



Change is afoot in Saudi Arabia

The West Asian kingdom is rapidly shedding its image as an insular Islamic state. Nowhere is this change more remarkable than in the status of women

An invitation to speak at a Global Cyber Security Conference took me to the Saudi capital, Riyadh, last week. This was my first visit to this important West Asian country with which India's relations have expanded significantly over the past few years. Saudi Arabia is not only a key supplier of oil to India, but is home to a large Indian expat population, both in professional and labour categories. It has been and continues to be a revered pilgrimage destination for Indian Muslims, being home to Mecca and Medina.

In recent years, relations have acquired a geopolitical edge, as the country looks to diversify its economy away from oil, exercise greater influence in the West Asian region and become a more outward oriented and modern country. It has been rapidly shedding its image as an insular, deeply conservative and even fundamentalist Islamic state. There is a conscious effort to dispel the entrenched perceptions of a feudal state, retaining medieval practices and strict patriarchal norms upholding a grey and joyless environment.

At the conference itself I was surprised to see a fairly large number of young women participating in the sessions and working as conference functionaries. While a majority of them still wore the hijab, there were several who did not. The Saudi minister responsible for cyber security and another for telecommunications, both expressed pride over the fact that there were a large and increasing number of Saudi women professionals in these high-tech domains. It was their policy, they claimed, to encourage equal participation by women in these and other spheres of activity. Saudi participants I became acquainted with at the conference

acknowledged the major changes that had been taking place since the present Crown Prince and now Prime Minister, Mohammed bin Salman (popularly referred to as MBS) had been handed over the reins of power in 2017 by his father King Salman. The change in the status of women, they



SHYAM SARAN

said, had been the most remarkable. Wearing a burkha or hijab was no longer compulsory and the much-feared moral police to enforce the strict dress code has been disbanded. Nor is it necessary any longer for a woman to be accompanied by a male relative while heading out in public. One could see Saudi women driving cars in the city and going to restaurants and coffee shops alone or with other women and male com-

panions. There is no longer any segregation between the sexes in public establishments.

There is a deliberate effort to project the city as a place of entertainment and leisure activity. I visited what must be one of the largest amusement parks anywhere in the world, called Boulevard, which had designer shops, restaurants and games and open-air popular music concerts. There were large crowds of Saudi families, groups of excited youngsters, both male and female, enjoying the various activities on offer as one may find anywhere else in the world. There is now an annual Riyadh festival that features international stars and performers, including our very own Salman Khan. The old stereotype has been consciously discarded.

The Global Cyber Security Conference was an example of projecting the country as a platform for international conferences. The conference infrastructure was modern and efficient, utilising

the latest in audio-visual and digital technology. Saudi Arabia has emerged as an unlikely leader in cyber security. It ranks second after the US in the global Cyber Security Index of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). The country has lavished both financial and human resources to this domain especially after its critical oil production and supply chain had been subject to debilitating hacking and malware attacks. India currently ranks 10th in the ITU index.

I was asked to speak at the opening panel, joined by the well-known physicist and populariser of science, Michio Kaku and a cyber psychologist, Mary Aiken. The latter is the author of a much acclaimed book, *The Cyber Effect*.

It was fascinating to listen to Michio Kaku who argued that the age of silicon and digital technologies was coming to an end and that we were on the threshold of a much more exciting and infinitely more powerful quantum computing. He predicted that within a decade, Silicon Valley in the US would become the new "rust belt" just as industrial manufacturing had become with the advent of the digital age. Present day computers would be like the abacus of old.

At the other end of the spectrum, Professor Aiken spoke passionately about how the debate was all about governing technology but rarely about what technology was doing to undermine and distort what is intrinsically human. She said that exposure to social media and the virtual world at the most impressionable ages from 3 to 5, was creating a generation unable to handle human-to-human contact and communication. In many cases parents were even encouraging their children to be adept in using the new devices and media at a very early age in the mistaken belief they were empowering their children with skills needed for the new age. She compared the psychological impacts to a pandemic.

The Conference covered a very wide range of issues related to the cyber domain. It is clear that this remains an anarchic space and those who are currently ahead in capabilities are least prepared to lead the effort to bring a semblance of order to it. There is little agreement on a set of norms and a code of conduct, let alone a legal framework. Technology in the cyber space amplifies and accelerates impacts with asymmetrical outcomes. Politics limps slowly behind. At the level of policy makers and decision-makers there is pervasive cyber illiteracy and thus a lack of awareness of the scale of challenge that confronts humanity and which only a global collaborative effort could resolve. Sadly, we may still be fighting analog battles even while the digital gives way to the quantum.