Saudi society, promote new industries, and enhance key Saudi diplomatic alliances around the world.^x Six months later, at a business conference in Beijing, the Saudi Deputy Crown Prince attended a ceremony in which Ahmed Mater presented "Silk Road," his dual panel painting celebrating Sino-Saudi history and Vision 2030, to Chinese President Xi Jinping.¹¹

There is little question that the Saudi creative movement is a powerful force. Its practitioners offer important insights into the present and the future of a kingdom that stands at the crossroads of the economic, political, and religious crises that shape both the Middle East and the contemporary world. That the West is an element in this movement is important. But even more important is the considerable effort to subsume the West into what is essentially an Arabic movement. "If we go back to the root of the Arabic word for poetry (shi'r), that is to the verb *sha'ara*,"¹² writes the Syrian poet Adonis, "we see that it means 'to know,' 'to understand' and 'to perceive.' On this basis, all knowledge is poetry. We call the poet sha'ir (literally, 'one who knows, understands, perceives') in Arabic because he perceives and understands that which others do not perceive and understand...he knows what others do not know."¹³

~ Sean Foley

Endnotes

1. T.E. Lawrence, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1926), p. 38.
2. Noah Feldman, "Taking It to the Street," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 25, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052970204425904578072630892858670>.
3. Karen Elliot House, *On Saudi Arabia: Its People, Past, Religion, Fault Lines – and Future* (New York: Knopf, 2012), p. 57.
4. Those two films are Ahd Kamel's *Ḥurma* (Sanctity) (2013) and Haifa Mansour's *Wadjda* (2013).
5. See the following link: <https://www.psfilmfest.org/2017-ps-film-festival/films/barakah-meets-barakah>.
6. There were 111,000 Saudi students in the United States alone in 2014. Ibrahim Naffee, "Number of Saudi Students in US reaches 111,000," Arab News, April 20, 2014, <http://www.arabnews.com/news/558416>.
7. In 2011, Gharem's *Message/Messenger* sold for a record \$842,500 at Christie's Auction House in Dubai. Umita Venkataraman, "Saudi soldier as artist: Abdalnasser Gharem's message, 'Peace, but with security,'" *Al-Arabiya*, April 28, 2011, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/04/28/147043.html>.
8. Abdalnasser Gharem, Twitter Biography, January 12, 2017, <https://twitter.com/abdalnasserghar?lang=en>.
9. Nancy Tartaglione, "Oscars: Saudi Arabia Enters 'Barakah Meets Barakah' In Foreign Language Race; Kingdom's Second Submission Ever," *Deadline*, August 24, 2016, <http://deadline.com/2016/08/barakah-meets-barakah-second-ever-foreign-language-oscar-submission-saudi-arabia-1201807983/>.
10. "Saudi Arabia grooves to a new beat," *Al-Arabiya*, October 8, 2016, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/life-style/travel-and-tourism/2016/10/08/Saudi-Arabia-grooves-to-a-new-beat-as-entertainment-opens-up.html>.
11. 'Abīr Mušāḳḳīs, "Hadīya al-Mamlaka al-'Arabīya As-Sa'ūdiya li-Daula As-Şīn 'Unwān Aṭ-Ṭaqāfa wa Al-Fann," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 2, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2cgvn4A>.
12. Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, trans. Catherine Cobham (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1990), 57.
13. Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 57.

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