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## قواعد النشر

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- يزود الباحث المجلة بثلاث نسخ من البحث مطبوعة بالكمبيوتر.. ونسخة على CD، على أن يكتب اسم الباحث وعنوان بحثه على غلاف مستقل ويشار إلى المراجع والهوامش في المتن بأرقام وترد قائمتها في نهاية البحث لا في أسفل الصفحة.
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## محتويات العدد

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تجاه أحداث غزة (طوفان الأقصى) دراسة تحليلية مقارنة  
أ.م.د/ إيمان متولي محمد عرفات  
٨١٣
- 
- ضوابط تصوير الجنائز في التغطية المصورة ونشرها بالمواقع الإلكترونية  
ووسائل التواصل الاجتماعي- دراسة للقائم بالاتصال وتصوير مقترح  
لمدونة سلوك أخلاقية  
د/ حسام الدين أحمد شاکر  
٩٣١
- 
- تأثير تعرض طالبات الجامعة لحسابات المؤثرات الإناث عبر شبكات  
التواصل الاجتماعي على إدراكهن للواقع الاجتماعي  
د/ سمر علي حسن محمد  
٩٧٧
- 
- العوامل المنبئة بإدمان الألعاب الإلكترونية لدى المراهقين نحو بناء  
نموذج تفسيري للظاهرة  
د/ محمود محمد زكي  
١٠٢٩
- 
- أخلاقيات عرض الفواصل الإعلانية الرقمية واتجاه الجمهور نحوها-  
دراسة ميدانية في إطار نظرية المسؤولية الاجتماعية  
د/ نهى سامي إبراهيم عامر  
١١٤٣
- 
- تقنيات الواقع المعزز في المحتوى المقدم بالمواقع الإخبارية العربية  
الإلكترونية وانعكاسها على مستويات التفاعل لدى الشباب العربي  
د/ رباب عبد المنعم محمد التلاوي  
١٢١٣
- 
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للقضية الاقتصادية  
د/ زينب الحسيني رجب بلال ريحان  
١٣٢٩

■ ١٣٧٥ توظيف إنتاج طلاب أقسام الإعلام التربوي بكليات التربية النوعية  
للفيديات القصيرة في علاج مشكلات المجتمع المصري (دراسة تطبيقية)  
د/ عبد الرحمن شوقي محمد يونس

---

■ ١٤٢٧ اتجاهات الجمهور نحو متابعة قضايا التغييرات المناخية على صفحات  
«الفيديو» cop-27 نموذجًا «دراسة ميدانية»  
د/ دعاء عبد الفتاح محمد الصادق

---

■ ١٤٩٣ دور صحافة المواطن في نشر الشائعات عبر المنصات الرقمية: دراسة  
ميدانية على طلاب الجامعات الفلسطينية  
هالة جانم، إيهاب أحمد عوايص

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■ ١٥٤٩ Rotana and the Advocacy of Film in Saudi Arabia (2005 -  
2015) Dr. Musab Alamri

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م	القطاع	اسم المجله	اسم الجهة / الجامعة	ISSN-P	ISSN-O	السنة	نقاط المجله
1	الدراسات الإعلامية	المجلة العربية لبحوث الإعلام و الإتصال	جامعة الأهرام الكنتية، كلية الاعلام	2536-9393	2735-4008	2023	7
2	الدراسات الإعلامية	المجلة العلمية لبحوث الإذاعة والتلفزيون	جامعة القاهرة، كلية الإعلام	2356-914X	2682-4663	2023	7
3	الدراسات الإعلامية	المجلة العلمية لبحوث الإعلام و تكنولوجيا الإتصال	جامعة جنوب الوادي، كلية الإعلام	2536-9237	2735-4326	2023	7
4	الدراسات الإعلامية	المجلة العلمية لبحوث الصحافة	جامعة القاهرة، كلية الإعلام	2356-9158	2682-4620	2023	7
5	الدراسات الإعلامية	المجلة العلمية لبحوث العلاقات العامة والإعلان	جامعة القاهرة، كلية الإعلام	2356-9131	2682-4671	2023	7
6	الدراسات الإعلامية	المجلة المصرية لبحوث الإعلام	جامعة القاهرة، كلية الإعلام	1110-5836	2682-4647	2023	7
7	الدراسات الإعلامية	المجلة المصرية لبحوث الرأي العام	جامعة القاهرة، كلية الإعلام، مركز بحوث الرأي العام	1110-5844	2682-4655	2023	7
8	الدراسات الإعلامية	مجلة البحوث الإعلامية	جامعة الأزهر	1110-9297	2682-292X	2023	7
9	الدراسات الإعلامية	مجلة البحوث و الدراسات الإعلامية	المعهد الدولي العالی للإعلام بالشروق	2357-0407	2735-4016	2023	7
10	الدراسات الإعلامية	مجلة إتحاد الجامعات العربية لبحوث الإعلام و تكنولوجيا الإتصال	جامعة القاهرة، جمعية كليات الاعلام العربية	2356-9891	2682-4639	2023	7
11	الدراسات الإعلامية	مجلة بحوث العلاقات العامة الشرق الأوسط	Egyptian Public Relations Association	2314-8721	2314-873X	2023	7
12	الدراسات الإعلامية	المجلة المصرية لبحوث الاتصال الجماهيري	جامعة بني سويف، كلية الإعلام	2735-3796	2735-377X	2023	7
13	الدراسات الإعلامية	المجلة الدولية لبحوث الإعلام والاتصالات	جمعية تكنولوجيا البحث العلمي والفنون	2812-4812	2812-4820	2023	7



# Rotana and the Advocacy of Film in Saudi Arabia (2015 – 2005)

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● روتانا ومحاولات دعم السينما في السعودية (2015 – 2005)

● د/ مصعب العمري

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## Abstract

This research delves into Rotana's pivotal role in supporting production, distribution, and exhibition of films in Saudi Arabia during King Abdullah's reign from 2005 to 2015. Despite the Saudi film industry producing merely three feature films during this timeframe—namely, *Keif al-Hal?*, *Menahi* and *Wadjda*, all under Rotana's banner—each encountered distinct challenges. This article sheds light on the indispensable roles played by Rotana and its owner, Prince Al Waleed Ibn Talal, in sustaining the industry against religious opposition. The clash between extremists and Rotana, backed by financial influence, reached a crescendo during the release of *Menahi*. Therefore, this article investigates Rotana's significant role in reviving the industry and financing films while underestimating the economic and political consequences of film production.

Although the tumultuous period from 2005 to 2015 has concluded, its lessons remain pertinent. The conflict between Rotana and opponents of cinema highlights the complexities of navigating cultural expression amidst conservatism, underscoring the challenges of fostering a vibrant screen culture in Saudi Arabia.

**Keywords:** Saudi Cinema; Film Production; Cultural Censorship; Screen Representation; Social Context.

### ملخص الدراسة

يستكشف هذا البحث الدور المحوري الذي أدته روتانا في دعم إنتاج وتوزيع وعرض الأفلام في المملكة العربية السعودية في عهد الملك عبد الله منذ عام 2005 إلى عام 2015. وعلى الرغم من أن صناعة السينما السعودية لم تنتج سوى ثلاثة أفلام روائية طويلة خلال هذه الفترة الزمنية، وهي «كيف الحال؟» و«مناحي ووجدة»، وكلها تحت راية روتانا، إلا أنه واجهت كل منها تحديات مختلفة.

يلقي هذا البحث الضوء على الأدوار التي لا غنى عنها والتي قامت بها شبكة روتانا ومالكها سمو الأمير الوليد بن طلال آل سعود، في تدعيم الصناعة السينمائية ضد الممانعة الدينية، وقد وصل الصدام بين الممانعين وروتانا- المدعومة بالنفوذ المالي- إلى ذروته أثناء عرض فيلم مناحي في عدد من المدن السعودية؛ ونتيجة لذلك، يبحث هذا المقال في الدور المهم الذي تؤديه روتانا في محاولات تدعيم الصناعة وتمويل الأفلام، مع التقليل من التبعات الاقتصادية والسياسية لإنتاج الأفلام. ورغم أن الفترة المضطربة من عام 2005 إلى عام 2015 قد انتهت، فإن الدروس المستفادة منها تظل وثيقة الصلة بالموضوع. يسلط الصراع بين روتانا ومعارضى السينما الضوء على تعقيدات التنقل في التعبير الثقافي وسط التوجهات المحافظة؛ مما يسلط الضوء على تحديات تعزيز ثقافة الشاشة النابضة بالحياة في المملكة العربية السعودية. الكلمات المفتاحية: الفيلم، السينما السعودية؛ الإنتاج السينمائي؛ الرقابة الثقافية؛ السياق الاجتماعي.



## Introduction

Rotana is a major media group in the Middle East founded in 1987, and it includes a film production company, television channels, radio stations and a music company. Rotana has played a pivotal role in supporting the film industry in Saudi Arabia. This article explores the details of Rotana's role in supporting production, distribution and exhibition in Saudi Arabia during King Abdullah's rule of the country from 2005 to 2015. At that time, Saudi Arabia produced only three films during this period, namely, *Keif al-Hal?*, *Menahi* and *Wadjda*. These films were all produced by Rotana and each had challenges and unique conditions.

This article focuses on the roles of Rotana and its owner Prince Al-Waleed Ibn Talal because Rotana and Al-Waleed, with his political and financial influence, were important to keeping the industry alive. The mere survival of the industry, even without progress, was an achievement at that stage, given the strength of the opposition to cinema from religious institutions. The conflict between religious extremists and their followers on one side and Rotana and the political leadership on the other was at its height during the screening of *Menahi*. Religious scholars' opposition to the cinema had greatly damaged the industry and was responsible for its lack of investors. Therefore, this article investigates Rotana's significant role in supporting the industry and financing films while underestimating the economic and political consequences of film production.

## Research Problem

The state of the filmmaking in Saudi Arabia, particularly during King Abdullah's reign from 2005 to 2015, posed a significant challenge due to entrenched opposition from religious and social conservatism. Despite efforts by Rotana, a major media group, to support film production, distribution, and exhibition, the industry faced numerous obstacles, including limited production output and opposition to cultural expression through cinema. This research delves into the complex dynamics surrounding Rotana's role in supporting the Saudi film industry during this period, exploring the tensions between religious extremism and efforts to promote social reform and cultural openness through film.

## Research Significance

The significance of this research is multifaceted:

1. This article offers a novel contribution to the academic scholarship on Saudi cinema during the period of official prohibition of all cinematic activities.
2. The article investigates a critical epoch characterized by the paradoxical coexistence of widespread public acceptance of cinema and the arts and their rejection under the influence of religious discourse.
3. By examining the political and religious complexities of the time, this study elucidates the personal influence of Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, who facilitated the development of the film industry through his ownership of the Rotana network.
4. To direct the scholarly community's attention towards analyzing this period from social, political, and religious perspectives, addressing the resultant low volume of Saudi film production. This engagement is essential for advancing contemporary trends in cinema research and studies.

## Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to analyze Rotana's role in supporting and shaping the Saudi film industry during King Abdullah's reign. Specific objectives include:

1. To examine the cultural context of Saudi Arabia during 2005-2015, particularly regarding Saudi feature film productions.
2. To assess Rotana's strategies and initiatives in promoting film production, distribution, and exhibition in the country.

## Research Questions

The article seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What were the key factors influencing Rotana's involvement in the Saudi film industry during King Abdullah's reign?
2. How did religious opposition affect the progress and outcomes of Rotana's film initiatives?

3. What were the broader societal and cultural implications of Rotana's efforts to advocacy the Saudi film industry?
4. To what extent has Rotana succeeded in promoting the production, distribution and display of Saudi films?

### **Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilising documentary analysis to examine primary sources, including media reports, television interviews, and official statements from Rotana and relevant stakeholders. The study will also draw upon secondary sources, such as scholarly articles and books, to provide historical context and theoretical frameworks for analysis.

In addition to primary and secondary sources, this study incorporates insights gained from interviews with key stakeholders in the Saudi film industry. An interview was conducted with Tariq Al-Harbi, one of the main actors in the *Menahi* film. Al-Harbi's perspectives provide valuable firsthand insights into the challenges and dynamics of Saudi film production, distribution, and reception, particularly from the perspective of an industry insider. By adopting a rigorous qualitative methodology, inclusive of interviews with industry insiders like Tariq Al-Harbi, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Rotana's role in the advocacy of the Saudi film industry and its broader socio-political implications.

### **Prince Al-Waleed and Rotana Group**

This section narrates part of Rotana's history and the prince's attitudes and activities and by doing so, it explores the challenges presented by the opposition from religious authorities and social conservatism towards openness and expression through films. To understand the roles of the Rotana Group and its owner Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, one must understand the political and religious context of Saudi Arabia in 2005. In August 2005, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz became the ruler after the death of his brother, King Fahd bin Abdulaziz. King Abdullah sought many social changes almost immediately, the most important of which was his support for openness and social reform, especially because of the global pressure on Saudi Arabia after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack in the US (Sakr, 2012). After 2005, the "faltering return of cinema" in Saudi Arabia began, and it was linked to a series of unclear trade-offs involving religious institutions and princes and their business interests (Sakr, 2012. p. 211). The

11 September terrorist attack also motivated the new King to reduce the authority of religious scholars over society. The terrorist attack was a shock to the Saudi political leadership, which began trying to balance the demands and expectations of conservatives and religious scholars on the one hand and liberal and open-minded people on the other. Therefore, the start of King Abdullah's reign was an ideal time to consider the return of cinema in the country and develop the film industry to produce films locally rather than abroad.

Rulership in Saudi Arabia is via monarchical succession. The great princes are the sons and grandsons of King Abdulaziz, and they dominate the younger princes. The closer a prince is to the king, the more influence on the king's decisions he has. With generations of princes in key positions at all levels of the government, contacts with government figures are seen as essential to running businesses in Saudi Arabia. Hence, these princes have significant influence over business activity in Saudi Arabia, and as they have stronger relationships with the king, they can do what others cannot, and thus the development of the cinema was possible because of the prince's patronage (Sakr, 2012). Most cinematic work related to the production, distribution and exhibition sectors in Saudi Arabia during this period was subordinate to one of two men: Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, the King's nephew or Sheikh Waleed Al Ibrahim, King Fahd's brother-in-law (Sakr, 2012). These two powerful men competed in the television and film industry, and each had his own company: bin Talal owned the Rotana Group and Al Ibrahim owned the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) Group. The personal business interests of princes and other influential people led to their support of the cinema and filmmaking. Their personal interests proved essential to the emerging industry in the 2000s and 2010s.

Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal was not only a political powerhouse within the country but also a successful businessman. In 2005, *Forbes* magazine ranked the prince the eighth richest person in the world, with estimated wealth of \$20 billion (Dagher, 2006). The prince was a shareholder in several US companies such as Time Warner, Disney and News Corporation. He also acquired, through Rotana Group, the world's largest library of Arabic music and films. Rotana channels, such as Rotana Cinema and Rotana Zaman, screened films produced by the prince. In 2006 the *New York Times* described Rotana as one of the fastest-growing media companies in the Middle East and described the prince as a person who "commands

special power within Saudi Arabia” (Fattah, 2006). However, religious scholars saw the prince as corrupt and made serious accusations against him, such as that he sought to destroy society’s values and was hostile to religion. Scholars used mosques, universities, schools and summer camps to attack him. In February 2009, one of those scholars issued an edict against Prince Al-Waleed and demanded his prosecution by the general prosecutor (Khalaf, 2009). Despite the prince’s political influence and financial strength, his efforts were overwhelmingly rejected because of the influence of the religious scholars and their control over mosques, universities, schools and summer camps.

Prince Al-Waleed demonstrated openness to criticism, so he did not retaliate his opponents, but he did face off with the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV). The CPVPV managed to stop most of the prince’s initiatives related to cinema and music. For instance, in 2005, the prince influenced government authorities to allow him to open a movie theatre for children (Fattah, 2006). However, within a few weeks of its opening, the CPVPV issued an order to close the theatre. The prince claimed that nothing in Islam prohibits films and that he had researched the matter himself (Fattah, 2006). Although the prince was not known as a social or human rights activist, he pointed out that he seeks, through his films, to correct a major mistake, and he tells young people that they deserve entertainment and that they have the right to watch films and listen to music (Fattah, 2006). The prince considers these rights for youth, whereas religious scholars and the CPVPV consider them forbidden and want them eliminated without exception. Therefore, the prince’s confrontations with the CPVPV began as his political influence increased, and they have revolved around the emancipation of women and supporting cinema and music.

From 2005 to 2015, despite these two powerful figures leading the television, cinema, theatre and music sectors in the country, their confrontations with their opponents differed significantly. These confrontations caused one to step back and head to Dubai, while the other remained in Saudi Arabia. Al Ibrahim chose not to continue confronting the opposition from religious scholars and the CPVPV. Instead, he focused on developing his television channels and supporting films by broadcasting from outside Saudi Arabia. However, Prince Al-Waleed stayed to face the CPVPV and declared that he was seeking to effect social change in Saudi

Arabia. The prince indicated that he believes in social change and progress (Fattah, 2006). He stated that he aims to change perceptions because they are not reality and that he wants to change the way people think (Fattah, 2006). This is an implicit indication that he seeks to challenge what scholars have taught children and youth in schools, universities and mosques. When a *New York Times* reporter asked what Al-Waleed would do to confront the CPVPV if he wanted to change the way people think, the prince said he would face them with logic and rationality (Fattah, 2006). One argument that supported Al-Waleed in front of the political leadership is that the strong influence of religious scholars in the country led to a minority of extremists secretly participating in the events of 11 September. Therefore, although Al-Waleed had produced many Arab films in countries such as Egypt and Lebanon before 2001, after the terrorist attack and the beginning of King Abdullah's rule, the prince shifted to supporting the film industry in Saudi Arabia.

Al-Waleed spoke out against the prevailing opinion and in favour of supporting the film industry, and his media statements and interviews were followed by swift action. Within several months after the new king took office in August 2005, Al-Waleed began implementing his plans. According to an April 2006 *New York Times* article, the prince built many commercial theatres, some of which were constructed without the necessary licences or legal status (Fattah, 2006). The article indicated that the prince sought to embarrass the authorities and force them to allow cinema inside the country (Fattah, 2006). The prince wanted to support the growth of the film industry in the country, which was very small at that time and only produced short films and documentaries (Dowd, 2006). Despite a heavy bureaucracy that delayed progress, Al-Waleed was able to build many theatres in several cities within several months. However, these theatres never opened and were stopped by the government without explanation. Thus, instead of becoming commercial theatres, they became private theatres for hotels and cultural centres. The lack of a statement or clarification regarding the government's actions is typical of political and religious conflicts in Saudi Arabia, which are characterised by ambiguity and non-disclosure.

Al-Waleed's vision and ambition to bring about social change required the assistance of experts knowledgeable about Saudi culture. Al-Waleed hired Ayman Halawani as a producer and made him the head of production at Rotana's film division. Mr Halawani was educated in the West

and lived in the US for sixteen years. He also had extensive experience in film production and financing. Halawani's openness and experience in the US coincided with Prince Al-Waleed's interests and vision, so he was a suitable choice for Rotana. Halawani had a great ambition to make films in Saudi Arabia (Dowd, 2006). After Halawani joined Rotana, he indicated that he aimed not only to promote cinema in the country but to support the industry and produce many feature films. Halawani stated that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries are only one-tenth of the population of the Middle East, but they are enormously wealthy. Therefore, Halawani saw Saudi Arabia as "a massive untapped market" and bet on its view of cinema transforming over time (Dowd, 2006). Thus Al-Waleed benefited from hiring Halawani because they shared the same ideas about entertainment and openness. In addition, they are both Saudi and well aware of the very conservative culture and the influence of religious scholars in the country.

Saudi Aramco is credited with launching the Saudi film industry's production and exhibition sectors since the 1930s but its efforts stopped since the cinema was banned (Alamri, 2024). Then in 2005, Prince Al-Waleed was considered the most important supporter of Saudi cinema (Al-Bishri, 2009), and Rotana dominated the Saudi film industry from 2005 to 2009 (Sakr, 2012). However, despite Al-Waleed's statements and interviews conveying strength and confidence, he did not achieve the promised results. Al-Waleed was enthusiastic about opening theatres and making Saudi films locally, but his opponents managed to prevent him from fulfilling most of his promises. The prince and his team at Rotana promised to produce plenty of Saudi films and establish several movie theatres. These theatres did not open, and of the dozens of films produced by Rotana and the hundreds of films screened through its channels, only three were Saudi films: *Keif al-Hal?*, *Menahi* and *Wadjda*. Al-Waleed and Halawani announced several times in the media that one of their main goals was to support local industry, but *Keif al-Hal?* was shot in Dubai and *Menahi* in Egypt. *Wadjda* was the only film shot in Saudi Arabia. The obstacles and challenges Al-Waleed faced were greater than he had imagined based on the tone of his interviews and speeches, and he only overcame the opposition in a few projects, such as filming *Wadjda* in Saudi Arabia. There may have been some trade-offs between he, the political leaders and the religious scholars, as he was unable to open the movie theatres he built, but he was able to screen *Menahi* in several cities and *Wadjda* for one day before the screenings were stopped. The *Menahi* and *Wadjda* screenings are discussed in more detail in the following

sections. These events indicate that the political leadership was trying to strike a balance between the liberal current in the country and the religious scholars who oppose any kind of openness.

### **Rotana's First Saudi Production, *Keif al-Hal?***

Al-Waleed and Rotana's support of Saudi film production really began with *Keif al-Hal?* *Keif al-Hal?* is a comedy-drama film and the first Saudi production of the Arab Rotana Entertainment Company. The film portrays the tension between religious extremists and the struggle for globalisation, especially among youth, while supporting positive Islamic values. Halawani, head of the company's production department, pointed out that they considered strict Saudi social standards, specifically, "deciding what to show on the screen" (Dagher, 2006). Therefore the production team was careful not to show anything "offensive to Saudi society" to the extent that, according to Halawani, they watched the actresses' eyes during shooting to decide whether each look was socially appropriate (Dagher, 2006). Rotana exercised caution in making this film as it was the company's first real attempt to confront cinema's opponents. Although the film is a love story, it is completely "free of any romantic dalliances, hand-holding or secret dating" (Dagher, 2006). Therefore, the strict social standards were considered and honoured so that the film could be completed and released to Saudi audiences. This section argues that the case of *Keif al-Hal?* demonstrates the efforts to advance Saudi cultural expression in a climate of censorship and social conservatism and the significance of home video in fostering an emerging Saudi screen culture.

The film was released at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006 (Dowd, 2006). The film's stars are Saudi actress Hind Muhammad, Saudi actor Meshaal Al-Mutairi, who has a great deal of experience in theatre and television series, and Saudi actor Hisham Abdulrahman. Hisham Abdulrahman won the pan-Arab version of the Star Academy talent contest in 2005. Although the film was intended to support the Saudi film industry, it was shot in the UAE with a predominantly foreign crew. Dubai's film industry at that time was not significantly different from that of Saudi Arabia. However, since the early 2000s, Dubai has been attracting capital by facilitating business, including simplifying visa requirements for workers and government procedures for shooting in public places. These conveniences were not available in Saudi Arabia. The film was written by Lebanese and



Egyptian writers and directed by a Palestinian-Canadian (Dagher, 2006), with a Saudi production company, Rotana, and associate producer Haifaa Al-Mansour, a female Saudi filmmaker. This combination of experience, multinationality and filming outside Saudi Arabia did not benefit the Saudi film industry as Rotana had promised, but its artistic quality was equivalent to that of Egyptian films, which are considered pioneering in the region. In addition, the use of foreign expertise and the film's production outside Saudi Arabia allowed it to be exhibited at the Cannes Film Festival and distributed in international and regional commercial movie theatres.

After the film was released at the Cannes Film Festival, international screenings of the film began in London and throughout the Middle East, except Saudi Arabia, where movie theatres were still banned at the time (Dawn, 2006). The official ban only applied to theatres, which meant that films could be distributed in the country through any other medium. Therefore, the only way to sell the film in Saudi Arabia was via DVDs through video shops. Video shops filled the role of the cinema during the ban, and VHS was the predominant means of film distribution in Saudi Arabia during the 1980s and 1990s. In the 2000s, DVDs replaced VHS. After the film had been screened at Cannes, then London and throughout the rest of the Middle East, Rotana began showing the film on television through its Rotana Cinema channel (Fattah, 2006). Al-Waleed believes that this helped the film reach cinema fans who did not have the opportunity to watch it in theatres or buy it from video stores (Fattah, 2006). Rotana Productions benefited from their ability to use Rotana Group channels as well as video shops, which was in cities and villages throughout Saudi Arabia, to quickly distribute the film.

Making this film was difficult for Rotana, despite its experience in producing, distributing and screening Arab films. The film was difficult to make because conditions for these three sectors of the film industry in Saudi Arabia were completely different from those of other Arab countries with which Rotana had dealt. When the film was released in 2006, the vast majority of Arab countries, including the Gulf States, did not have controversy over cinema and considered it a cultural and entertainment activity. However, Saudi Arabia continued its rejectionist stance on this matter. Halawani pointed out that creating a film industry, including production, distribution and exhibition sectors, from scratch is a tall order, but it was their hope and ambition for the future (Dawn 2006). Halawani

argued that after they finished this film, they observed a great hunger among Saudis to see their lives on the screen (Dawn 2006). Therefore, according to Halawani, this film is important in charting the growing role of women in Saudi Arabia. The BBC also stated that those behind the film clearly hoped it would help ease some of the social restrictions on women in this very conservative country (Dawn 2006). The difficulty of the filmmaking experience did not deter Rotana from increasing their criticism of social and human rights issues in Saudi Arabia, especially those concerning women.

### **Adapting a Beloved Television Character to Film**

In 2005, Saudi state television produced a series called *My Brothers, Sisters* (2005). The well-known Saudi actor Fayez Al-Malki played the lead character, named Menahi. Menahi is an uneducated Bedouin, lacking knowledge of the simplest technical matters, pretending to understand too much and, sometimes, trying to fool others. The character dressed similarly to those who lived in the desert three decades prior, such that the outward appearance and manner of speech were authentically Bedouin. The series achieved great success because of this character being performed in an entertainingly comic manner, which led the MBC Group to convince Al-Malki to leave state television to play the starring role in a new series, *Between Me and You*, in which Al-Malki portrayed Menahi in the first and second seasons in 2007 and 2008. Although the character did not change or develop, it retained its resonance and was a great success. After the success of the character Menahi in *My Brothers, Sisters* and then *Between Me and You* seasons one and two, Rotana persuaded Al-Malki to collaborate with the company to produce a film using the name and character of Menahi. Al-Malki agreed, and after filming the third season of *Between Me and You*, he withdrew from the series and went to Rotana. Before playing this character, Al-Malki had played more than 180 characters over 20 years (Al-Suhaimi, 2007), but Menahi changed Al-Malki's career. *Menahi's* production and release show the intersections and frictions between Saudi television and film and further indicate the conservative social attitudes of filmmakers and producers.

After Rotana produced and distributed *Keif al-Hal?* in 2006 and the Menahi character had become popular with audiences, Rotana started producing another film, *Menahi*. The character Menahi had appeared on MBC channels for two years, watched by audiences throughout the Middle

East and North Africa. This made it an ideal opportunity for Rotana to produce a film based on the character. In 2008, the film was produced in Egypt with an Arab crew, and Saudis were limited to acting roles and the production's senior management. Although *Keif al-Hal?* addressed sensitive topics and criticises religious scholars, *Menahi* (2008) is the opposite. It presents a comedic story without delving into controversial or sensitive topics related to religion or politics, possibly because the film's star, Al-Malki, is known for his support of religious scholars and has always refused to criticise them, the leaders of the Islamic Awakening or other Islamists. His brother Dr Ali Al-Malki is a religious scholar and advocates Islamic activity.

Rotana began promoting the film in the fourth quarter of 2008. Al-Waleed managed to obtain the approval of his cousin, Prince Khalid Al Faisal, the Governor of Makkah Province. Although Prince Khalid's father, King Faisal, was conservative and inclined to support religious scholars, his son is inclined to support liberalism and steps towards openness and has been described by some in the international media as a reformist (*The Guardian*, 2008). With Prince Khalid's approval, Rotana began preparing to screen the film in cultural centres in Jeddah and Taif. Prince Khaled's approval was conditional on following the demands of the CPVPV, specifically to prevent mixing by having screenings for men in one theatre and screenings for women in another. In addition to avoiding mixing inside the theatre, the building had to have separate entrances for men and women (Abeer, 2009). Despite these conditions, the opponents of cinema were angry and opposed the screenings; however, this time the second most important religious figure (after the Grand Mufti) in the country at the time and the General Chairman of the CPVPV, Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Ghaith, made a statement to the media. Al-Ghaith stated that cinema is evil and argued that the position of religious institutions regarding cinema is clear because it is an evil, needless tool and the country has had enough of its evils (*The Guardian*, 2008). Despite the severity of this statement, he issued a counterstatement less than 24 hours later, saying that cinema could be tolerated if the film did not violate Islamic law. Despite his retreat from his original statement, a royal order was issued to remove him as chair of the CPVPV a few weeks later.

The General Chairman of the CPVPV retracting his statement regarding screening films in cultural centres did not stop the opposition. After the CPVPV failed to stop the screenings of *Menahi*, the religious

scholars used other means to pressure the government, the most important of which was confronting the King in person. Before confronting the King, the CPVPV had arrested a group of Saudi actors while they were filming a television show in a Riyadh hotel (Allam, 2009). The actors were detained for one week for violating the strict rules about gender segregation. After this arrest became a public opinion issue in Saudi Arabia, the actors were released. Two weeks later, the confrontation with the state developed into a petition to the King. Religious hardliners usually reside in central Saudi Arabia in Riyadh or Qassim Province, far from the city of Jeddah in western Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, hardliners used some of the citizens of Jeddah to present a petition in the name of “the people of Jeddah” signed by dozens of prominent religious scholars (Allam, 2009). The petition repeated the complaint about cinema and stated that it involves spreading corruption, warning that it cannot be tolerated. The religious scholars asked the King, in the past, cinema has always been rejected as evil in the Holy Land, how is it that it has “become permissible in your reign?” (Allam, 2009). The *Financial Times* indicated that this petition was in response to Rotana’s announcement that it would like to produce several more films. After this petition was submitted, a new Minister of Culture and Information was appointed and, according to the *Financial Times*, the new minister was explicitly under pressure to clamp down on the media (Allam, 2009). What is notable about these events is the behaviour of the religious scholars and institutions, as if they rule the country rather than the King and his family. In addition, they bypassed the ministries and were not afraid to suspend entertainment, cultural or other events by force, even if their actions did not comply with their own standards.

Not satisfied with the results from their previous methods, the opponents of cinema exploited conservative channels to promote their position. The Daleel Channel broadcast a television programme entitled *The Witness About Cinema in Saudi Arabia* in which Dr Mohamad Alsaidi represented religious scholars and the official spokesman for Rotana Productions, Ibrahim Badi, represented the film *Menahi*. Alsaidi began by attacking cinema and citing a few studies on the negative effects of cinema on family, women and children in the US (Moftrs, 2009). Then Alsaidi warned that the country should not make the mistakes that countries with cinemas have made. Badi defended *Menahi* and asked Alsaidi why he rejected the film. Alsaidi responded that it was because of gender mixing, Badi responded that all of the screenings of *Menahi* in Riyadh, Jeddah and

Taif were without gender mixing. This weakened Alsaïdi's argument, and he replied, gathering people to view *Menahi* is a forbidden meeting (Moftrs, 2009). Alsaïdi claimed that the *Menahi* screenings were a pretext for introducing corruption into Saudi Arabia and that gender mixing had entered countries such as Egypt and Syria through such activities (Moftrs, 2009). Alsaïdi tried to portray the screenings of *Menahi* as contrary to the opinions of Saudi society. Notably, religious scholars often claim rejection by society in general to justify their opposition to something.

The events surrounding *Menahi* occurred for one important reason: Rotana and MBC broadcast *Keif al-Hal?* and other non-Saudi films from outside Saudi Arabia. Although *Menahi* was a comedy without any religious criticism (unlike *Keif al-Hal?*) the religious scholars were shocked when the halls were opened in the cultural centres. After three decades of no movie theatres, *Menahi* was the first film to overcome the ban in Saudi Arabia (Abu-Nas, 2009). The film was screened in three theatres in Riyadh, Jeddah and Taif through cultural centres, and Rotana sold more than 25,000 tickets (Abu-Nas, 2009). Despite a comprehensive campaign of religious opposition, with media support from conservative channels and an attempt to portray society as rejecting of the film, five theatres accommodated more than 25,000 cinema lovers to view it. Although the authorities in Riyadh did not allow women to attend the show, more than 9,000 tickets were sold to women in Jeddah and Taif. Badi points out that Rotana did not receive permission for women to attend as the Riyadh authorities were more conservative than those in the Emirate of Makkah Province (Abu-Nas, 2009). This is proof that there was a significant number who believed in cinema in Saudi Arabia and wanted to exercise their rights without having to travel abroad to watch films in theatres.

Rotana sought to commercialise the popularity of the *Menahi* character and benefited from international media coverage; however, one of the film's actors did not regard Saudi films as significant, preferring television work instead. Tariq Al-Harbi (2019) stated that his participation in the film was his first and last film experience, despite the film successfully recouping its budget at the box office. Al-Harbi was happy to participate in the film and cooperate with Rotana, but he did not consider films worthwhile compared with television series (Al-Harbi, 2019). Al-Harbi stated that he enjoys the follow-up and interest from local audiences that occurs with series but not films. Al-Harbi believed that as movie theatres were

banned at the time, films were only screened abroad, so few Saudis would know about the film or its actors (Al-Harbi, 2019). When he participates in a project, Al-Harbi aspires to reach Saudi audiences first, then citizens of the other Gulf countries and, finally, those of other Arab countries. He believes that Saudi series attract local and regional audiences unlike films, which attract only a regional audience (Al-Harbi, 2019). Certainly, banning movie theatres and not regulating video stores to allow them to operate legally does nothing to stimulate investment in Saudi film production. Therefore, series are considered a safer investment than films and are more popular with Saudi audiences.

Rotana's goal was not to make money from *Menahi*. Al-Harbi pointed out that Rotana spent millions of Saudi riyals without considering the film's economic viability. Rotana was also interested in participating in the distribution and exhibition of *Menahi*, which was beyond the company's usual scope, but it wanted to support the Saudi film industry. However, Al-Harbi emphasised that the film industry needed significant reforms and development (Al-Harbi, 2019). Al-Harbi disagrees with those who oppose government censorship of films and asserts that censorship is important (Al-Harbi, 2019). Al-Harbi cited what happened with *Menahi*, a screenplay the Ministry of Culture and Information (the ministry in charge of approving screenplays before the creation of the GCAM) approved. Al-Harbi stressed that the ministry did not request the amendment or deletion of any scene or word in the film (Al-Harbi, 2019). Thus, Al-Harbi believes the problem was the absence of a Saudi film industry and infrastructure, not censorship. *Menahi* was part of Al-Waleed's goal, which is to lead social progress through Rotana Group, and achieving this goal matters more to Rotana than profit does despite Rotana being a company that generally pursues profits.

### ***Wadjda* (2012), Testing Cultural Boundaries Again**

After struggling for years to produce Saudi films and overcoming numerous obstacles, Rotana finally produced a Saudi film that received widespread acclaim and won awards at prestigious film festivals. That film is *Wadjda* (2012), directed by the first female film director in Saudi Arabia, Haifaa Al-Mansour. What distinguishes this film from Rotana's previous films is that it was the first film shot entirely inside the country and written and directed by a Saudi national. Given that at the time, the country still had a ban on women and men mixing in public, Al-Mansour had to direct the film while

sitting in a van segregated from the men. From this vantage point, Al-Mansour oversaw the entire production process, guided the cast and communicated with the crew via walkie-talkie (Atakav, 2013). Al-Mansour stresses that while producing *Wadjda*, she respected the laws of the country, and she personally made sure that none of the rules were broken (Lapin, 2013). Al-Mansour sought to make her film successful by not subjecting the production to efforts by the CPVPV or police to stop or suspend it. Having shooting permits from GCAM does not mean that shooting will not be stopped if the country's laws or social conduct rules, such as segregation, are violated. Therefore, the best solution for Al-Mansour was to stay inside the van to avoid being seen by a pedestrian who might contact the authorities. *Wadjda* and the career development of its director, Haifaa Al-Mansour, further indicate how Saudi producers dynamically use screen media to tell Saudi stories and to expand the boundaries of expression within the country, in this case addressing not just to local but also international audiences. At the same time, local critiques of the film demonstrate the contested environment confronting Saudi filmmakers, particularly women such as Al-Mansour or others testing the cultural boundaries.

When Al-Mansour obtained Rotana's approval to produce the script, she needed professional actors. For professional, experienced and popular actors, the television industry provided the obvious talent pool. Al-Mansour wanted actress Reem Abdullah to play the role of *Wadjda's* mother and described her as a great television actress who was shocked when she was asked to participate in the film (Lapin, 2013). Noting that the theatre ban had led people to focus on television series rather than films, Al-Mansour stated that Abdullah initially refused to join the production because film as an art form did not exist in Saudi Arabia at that time. Al-Mansour tried several times and sent Abdullah the script many times to convince her before she finally agreed (Lapin, 2013). Abdullah's reluctance was based on a preference for series over films, like that of Al-Harbi as discussed previously in this article. In Saudi Arabia, it is difficult for TV actors, especially the most popular, to participate in films because they have established careers and would not see a need to move to perhaps more precarious or less widely seen film work. In addition, actors usually make less money from films compared with television series.

Rotana garnered significant international attention for *Wadjda*. The film participated in dozens of international festivals, with 22 wins and 33 nominations (Al-Mansour, 2012). Among the most important festivals at which the film won accolades were the Los Angeles Film Festival, the Dubai International Film Festival, the Venice Film Festival, where it won the CinemAvvenire award, and the 67th British Academy Film Awards, for which it was nominated for the Best Film Not in the English Language award (Al-Mansour, 2012). This international presence was unprecedented for Saudi films, which had participated at the regional festival level but not annually. Commenting on this achievement, Prince Al-Waleed described Rotana as representing the face of social progress in Saudi Arabia and stated that Rotana would continue to make social progress (Trade Arabia, 2012). Al-Mansour emphasised her commitment to women's rights and women's issues in Saudi Arabia and claimed that as a woman who lives there, she wants to tell stories about her and her sisters because she wants to promote social change (Concannon, 2013). One of the most significant factors for the film's recognition is that it was the first film to focus on the sensitive issues faced by Saudi women and their suffering in the male-dominated society – such as the cultural veneration of virginity and the parallel phenomenon of child brides – and it was narrated by its female director.

The film's story revolves around a rebellious ten-year-old girl, Wadjda, who overcomes difficulties and obstacles to own a bicycle. To achieve this socially forbidden goal, Wadjda had to achieve something socially approved, participating in a competition for memorising the Noble Quran in school. Wadjda's goal was to buy a bicycle with the prize money because her father would not buy her a bicycle because she is female, and girls traditionally do not ride bicycles in Saudi society. A strong scene in the film is when Wadjda is secretly learning to ride the bicycle on the roof of their house, but when her mother finds her, she panics, falls off the bike and hurts her knee, causing it to bleed. Although she was a child and it was a simple thing, her mother felt shame and covered her face when she saw her daughter bleed. Interestingly, the mother's imagination went so far as thinking that Wadjda had lost her virginity when she fell off the bike and bled. This scene could be painful for girls who grew up in this culture or a similar one.

The father character in the film was particularly important because he made the decisions at home, and he could allow or refuse Wadjda



owning a bicycle. The father was also going to marry a second wife at his mother's insistence because his current wife had not given him a son. However, the father was not very present in the film, and the symbolism of this may only be noticed by someone deeply familiar with the country's culture. Nothing in the Islamic religion prevents a man from spending most of his free time with his wife, but the film depicts the culture of Saudi conservatives. As men in this segment of Saudi society usually do not spend much time at home, when a man has free time, he spends it with his relatives and friends away from home. Therefore, a man spends most of his time with men, and a woman spends most of her time with her children or her female neighbours.

Al-Mansour indicated that she wanted to attract the Saudi audience and make them feel that this film represents them, unlike foreign films that do not represent the lives of Saudis (Lapin, 2013). The film depicts Saudi life realistically in terms of location, from the home to the neighbourhood to the school, and these locations give the audience a greater connection with the film, unlike other Saudi films that have been shot inside studios or outside Saudi Arabia. Therefore the film specifically portrays Saudi streets in an avowedly authentic way and gives a rarely seen intimate view of Saudi middle-class life.

Although the film deals with many women's issues and struggles, they are portrayed in a simple and uncomplicated story. A qualitative exploration of the positive psychology concepts in *Wadjda* points out that its storytelling is "unique" and unobtrusively conveys "vital messages" (Deb, 2016, p. 531). The study indicates that the film was simple and positive in its storytelling as only "positive emotions, warmth, and hope for change" are transmitted, and they stay with the audience long after the film ends (Deb, 2016, p. 531). The film does not present *Wadjda's* father as bad, but rather as a traditional father who loves his wife and little girl but must follow conservative notions. These conservative notions include marrying a second wife who might give him the son his first wife has not (Deb, 2016). One advantage of Al-Mansour's story is that she has been able to strike a balance between highlighting injustice to women and reducing her status and developmental role in society, while giving hope that change is possible. For instance, despite the great restrictions and suffering of the women in the film, its closing scene offers an optimistic tone, as *Wadjda* achieves her goal and rides her bicycle to the main street that is crowded with cars and then

smiles, indicating that the next challenge is driving a car. The film particularly offers optimism for progressive-minded women and anyone who favours women's basic rights.

Several scholarly studies, such as that of Deb (2016), and media outlets, such as Trade Arabia (2012), have described *Wadjda* as "revolutionary" because of the bravery required to discuss such sensitive topics in a very conservative society and because it was written and directed by a woman who had been exposed to circumstances similar to those in the film. In a press interview, Al-Mansour indicated that she did not seek to be a feminist with *Wadjda* (Concannon, 2013). She added that she wants to tell stories about her and her sisters, and there are many women's rights issues in Saudi Arabia. In the same interview, Al-Mansour stated that she has a daughter that she wants to have a better life and to be respected by men and allowed to live freely, but Saudi Arabia still has a long way to go to achieve this (Concannon, 2013). Al-Mansour asserts that women still need to fight and voice their demands, and filmmaking is one way to achieve this (Concannon, 2013). These statements may seem contradictory, as Al-Mansour denies being a feminist, then demands a fight, expresses demands and complains about the lack of rights for women in the country. The term "feminism" is controversial in conservative circles, and not just in Saudi Arabia, even if the actual principles of feminism are widely supported in words if not deeds. Al-Mansour clearly sought to appeal to both parties, the government and women in Saudi society, as talking about feminism, especially at the time of the press interview in 2012, could have ended Al-Mansour's career in filmmaking and caused her to be imprisoned for an indefinite period. Therefore, walking a fine line between the government and her career was a way for Al-Mansour to continue expressing her ideas in films.

As discussed, the film highlights the suffering of women in Saudi society. Notably, the screenplay and film include some geographic and cultural inconsistencies that commentators have not addressed in depth. Among these is the fact that the husband's absences were because he worked in the Aramco fields. The Aramco fields are in the eastern region of the country, far from Riyadh, where the film's events take place. The second issue is that the husband, despite his love for his wife, was considering marrying another because his wife had not had a boy. This rarely occurs, and if it does, it is usually after the mother has given birth to at least four or five

daughters. In such cases there is social pressure on the father to marry another woman because his first wife has not given birth to a son. Therefore, it is not fair to society for the film to portray that after a woman has had one girl, a husband would marry another woman who might give birth to a boy because this does not happen often, and if it does, it is usually after the wife has given birth many times. Despite these minor inaccuracies, the film presents the hardship of being a female in Saudi society at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

What is notable about the screenplay is that the family is portrayed as traditional, meaning socially very conservative. A family that forbids its daughter from riding a bicycle would not have a wife who works in a hospital. At the time this film was produced, Saudi social norms did not allow women to work in hospitals, which involves gender mixing. Therefore, because of social pressure, women cannot study medicine or any health specialities because after graduation, they would work in the gender-mixed work environment of hospitals. A contradiction in this film is that the husband married a woman who works in a hospital, did not object to her gender-mixed work and allowed her to be driven to work alone by a foreign driver, another significant social issue, but the daughter is not allowed to ride a bicycle. The film focuses on women's rights but neglects the two biggest problems facing women at that time: gender-mixed work and riding in a car with a foreign driver. Instead, it focuses on a small problem: cycling. The first two problems are common in Saudi homes, but the film does not portray them as problems, whereas the latter problem may only be present in a few homes, but it was portrayed as a common problem. Thus, the film's international acclaim shows that commentators may be willing to overlook factual inaccuracies to champion a feature film that represents Saudi culture in-depth as there is no regular representation of Saudi films in prestigious film festivals.

## Conclusion

As noted at the outset of this article, in ten years, Rotana produced three Saudi films. In most economically developed countries, that number would appear quite small, but Saudi Arabia differs greatly in terms of timing. When the twenty-first century began, the religious authorities were still intolerant of cinema and behaved as church groups and women's organisations had in developed countries at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rotana and Al-Waleed were involved in confrontations with the religious authorities in

which Al-Waleed and Rotana prevailed. However, the opposition managed to disrupt Al-Waleed's largest project, which was building hundreds of theatres around the country, and they were able to cancel most of the films Rotana had planned. Rotana sought to produce several Saudi films annually, but as a result of the conflicts, only produced three films across a decade.

Al-Waleed was only able to defeat the opponents because of his political power as the nephew of the King and the eighth richest man in the world. Al-Waleed used his influence during this period and made it clear that the young have the right to entertainment and the right to enjoy watching films and listening to music. However, the religious scholars viewed cinema as a pretext to corrupt people morally, and they believed that cinema could not enter the country without negative effects and damage to society, the family, women and children.

This era and its religious conflicts have had lasting negative effects on the industry. Among these negative effects is investors' reluctance to invest in any of the industry's three stages, production, distribution and exhibition, given that the consequences and returns are unpredictable because of the state's unclear position regarding cinema. Another negative effect is the transfer of production to outside Saudi Arabia and the closure of the theatres built by Al-Waleed. In addition, television series stars are reluctant to participate in films because of the lack of theatres in the country and because the television industry is removed from the conflict with religious scholars. These effects show the difficulties of advancing cultural expression in a climate of censorship and social conservatism to foster an emerging screen culture.

Although the 2005 to 2015 era has passed, its events hold a significant lesson for anyone claiming to represent Saudi society. Although the conflict between Rotana and those opposed to films was at its peak during the screening of *Menahi* and few theatres were available to show the film (three theatres in three cities), more than 25,000 tickets were sold. Despite women being prevented from attending the screenings in Riyadh, more than 9,000 tickets were sold to women. This indicates that there is a cinema culture in the country and that audiences are hungry for the experience of watching films in theatres rather than at home. However, the opposition of the religious authorities and social conservatism towards openness and expression through films was a major challenge in the period.

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