## A Saudi Woman Is Threatened After Tweeting About Beards

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The controversy began—as virtually all political and religious debate in Saudi Arabia does these days—with a provocative tweet. On January 18th, Souad al-Shammary, a liberal activist with more than a hundred thousand Twitter followers, [tweeted her thoughts](https://twitter.com/SouadALshammary/status/424600637436076032) about the idea, popular among devout Saudis, that Muslim men should grow long beards in order to differentiate themselves from unbelievers. The notion was “silly,” Shammary wrote, pointing out that “Jews, priests, Communists and Marxists” have also been known to wear beards.

Shammary is the co-founder of a group that calls itself the Saudi Liberal Network, in a country where *liberaliyeen*—Saudis use the English word, giving it an Arabic plural—are so widely reviled that even prominent feminists and human-rights advocates shy away from the label. She has never been popular among Saudi conservatives. But her remarks about beards were met with an unusually violent reaction. [Sheikh Adel al-Kalbani](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/11/world/middleeast/11saudi.html), a former imam at the Grand Mosque in Mecca (in 2008, when he became the first black man appointed to the post, some in the Kingdom dubbed him “the Saudi Obama”), announced that Shammary should be tried for insulting the Prophet, adding that he prayed for her to become blind and to lose the use of a hand.

In the past month, via Twitter, thousands of conservatives have echoed Kalbani’s remarks, attacking Shammary and calling for her to be put on trial. Some have gone a step further, accusing Shammary of apostasy, an offense that carries the death penalty under Sharia law. Last week, Shammary told an interviewer for the BBC World Service that she and her family had received so many threats that she had gone into hiding.

Beards are an emotional symbol for many Saudis. To a Westerner arriving in Riyadh for the first time, Saudis—the women wearing black *abayas* and head scarves, and most men wearing the traditional long white tunics called *thobes*—often seem like a fairly homogeneous lot, at least in terms of apparel. But Saudis pay a great deal of attention to little signifiers that the newcomer may have difficulty perceiving. The fabric and the cut of the *abaya;* the way that a woman’s head scarf is worn (tied in such a way that the outline of her neck and shoulders is still discernible, or worn “over her head,” in a looser style that is considered more modest); the precise length of a man’s *thobe;* the [way a man folds his *ghutra*](http://saudijeans.org/2009/09/07/how-to-wear-a-ghotra/), or headdress, and whether or not he uses a band of black cord called an *agal* to help hold it in place—all these things can telegraph information about the wearer’s social background, religious beliefs, age, and profession. Beards are among the most powerful of these signifiers, and Saudi men with long beards are, in some circles, accorded immediate deference.

According to Bernard Haykel, a professor at Princeton University whose research focusses on Saudi Arabia’s Salafi movement, beards are *sunnah*, recommended but not required of Muslim men. Beard styles are a subject of intense discussion among Islamic scholars, Haykel told me when I spoke to him by phone. The specific length of a beard, the way it is trimmed, whether or not it is dyed: these distinctions make a deliberate statement about the wearer’s religious affiliations and the degree of his piety—or the degree of piety that he wishes to have imputed to him. “The Muslim Brotherhood wear it in a particular way,” Haykel said. “The Salafis wear it in a different way. The Hanafis wear it in yet another way.”

On trips to the Kingdom, I’ve often heard Saudis mention that a man is growing his beard as a shorthand way of saying that he is becoming more punctilious in his religious observance. Saudis tend to be very devout, and usually the tone is admiring. At lunch with a group of teen-age girls in a fashionable café during my first visit to Riyadh, a few years ago, I was startled to hear one girl boasting to the others about her devout older brother’s beard, affectionately describing how fine and wispy it had been when, while still an adolescent, he first began trying to grow it out.

Other Saudis believe that their society places too much emphasis on outward symbols of religious devotion, including beards. Muna AbuSulayman, a popular Saudi television presenter, told me in an e-mail that the beard is “a personal choice that has become a symbol of faith, and taken out of proportion.” AbuSulayman noted that her father, a respected Islamic scholar, does not wear a long beard. Haykel pointed out that King Abdullah and many of the most powerful Saudi princes don’t wear full beards, either, for that matter.

And yet people I spoke to were not surprised by the reaction to Shammary’s tweet. Even some who were far from conservative suggested that she should have known better—that [her comments to the BBC](http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p01rhg1x/Outlook_Saudi_Woman_Activists_Beard_Row/), in which she said that she “never expected” such a furor, were disingenuous. A well-known Saudi academic and women’s-rights advocate, who asked not to be identified, because she does not wish to be associated publicly with the current controversy, told me in a Skype interview that an experienced activist like Shammary was unlikely to have been surprised that criticism—even implied criticism—of men with beards would cause widespread offense. Whether she might have expected that to include threats against her children—there was a reference to the location of her daughter’s school on Twitter—is another matter. Since conservative Saudis believe that women’s voices should not be heard in public, Shammary’s tweeted observations, coming from a woman, had multiplied the conservatives’ sense of injury. There is not much readiness in Saudi Arabia for the idea that a woman may be intentionally provocative and still be reasonable—so women who speak up are taking an additional risk.

The academic I spoke to said that the explosive growth of social media in recent years—Saudis are now some of the heaviest users of social-networking services in the world—has created an environment in which Saudi liberals and conservatives alike sometimes stake out extreme positions in order to spark discussion or simply to attract attention. Kalbani’s shocking threats against Shammary, from the academic’s perspective, were best understood as the actions of an Islamic scholar who sensed that the high point of his career was already behind him—a man “who feels he’s not as important as he’d like.”

Given the weight of Saudi law and culture, one sees how the threats might not be taken as idle words. Saudi liberals and conservatives both praise social media for enabling an entirely new kind of public discourse. But, as the shocking threats against Shammary make clear, liberals and conservatives are still not debaters on even ground in the Kingdom.