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### **The Saudi debate on conscription**

King Salman of Saudi Arabia issued a royal decree on February 27 allowing women, on a voluntary basis, to enrol in the military and fill positions within the General Security Directorate of the Ministry of Interior (also as policewomen). Positions are available for women in 7 of 13 Saudi governorates: Riyadh, Mecca, Medina, Qassim, Asir, Ash-Sharqiya and Baha. Women must be 25-35 aged and with high school degree, they must not be married to a non-Saudi national and their male guardian must work in the same region of the offered job. Saudi women will not serve on the frontline. In 2014, the United Arab Emirates already opened to voluntary military service for women.

Although aimed to support Saudi Arabia's economic reform path, this unprecedented decision marks another step in the 'transformation from within' pursued by the kingdom, both at a social and cultural level. Looking at civil-military relations in Saudi Arabia, this choice can be framed in the broader public debate on military conscription for the male.

The Deputy Chairman of the Security Committee of the Shura Council, Major General Abdul Hadi Al-Amri, ruled out the possibility to apply conscription for Saudi male nationals, declaring that voluntary enlisting still satisfies Saudi armed forces' needs and "the accord and harmony among citizens make military conscription for Saudis unnecessary" [Habib Toumi, "Saudi Shura opposes military conscription", *Gulf News*, 12 February 2018].

Many Saudi voices have publicly supported the introduction of military service for Saudi men: the Saudi Grand Mufti, Shaykh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah Al-Sheikh, was one of the first leading figures to break this political taboo, stressing the necessity to train male citizens in times of rising geopolitical threats. Shaykh Ali Hakami, a member of the Council of Senior Scholars, stated that military conscription "to protect our religion and country is a requirement of Shari'a Law" [*Arab News*, "Saudi youths' conscription is must, says expert", 8 February 2016].

Among the members of the Saudi Shura, Iqbal Darandari, one of the female appointed representatives, called for a mandatory draft for men and women, as a national duty. Ibrahim Al-Marie, Saudi military

analyst and former brigadier, highlighted that military service would complete the overall professionalization of the armed forces, taking into account shifting international security balances.

The retired Colonel Khalid bin Bjad Al-Maymouni, former president of intelligence in Qasim, called for enhanced voluntary enlistment in Saudi armed forces (*Arab News*, *ibid*): but the youths' constant willingness to join the army was indicated by former National Guard's military leadership as the reason why is not necessary to implement conscription in Saudi Arabia.

Differently, from a few years ago, the introduction of the compulsory draft by Riyadh's authorities is frequently debated on Saudi media and social networks, and it can't be fully excluded.

Regardless the final outcome, this already represents a deep, impressive paradigm change in the relationship between the *state* and the *citizens*.

**Eleonora Ardemagni** – *Analyst of the Middle East, focused on foreign policy and security issues of Yemen and the GCC region. External researcher (Mediterranean and Middle East Program) at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies and regular contributor for the Aspen Institute Italy*