



Drugs behind the veil of Islam: a view of Saudi youth

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Abstract

Insufficient research exists on drug trafficking and abuse in Saudi Arabia. This paper aims to uncover how drugs are trafficked to Saudi Arabia, what factors contribute to an ever-growing drug use in the Kingdom, and what the life of illegal drug use looks like in such an Islamic environment. Documentary methods and in-depth interviews were adopted to associate drug problems with social environments. It is discovered that drug trafficking is correlated to economic disparity among regions and social strata in the Kingdom, methods of drug purchase differ regionally, and drug use is an unintended consequence of social changes. The study concludes that drug offenses, countering traditional associations of Saudi society, creates a double life in the Kingdom.

Introduction

Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, the world's second largest religion. As Islam is associated with strictness and conservatism, people perceive Saudi Arabia as a drug free society. However, Islam's harsh anti-drug laws and culture haven't prevented drug trafficking and substance abuse effectively in the Kingdom. The Saudi government spared no expense to combat this issue. However, research shows that drug trafficking and substance abuse are surprisingly prevalent in Saudi Arabia. According to the World Drug Report by the UN, half of the seized amphetamine worldwide in 2008 occurred in Saudi Arabia [1]. News also reports that 40% of Saudi youngsters are drug addicts [2]. The discrepancy between the public perception of a drug-free Saudi society and the reality of drug-based crimes intrigues readers. This paper tries to solve this puzzle through an examination of the relationships between drug trafficking, substance abuse, and social environments in the Kingdom.

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Literature review

Saudi Arabia is the largest sovereign state in the Middle East. For years, the Saudi government has denied drug abuse to decrease foreign associations with crime in the Kingdom. With the advent of the internet and social media age, the problem has become increasingly exposed to outsiders. The severity of drug-related crimes is now unavoidable: the Saudi government finally claims the “Kingdom is facing a drug war on its youth” [3].

Drug trafficking in the Middle East is always found to be interwoven with terrorism [4]. It is also discovered that drug abuse is associated with local politics in the Middle East as many ethnopolitical organizations are involved in the drug trade [5].

Drug abuse in Saudi Arabia has only been explored partially in some descriptive studies and health studies [6]. For instance, a recent study with geographic information systems techniques shows that most drug offences occur in Saudi Northern and Southern Borders [7]. Drug abuse is found to be geographical and associated to age in the Kingdom [8]. Drugs get popular in the Kingdom for various reasons, including a reputation of sexual stimulant [9] and easy access [10]. Limited studies from a criminological perspective show peer influence and media influence are the most consistent predictor of substance use in the Kingdom [11, 12].

Islam Wahhabism is a predominant feature of Saudi culture. Islamic nations including Saudi Arabia practice *Sharia* law which is an Islamic legal system derived from religious precepts of Islam. There is no clear verse about prohibition of narcotics and tobacco use in Quran, neither does it express clearly whether the narcotics are halal (legal) or not [13]. The lack of a clear and definitive ruling on drug use leaves a space for disputes among Muslim jurists. Although some Islamic scholars argue that intoxicants (*khamr* in Arabic) refer to alcohol specifically in Prophet Mohammed’ words [14], most of Muslim jurists regard drugs as intoxicants.

Research methods

The qualitative approach fits the study because of the illusive nature of drug trafficking and abuse. Documentary method is adopted to develop an understanding on the relationship of social background and the latest drug cases in Saudi Arabia. In-depth interview is chosen to best probe tricks and motives in drug trafficking and abuse. Drawing on the qualitative data, the study tries to shed light on the hidden dimensions of drug trafficking and abuse in the Kingdom through its diversity, complexity and richness.

Participants are sampled via snowball method from a Saudi university in Eastern Province. A diversification of interviewee’s hometown is utilized to avoid biases reflecting the first interviewee’s network. Eighteen participants are finally recruited. All participants are male for the sake of sex segregation and the unavailability of female subjects. Among them, 10 have personal experience of drug use. Information about the interviewees is as below (Table 1).

Twelve interviews are done face to face, while six are conducted through Whatsapp because of coronavirus-19. Each lasts about one and half hours. All

Table 1 Descriptives of the interviewees

No.	Drug experience	Gender	Education	Age	SEC	Residence
Interviewee A	Yes	M	Undergraduate	21	Middle class	Not clear
Interviewee B	Yes	M	Graduate	24	Working class	Not clear
Interviewee C	No	M	Graduate	23	Working class	Village
Interviewee D	Yes	M	Undergraduate	19	Middle class	Not clear
Interviewee E	No	M	Undergraduate	20	Working class	Not clear
Interviewee F	Yes	M	Undergraduate	19	Middle class	Not clear
Interviewee G	No	M	Graduate	25	Working class	Not clear
Interviewee H	Yes	M	Undergraduate	22	Working class	Not clear
Interviewee I	Yes	M	Graduate	23	Middle class	Not clear
Interviewee J	No	M	Graduate	23	Working class	Not clear
Interviewee K	No	M	Graduate	25	Middle class	Not clear
Interviewee L	Yes	M	Undergraduate	21	Working class	Not clear
Interviewee M	No	M	Undergraduate	20	High class	City
Interviewee N	No	M	High school	17	Working class	Village
Interviewee O	Yes	M	High school	16	Middle class	City
Interviewee P	Yes	M	Graduate	24	Elite	City
Interviewee Q	Yes	M	Graduate	24	Working class	Village
Interviewee R	No	M	Undergraduate	54	Middle class	City

interviews are conducted in English. Participants are thoroughly informed about the aim of research, the contents of the interview, and confidentiality. The interviews are semi-structured with questions on three broad topics, drug trafficking, drug sale, and drug abuse.

The interviews are transcribed and analyzed using a narrative method [15]. The grounded theory approach [16] is followed to comprehend the themes emerging from transcripts, and develop a theoretical framework which explains drug offences in Saudi Arabia.

Popular drugs in Saudi Arabia

Three kinds of drug (natural narcotics, semi-synthetic narcotics, and synthetic narcotics) range in popularity among Saudis based on region, age, and social strata [17].

The most popular drug in the Kingdom is hashish. It is particularly popular among the younger generations, as discovered in other studies [8]. “College students like hashish most because it is not strong and relatively cheap. My friends say you won’t get addicted by smoking hashish” (Interviewee C). It is so common among Saudis that it gives people the false impression that hashish is legal in the Kingdom. Interviewee C’s words also verify the finding from a longitudinal comparative study that drug users’ educational level increased dramatically in the past 20 years [18]. For an interviewee who is a senior, there is a social reason for the popularity of hashish. “It is so popular among youngsters that you may be distanced if you don’t try it with peers. Gradually,

you consider it acceptable” (Interviewee M). Apparently, when more and more youth smoke hashish, there are intense social pressures on those who don’t smoke. The pressure encourages the youth to either use hashish or face continual ostracization. For adults, hashish is usually mixed with tobacco or Shisha in hookah bar in Saudi Arabia, which de facto deprives attributes of illegal drugs and explains its popularity [19]. Correlations with gender and hashish use are found to be weak. Interviewee G exposes that “girls smoke hashish too. I heard from my sister that her friends meet together and smoke hashish.....Arabs always smoke shisha mixed with hashish. You know, women smoke shisha too; it should be common that they smoke shisha with hashish. But it may not be as popular as it among boys.” Small differences between rural and urban areas are discovered. As interviewee L tells, “I am from a village, and now study at the second largest city in the Kingdom. Look like drug-taking is more common in the city. But city residents and villagers take similar drugs.”

Studies [20] show that amphetamine (mainly a nonprescription drug named Captagon) is the second most common drug among both adolescents and adults in Saudi Arabia. CNN reports that narcotic manufacturers including home laboratories in South-Eastern Europe produce counterfeit Captagon tablets mainly for Middle East market, especially Saudi Arabia [1]. Amphetamine is more prevalent among young citizens for several reasons. First, “I think age matters. Unlike old people, young people like to try and accept new things. That is why old Saudis like hashish but young Saudis like Captagon” (Interviewee M). Second, it is popular because of its convenience. For interviewee O, amphetamine is better because “Captagon is small. My school mates and I like it more than hashish. Not like hashish, we can buy in tablet.....Once we get 25 Riyals from parents, we can buy one tablet and enjoy it.” Third, health awareness plays a role in drug selection. According to interviewee H, older generations prefer hashish to amphetamine because they are more conscious of strong adverse effects of amphetamines. He says, “Old people have social status and families. They may lose all of them if take amphetamine. But young people have no such fear.” Fourth, the age difference is also accounted for by network of dealership, because “drug dealers specialize one or two kinds of drug. Those above middle age stick to their old social circle and don’t have connections with amphetamine dealers.” (Interviewee D).

Derived from the leaves of a specific tree and classified as a natural drug for producing psychological dependence by the WHO, khat is the third popular drug in Saudi Arabia. Khat started to enter Arab history in the fourteenth century when Yemeni Sufis used khat as a tea in religious ceremonies. It has proliferated among elites and become popular amongst Arabs over the last 30 years [21]. Although the khat is illegal in Saudi Arabia, khat chewing is still significantly common among college students [22]. Research confirms that khat has negative effects on abusers such as anorexia, depression, delusional behavior, violence, hallucinations, and paranoia [23, 24]. However, Interviewee A seems to be ignorant of these adverse effects. “People say there are side effects. My friends and I haven’t experienced such very much.....Smoking may lead to cancer, but it seems you cannot find many cases in which smokers get cancer in real life.” Because khat use started in Yemen, there is a geographical difference among drug users. Interviewee A exposes that “We Southern people like khat best. It is safer than hashish and amphetamine, but it is strong though and can keep you up for the whole night”. Besides geographical difference in khat use, there used to be a class difference in khat use. Hashish and amphetamine are about four times as expensive as

khat, therefore are more popular among the rich. As interviewee P reveals, “it looks boorish chewing khat with your cheek plump.....I prefer Captagon to khat.” However, such a class difference is diminishing recently because of the conflict with Yemen and increase of khat price. Khat is used for several purposes. First, it works for refreshing or keeping some awake. Interviewee M points out that “Khat was used as tea at the beginning by Sufis. Later, people find it can stimulate to a great deal, then use it very often.....lots of my classmates use khat during the final exam because we need to study for the whole night. You know many Saudi students don’t study until the last day, so there is a need of khat.” Second, it functions as a social tool. In interviewee H’s point of view, khat is not just a drug for relaxation, but a social treat. “Khat is a social thing; I treat my friends with khat and my friends treat me with khat too. All my friends chew khat, no need to hide.” Used in such a way, khat has been a tool for building or keeping social relations, similar to wine, tea, coffee and banquet in other societies. Since chewing khat is kind of a secret thing, treating each other with khat can certainly bring participants closer.

Tramadol and opioids are also popular to some extent in Saudi Arabia. Some studies report that two thirds of those who take drugs use tramadol as their first choice drug, after tobacco, as it is readily available (no prescription needed) and sold at a low price [12]. Tramadol is fashionable, first of all, because it is easier to hide and its effect lasts longer than others. Second, it helps escape justice. When drug users get caught, they would be less likely to be charged due to medical function of Tramadol. As interviewee H shares, “I tried many kinds of drug. Besides khat and hashish, I once asked doctors to prescribe Tramadol for me, and had no fear because it is medicine for pain-killing.” Third, Tramadol is popular because it may be covered by medical insurance. This is particularly important for the youth who have no job or are from working class. “Money is the thing people consider most. Some Saudis smoke tramadol for he has no money. I know lots of middle school students smoking tramadol.” (Interviewee G).

Routes of drug trafficking to Saudi Arabia

The way drugs are trafficked to Saudi Arabia is interwoven with economic, political, and religious factors, as well as relative to drug suppliers currently active in the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia is “lucky” to have three drug production centers in neighboring countries. Having the largest population in the region and largest oil reserve in the World, Saudi Arabia is the most lucrative market for drug traders. Consequently, drugs flow to Saudi Arabia from different ways. There are three main routes through which drugs are trafficked to Saudi Arabia. These routes are either established by the people from poor tribal areas, or interwoven with migration and pilgrimage. Smuggling via the three routes goes more smoothly than that among Non-Arab countries because there is no linguistic barrier in the Middle East.

The first, called the North Eastern route, starts from Afghanistan- the main supplier of cannabis in the World. It goes through Iran and then to Iraq, and finally into the Saudi province of Al-hudud Ash Shamaliyah. It is an old route which can be traced back to 20 years ago when donkeys were used for drug trafficking. The route is controlled by tribes in the Areas and has been part of local shadow economy. For instance, reports say that drug trafficking provides 30% of aggregate income of the

Bedouin tribes by delivering drug into the Nile Valley [25]. In many cases, such tribes are strong enough and sufficiently armed to intimidate police from interfering in drug trafficking [26]. Interviewee B mentioned, “people would be crazy if they (border guard, the author added) go harsh on drug trafficking in the tribal areas. Those people are very tough, and may kill police.....because it is about their income. For policemen, it is just a job. They may go easy on these tribes for there is no need to sacrifice life for combating drug trafficking. Also, it is very possible those police are local. They have to protect their own tribe; otherwise his family cannot survive in the region.”

The second route, regarded the primary supply route, starts from Yemen (or from Morocco, another main supplier of cannabis in the World) and ends in Najran Province of Saudi Arabia. Some drugs are trafficked to Saudi Arabia by illegal immigrants from North Africa who look for jobs in the Kingdom. A study from the Institute for Security Studies reports that drug trafficking facilitates illegal migration all the way from the horn of Africa, to Ethiopia and Somalia, to Yemen, and then to Saudi Arabia crossing the border at the al-Tuwal, Sa’adah and the al-Nahouqa mountains. These migrants carry drugs to the Kingdom with the help of international smuggling networks in exchange of a free passage [27]. That is why both academic research and official news show that rate of non-Saudi drug offences is higher than Saudi national rate in Southern Provinces (Jizan and Najran) which is the location where illegal immigrants first arrive [7, 28]. Interviewee J shares that “everybody knows there are numerous illegal immigrants in the Kingdom. It is also well known they carry drugs to the Kingdom to make a small money in order to settle down”. Some drugs are trafficked by Saudi and Yemeni gangs on the border. Interviewee C discloses that “there are kinds of mafia in my hometown Najran; like mafia in other countries, they smuggle drugs and sell drugs. But they may not be real mafia, but tribe gangs.” Interviewee M also say that “I hadn’t known gangs existing in Saudi Arabia until I read news about drug trafficking by gangs”. Yemen used to be the main source of khat for Saudi Arabia, but it recently began providing hashish to Saudis [29]. Numerous attempts at drug trafficking are foiled by Saudi border guards [30]. In spite of these arrests and the resulting political tension, smuggling along this second route actually increases as both sides use drug smuggling for weapons recently [31].

The third route starts from Lebanon (the third largest supplier of cannabis and a major amphetamine supplier in the World) or East Europe (another key amphetamine supplier), goes to Jordon (Abaqa Governorate), and then ends at the Saudi Province of Tabuk [32]. The route grew rapidly because amphetamine can be easily manufactured even in a minivan without making any noise [33]. Interviewee L states that amphetamine is cheaper in the North region because “it is from Lebanon and you can buy from big drug dealers directly. I wish they could move machines to Saudi Arabia so the price will be lower and lower.” Recently forces in Syria (the ISIS, specifically) joined the industry to boost their regime [34]. The director of the Saudi Department of Statistics reveals that more than 18 million narcotic pills and 22 tons of hashish were seized in 2017, of which 80% were in Tabuk [35].

Methods of drug trafficking to Saudi Arabia

Methods of drug trafficking are diversified in Saudi Arabia, depending on route, number of people involved, type of drug, etc. Some trafficking is carried out by

individuals, while some drug trafficking is organized by gangs with plenty of people involved, supports, and high-tech facilities.

There are several popular ways through which individuals smuggle drugs through customs. The first is to swallow capsules filled with heroin. In 2018, one attempt of smuggling drugs involved 80 capsules of 577 g of heroin and in another, 250 capsules of 1655 g of heroin were foiled at the Jeddah Airport [36]. One interviewee's cousin was once approached by drug dealers for such business. "My cousin and his friends went to a trip to Yemen for drugs. He thought it would be taking drugs with luggage, but it turned to be hiding drug in stomach. My cousin refused, but my cousin's friends did it." Concealing drugs in luggage is the second popular method. Drugs like amphetamine are usually hidden in confusing items, such as wooden stand or hollowed Quran with a wooden cover [37]. Thirdly, some traffickers take drugs to the Kingdom by taking advantage of produce import. As a state covered by desert mainly, Saudi Arabia relies on imports for food [38], but such imports are exploited for drug trafficking. "I once saw a video on Whatsapp. One Saudi put drugs in onion during its growth, so the drugs are naturally covered by onion. But he was unlucky for he was whistle blown by someone; otherwise nobody could find it" (Interviewee D). Fourthly, using birds for drug trafficking is adopted on the border between Saudi Arabia and Yemen. "It is somehow easier for us to transport drugs to the Kingdom. One of my neighbors uses homing pigeon to carry drugs." Interviewee A, a resident from Najran, says. He further explains that drugs are put in small bags tied to pigeons' backs. "It is better than other methods because it can be reused again and again. But for people in other areas, it is difficult," says he.

Large quantities of drugs are commonly smuggled with vehicles. In the talk with interviewee E who has a classmate involved in such smuggling activities, he explains that smuggling drugs with vehicles is popular because of efficiency. When asked how to hide the drugs,

"usually they (gangs, the author added) don't do it by themselves, but ask a third party to drive a crappy Saudi car to Yemen and then drive a new car back to the Kingdom. The new car is somehow resembled by gangs in Yemen," he says. (Interviewee E)

"Why do they resemble the car?" (the author)

"Because they need to hide drugs into automobile parts or the space between automobile parts, such as under chairs, in the tires, in the door, inside the vehicle's mattresses, etc. Once the person can drive the new car safely into the Kingdom, the car will be his." (Interviewee E)

"Why give the car to driver?" (the author)

"The profit is huge. The drug dealer is happy to give the driver the car..... Sometimes, drug dealers drive the vehicles by themselves. If so, they have guns or other weapons in car. Bigger dealers even work with automobile import company and put tons of drugs in imported new cars." (Interviewee E)

However, Saudi border guards haven been aware of such tricks very well. For instance, they foiled one smuggling attempt at the Northwestern border of Halat Amar, and discovered 4,839,000 Captagon pills and 349.7 g of hashish in 2019 [39]. That is why the risk increases transporting drugs to the Kingdom with this method.

Ways of drug purchasing in Saudi Arabia

Once the drug is trafficked to the Kingdom, it goes to dealers at different levels in various regions. Dealers promote and sell it in his own way. Some approach youth in front of schools; some wait for customers at home; some try to find drug users on the coasts, like peddlers. There is a difference in ways of drug purchase among regions, because of cultural difference, demographic structural difference, etc.

Drug purchase in eastern Saudi Arabia

Interviewee F has good knowledge of drug purchase in Eastern Province. He says,

“I am from east coast, so I know how get hashish here. Two best places to buy hashish is Aramco camp and corniche. Hang out there and check out with adolescents hanging around. Be careful when you approach them because there are cops too. Usually 100 SRs for a piece as long as your finger.” (Interviewee F)

When asked why hashish is available at Aramco camp, he exposes that

“Aramco is the largest oil company in the World and extremely important to Saudis’ life. There are also many foreigners there. The Aramco camp is segregated from Saudi society with the highest security level. Even policeman cannot get in without Aramco employee’s invitation. It is very safe inside. So, young kids there could sell hashish for pocket money.” (Interviewee F)

His words are corroborated to some extent by the story of a 11-year old boy who is arrested for selling drugs in Riyadh [40]. However, interviewee F says, “but don’t always expect good quality for sometimes they cannot get good ones from upper dealer; sometimes it is from Qatif (a province in the East, the author added); sometimes it is from Afghanistan; sometimes, it is from Morocco.” Drugs are trafficked to the Kingdom mainly by Saudis who have connections to get around rules. Therefore, it is more possible for locals to get high quality hashish. That is why the interviewee F says that “I usually don’t go to foreigners for hashish for they can get craps from upper dealers”. As what happens in other countries, once a drug dealer and buyer complete a deal, a long-term deal relationship may be established. As the interviewee F shares, “although lots of people smoke hashish, I have to be careful; in past 5 years, I got hashish from one dealer only; we know each other very well.”

Drug purchase in Central Saudi Arabia

In the Middle part of Saudi Arabia, such as City Al-kharj, the easiest spot to get drugs is school. Drug dealers usually park their vehicles outside school waiting for

customers when the school is finished. Interviewee J is from the City and shares his findings.

“Some people do it for a living there. They have developed a set of drug-selling culture. For example, when they park their vehicle outside school, they hang prayer beans on rear view mirror. The type of the bean and the way they hang the beans signal to potential purchasers, such as what kind of drugs available today, and how much the price is.” (Interviewee J)

Interviewee I’s experience is different for he purchases drugs from their classmates in high school.

“Although smoking hashish is common the Kingdom, nobody likes to be discovered. That is why I only buy drugs from dealers I know well. My high school mates got drug from his older brother and sell to us. Amphetamine is small and can be hid and carried easily.” (Interviewee I)

When asked how much is the cost, interviewees imply that there is a class difference because drugs are too expensive for lower class, particularly after the war with neighbor countries [41].

“for me, it is quite expensive because I had no income in high school. The money I used for drug is pocket money from my mom. I saved them and bought drug every month.....My dad has a steady job, so I can have pocket money every week. Some classmates are poor and have no money to buy. They borrow money from friends. We all know he is not going to pay back. And his friends don’t expect him to pay back. This is Saudi culture.....Government doesn’t give you money unless your family has no income. We are the same as other countries..... If you have no income, government only gives you about 1000 riyals per month (unemployment benefit, the author added) which is only enough for food.” (Interviewee I)

“I wish I can try. I didn’t want to try before; I want to try it now, but I cannot afford it. Price went to up because of the war with Houthis and new virus (covid-19, the author added). It is very expensive now. My classmates told me it costs 25 riyals for one Captagon tablet, 500 riyals for hashish as long as a finger. Khat used to be relatively cheap, about 150 riyals for one bunch or one kilogram, but it has been up to 500 riyals. My parents are not rich; I have no pocket money. (Interviewee N)

When asked why not get quick money in bad ways, the interviewees seemed to be cautious and lawful. Apparently, there is a clear distinction between drug abuse and other crimes for them. While stealing, homicide, and burglar are regarded as crime by them, drug abuse is not. It explains why crime rate in Saudi Arabia has not been soaring while drug abuse case increased significantly [42].

Drug purchase in Western Saudi Arabia

Western coast of Saudi Arabia is mixed in race and culture and more tolerant on drug crimes than other regions. For instance, Jeddah, the largest seaport and commercial capital in Saudi Arabia, is perceived as the “most open” city in the Kingdom. A research shows that Jeddah residents have the most positive attitudes toward drugs in comparison to people from other regions [43]. Interviewee H, growing up in Jeddah but working at eastern province, considers it easier to get drugs on the west coast. When asked how to get hashish in Jeddah, he responds with that “it depends on the quality of hashish you want. For cheap ones, you can go to slum karanteenah or old town Al-balad. You can see all kinds of people over there; don’t even ignore women, they may have hashish.” Similar to what happens in eastern provinces, there is also a social stratification behind drug dealing in Jeddah. “Usually try to talk to Saudi women instead of black ones because Saudis have better quality hashish. For best ones, you have to go to north part of Jeddah. People there are rich; hashish is good too” (Interviewee H).

Drug trafficking and dealing as a response to economic conditions

That the drug trafficking and dealing are pervasive is not mainly because of a huge market, but very much related to economic conditions in Saudi Arabia. Although it is perceived a wealthy country, Saudi Arabia is noted with economic disparity. Unemployment rate has been soaring for years. A latest report shows that it reaches up to 12.7% [44]. Only 30% citizens own houses compared to the average of 70% worldwide [45]. For the unemployed and financially strapped Saudis, drug trafficking and selling are ways to make a living and sustain themselves [46]. Interviewee B exposes that

“As you know, Saudi economy is mainly oil-based for we have the second largest reserves of petroleum. All Saudis know that eight-seven percent of Saudi revenues is accounted for by the petroleum sector. It is good but also bad because there is an economic instability. When oil price goes down, finding a job is not easy in Saudi Arabia; even though you have a job, salary cannot support your family very well; Saudis normally make around 4000 Riyals per month, 2000 for rent, 1000 for food, 1000 for miscellaneous; nothing left”. (Interviewee B)

Interviewee G has the same opinion about motives of drug trafficking. He says,

“Everybody knows that Saudi laws on drugs are among the strictest in the World. You may get a death penalty for drug trafficking, importing, exporting, distributing, manufacturing, or growing drugs even for the first offense. I think it is not because Saudis like drugs or have no fear of death, but because they need money; both high pay and low pay jobs are taken by foreigners; there are 31 million population in the Kingdom. Among them, foreigners reach up to 10 million. Governments went harsh on foreigners in recent years, but there are still a big

number of them. Our life is not easy; otherwise nobody takes that risk.” (Interviewee G)

Interviewee C points out a misperception about Saudi society by saying that “people always think we are rich, but actually we are not. In the Kingdom, only a few are rich. Many Saudis are struggling on the poverty line. Government say that youth unemployment rate is about 10%, but many of my friends have no job. People say that it might reach up to 30%. To make a living, they need to find something to do. Selling drug is a way to support family although it is risky...Not much discrimination from community if you sell drugs.” For some interviewees, drug trafficking and dealing are also associated to a feature of Saudi culture. “Saudis are lazy, and want to make a quick and easy money. The only way is to sell drugs.” (Interviewee D).

Because the drug trafficking is source of income, traffickers try all their best to protect it. As interviewee H said, “You know that drug trafficking is subject to death penalty in the Kingdom. Some people still do it; it means it is extremely important to them. So, just be blind and dumb when you see drug trafficking or dealing. They may kill you. There was a case in May. One woman and her son were fatally shot by their neighbor who had been reported by the women’s husband for drug things in Najran.” According to Interviewee C, the capital punishment is not applied to Saudis very often, so there is no deterrent effect on drug trafficking. As he explains, “wasta (personal connections, the author added) plays a big role in Saudi society. Saudi drug trafficker and dealers can always get around with wasta. If you check out news, you may find that majority of drug traffickers and dealers executed are foreigners.”

Drug use as a response to social conditions

A vent for boredom

Entertainment is part of social life worldwide. However, Saudi life seems boring to the youth for Arabia practices *Sharia* Law which has many specific behavioral codes on followers, such as no alcohol, no smoking, no music, no dancing, etc. Consequently, some deviant behaviors such as drug use are developed to kill boredom and seek fun or sensation. As interviewees expose,

“Lots of thing we cannot do in the Kingdom. In my understanding, the most common relaxation here is to chat with friends at a coffee shop. That is boring too. Taking drug is our choice of releasing pressure and depression. If there were other options (such as singing, dancing or drinking, added by the author), we may not smoke hashish.....I like smoking hashish while watching Facebook or Twitter videos. It is fun. Many videos over there are about drug taking.....It is so much fun; people always forward to friends... For us, it is a way of relaxation.” (Interviewee H)

“Now it is a little better because government is not as strict as before. At least, there is cinema here. We can go and find something fun on weekend. Several years ago, nothing interesting for young people, but hanging out at coffee shop. When I was in the high school, my classmates and I always made circuits along shops again and again inside malls. Looks like stupid, but that is what we did at the time. Now, my younger brother has one more option, watching movie.” (Interviewee I)

“We young people, not like older generation, need something for fun. I didn’t hear cases in which old people take drug. They seem to be used to a boring life. There might be some Saudis in the middle age taking drug, but I think more young Saudis use drug.” (Interviewee L)

A solution for psychological stress

Although Saudi Arabia has relatively good welfare for her citizens such as free education and medical care, Saudi youth face many pressures, such as academic pressure, financial burden, gender discrimination, limited accessibility to higher education, and marriage. It is discovered that mental health problem is one of the 11 leading causes of reduced quality of life in Saudi Arabia [47]. The prevalence of such negative emotional states as depression, anxiety and stress reaches up to 24.4% in a sample of dermatology patients [48]. A study on nearly 1000 Riyadh residents even shows that 68.2% of subjects often feel nervous and stressed [49]. Another very recent similar study shows that 22.0% respondents report severe anxiety and depression symptoms [50]. Interviewees share similar experiences; some of them choose taking drug as a solution to the psychological stress.

“We are the same as other countries. We may lose job; we may be suspended from school; we may be forced to marry someone we don’t like, etc. I know many Saudis feel stressed. I am from a tribe. We are tough, so I got no depression. My classmates smoke hashish when he is anxious or depressed.” (Interviewee N)

“I usually take more drugs during the final. Some professors are crazy; questions are very tough. We have to study very very late. No drug, it is impossible.” (Interviewee Q)

“When you have problems and got no help, what can you do? Not much, but taking drugs can help you forget the problem temporarily. I need do it very well in the exam to college next year. But I know I won’t be able to get a high score. To be frank, I couldn’t sleep sometimes, and used drug for help.” (Interviewee O)

Lenient institutional control

Saudi Arabia is noted for imposing harsh penalties on drug crimes. Trafficking, possession or use of drugs can be punished by public flogging, fines, lengthy imprisonment, or death, with smuggler, dealer and user distinguished and first offender and recidivist distinguished. However, Islamic legal system is also noted for a feature of restorative justice [51]. Although viewing drug abuse is harm to people’s health,

relationships, and the community, Saudi authority is particularly lenient with drug users. Once found taking drug, Saudis face two options, imprisonment for 2 or more years or receiving medical treatment through a treatment program or specialized hospital. Students are treated more leniently with a punishment limited to discipline and monitoring. The lenience “encourages” Saudi youth to take drug de facto.

“Outsiders always think Saudi government is very simple, just punish and punish. Actually, they are not. They always try to solve the problem peacefully. Why I dare to smoke hashish? Because government usually won’t put students like me in jail for it.” (Interviewee I)

“As long as you don’t smuggle drug to the Kingdom, you won’t be in trouble. Saudi government is very strict on drug smuggling, but easy on drug use. Also, we Saudis have *wasta* to get around rules once we are in trouble. You can always see news about foreigners executed for drug crimes because those foreigners take drugs to the Kingdom and have no *wasta*.” (Interviewee P)

Loose social control

After the discovering of oil in 1938, Saudi Arabia has been on the road of industrialization and urbanization. Industrialization and urban development lead to migration inside the Kingdom [52]. Traditional social fabric is therefore broken to some extent. Informal social control such as parental attachment turns out to be weak in such a mobile society. As interviewee E said, “modern society is different.....we young generation don’t have to stay at home watching TV with parents.” His words are echoed by other interviewees.

“It is rare that you can find a job near your home, so young people usually live distantly from parents after graduation. Their independent consciousness grows as time passes.” (Interviewee M)

“We Muslim care family very much and have tremendous respects for parents. But time is changing. Some young Saudis start to have his own opinion. It is hard to say we are unattached to parents very much, but parents’ influence on us is actually decreasing.” (Interviewee K)

It has been widely verified in various cultural contexts that deviant behaviors are possible to be developed or imitated in a situation of unattachment to parents [53]. Saudis are no exception.

“I have a friend living alone. He started to take drugs because of his friend. At the beginning, he smoked hashish because of group pressure, but later couldn’t get out of drug-taking.” (Interviewee K)

In contrast, traditional villages in which social fabric is not broken badly have fewer cases of drug abuse. Interviewee Q grows up in a village and settles down in

cities after graduation. He starts to smoke hashish in college because of study pressure. For him,

“There was no chance to take drug in my village. Everybody knows each other and me. If I smoked hashish, they would tell my parents immediately.....it brings a negative image to my family. We may be isolated. For instance, nobody is going to lend money to us; they think we spend money on drug..... You will feel you are in a giant net while living village, and there are hundred eyes watching you. But I have been free after I went to college. Nobody cares about you here. That is why I started to take drug.” (Interviewee Q)

When asked how parents may respond if find him taking drug, he tells:

“Saudis are very collective and care social image. Saudi parents usually try to cover it up and send his kid to a specialized hospital for a treatment..... Sometimes, they send his kid to another city to cut ties with his kid’s friends. Personally, I didn’t hear the news that parents report to police.” (Interviewee Q)

Besides the unattachment to parents, unemployment provides “time” for drug use. Saudi population has been increasing rapidly for a long period. It is reported that 65% of populations are under age 29 [54]. Such a social structure has a significant pressure on government for job creation. It is reported Saudi unemployment rate reached 12.3% in 2019 [55]. The situation of unemployment means no involvement in healthy activities for young generations. Given the substantial leisure times with few options of positive activity, Saudi youth tend to be engaged in drug abuse [22]. As interviewees say,

“My high school classmate used to be a good boy. He started to take drugs when didn’t get admission to the university and has no job. For me, there is no time for such a thing; too much study and homework.” (Interviewee M)

“As you know, we Saudis are lazy and don’t want to work. No job, in some sense, means good for some people. On one hand, they can get some money from government (unemployment benefits, about 1000 riyals per month, the author added); on the other hand, they can have time to enjoy lifeIf there were somethings keeping them busy, their life would be different.” (Interviewee K)

Weakened Islamic cultural control and emergence of subculture

With social structural changes comes cultural change, which is of great concern to the Saudi government as culture is viewed to be a strong control mechanism for social behavior [56]. Studies [43] show the more religious Saudis are, the more negative their attitude towards drug-related behaviors is. However, Saudi society is becoming increasingly globalized because of the dependence on

foreign products and workers. Interaction with foreigners, using foreign products, access to the Internet, and recent loosened governmental control on Islamic culture have weakened Saudis' adherence to religious values [57]. While Islam's influence is decreasing among the Saudi youth, western individualism's influence has increased among the young generations. Consequently, their collective Muslim identity has faded to some degree. Although Saudis are expected to be a good Muslim and social member, the young generation are less committed to it, compared to the older generations. As a result, they follow Islamic rule selectively, for their own convenience.

"Islamic culture is great, but other cultures are good too. I think most of us, no matter whether you agree or not, are multicultural. At least, I am such a person. I like foreign cultures." (Interviewee L)

"You know, people live in cities nowadays; cities are not like traditional Islamic community.....There is no such a thing, like caring neighbor's opinion on you.....no need to label yourself as a good Muslim." (Interviewee J)

"I am surely Muslim, but it doesn't mean that I follow Islamic rules 100%. I am a normal person, and make mistakes." (Interviewee B)

"That (drug-taking, the author added) might be a big thing for my father's generation..... To be a good Muslim is very important for him.....But most of young people like my friends have their own interpretation on Islam. Taking drug doesn't seem to influence their Muslim identity." (Interviewee C)

As a matter of fact, the Saudi government is facing a worsening situation in which a subculture of drug-taking has been growing among the youth. The core part of such a subculture is neutralization of drug-taking. Although Saudi drug users' attitudes towards drug may vary in terms of income, religiosity, education, etc. [43], most of them find similar ways to neutralize or justify their drug-taking behavior.

"Quran doesn't prohibit drug clearly. I remember that there are some verses talking about intoxicants and gambling in Chapter 5, but that is not drug. I know it is bad for health, but I only smoke hashish. Hashish doesn't cause health problem that much, and won't get you addicted." (Interviewee F)

"Currently, nobody thinks it is a serious deviance although most of Islamic scholars consider it a haram." (Interviewee J)

"Prophet Mohammed may say yes if he knows we have psychological stress and drugs can help." (Interviewee O)

"I didn't hurt anybody by smoking hashish. Compared to those who pray five times per day, don't touch drugs, but hurt others, I am much better." (Interviewee Q)

Neutralized attitude towards drug spreads quickly among young generations when it is conveyed by fun stories, videos, and jokes which go virus among Facebook, Twitter, Tiktok users. The information from the videos and jokes changes Saudi youth's attitude

towards drug use in some cases, and reinforces Saudi youth's neutralized attitude towards drugs in other cases.

"The Hekmat Mohashish account posts so many funny videos and stories about hashish smokers. They are so funny that people even don't think smoking hashish is haram." (Interviewee E)

"My young brother used to hate drugs and felt disgusted toward it, but he seems to be ok with it now. I know he always watches funny videos about Mohashish recently. I worry about him very much. If he took drugs, our whole family life would be affected. I always have an eye on him." (Interviewee M)

The new drug culture seems to have similar influences on men and women. No dramatic differences were observed between genders. Although there is no official data on women's drug abuse, interviewees' responses reflect that drug-taking is quite common among Saudi women.

"I heard of many cases of female's drug abuse. I know my daughter and son smoke hashish.....I am kind of ok with my daughter's drug taking because she uses it for study. She faces study problem and cannot focus.....My son is bad because he uses drug for fun..... They even don't think it is a problem. I sent them to a rehabilitation center and thanks to Allah, it works a bit." (Interviewee R)

"Sometimes, girls receive more pressures from society. There are some options of fun for boys at least, but for girls, it is very limited..... girls are more likely to have psychological depression. Many of them turn to drugs for a solution. Gradually, they have their own opinion on drugs." (Interviewee P)

"Saudi girls like to party. That is their fun. They do it like a fashion show. After the show, they dance and smoke shisha, and probably with hashish. It is popular culture among them." (Interviewee M)

Theoretical reflection: A double life

The above analysis shows that rampant drug crimes in Saudi Arabia are an unintended consequence of global and industrial social changes. First, economy plays an important role in drug trafficking and selling. Given the lack of fully developed industrialization and a well-developed job market, income inequality is inevitable in the Kingdom. Saudi society is economically stratified to a great extent. A large percentage of citizens still live at or below the poverty line. Poverty pushes some of them to take a risk in drug trafficking and dealing. The case is worse for marginalized tribal areas. Second, the needs for a social life contribute drug taking in the Kingdom. Islam has strict rules on Muslims' behavior and entertainment. Saudi youths' lives are marked by boredom. Drugs function as a way to vent, to relax, and to entertain themselves. Third, positive functions of

drug-taking encourage Saudi youths to try it out. Saudi youth, particularly college students, face psychological stress due to a heavy study load. The insufficiency of psychological services pushes them to seek drugs for help. Since income and psychological problems are the main causes of drug trafficking, drug dealing, and drug use, drug crimes mainly happen among middle-aged and young Saudis.

The influencing process of such economic, social, and psychological factors on drug crimes is moderated by the condition of social fabric in community and neutralization techniques among Saudi youth. Social fabric has been strained by migration caused by industrialization. Once social fabric is broken, Hirshtian social control through attachment is weakened. The more broken the social fabric in community is, the more drug crimes there are; also, the more popular the neutralization techniques there are, the more drug crimes there are.

Although drug-trafficking, drug selling, and drug use are prevalent in Saudi Arabia, Saudis don't expose their criminal behavior to the public due to Islamic cultural and institutional control. Collective pressure is always on Muslims in an Islamic cultural environment. Exposure of drug crimes means a damage to family reputation and individual's image. Although actual institutional punishment is not harsh enough to deter drug crimes, it can force them go underground, since a drug-user may lose job, marriage, and life. As interviewees tell,

"Life is life; belief is belief.....Saudis are normal people, and do bad things, but secretly." (Interviewee B)

"We only smoke hashish in front of trusted friends.....I have to pray with people frequently. Otherwise, I may be suspected." (Interviewee H)

"I don't take drugs with anybody because it may spread out fast..... If so, it brings a big problem to my family. My sister may not be able to get married..... You know, Saudis check each other's family background before they get married." (Interviewee G)

"It is illegal in Islam; we are Muslim, so we have to hide it well; otherwise people say we are not Muslim." (Interviewee F)

"People don't talk about drugs in front of classmates and colleagues..... If you let them know you take drugs, what do they think of you in heart? Do you still dare to pray with them?" (Interviewee J)

"I know my friend smokes hashish because we trust each other. He doesn't tell anybody else. If others know and gossip, it is going to influence his family a lot." (Interviewee N)

"I am a good man in everybody's eyes. Nobody knows I take drugs. Actually, I am a really good man except taking drug." (Interviewee Q)

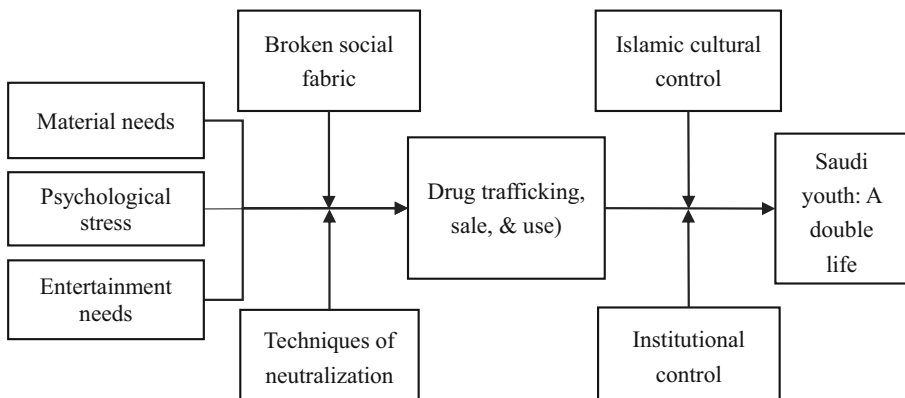
Therefore, Saudi drug traffickers, dealers and users try to conceal their criminal behavior and show their religiosity to the public, by engaging in such behaviors as praying five times per day, reading Quran in public, and donating to the needy. Apparently, they have a double life, with both a public and underground life. On one hand, drug crimes have been a part of their life, but are exposed to only their closest friends; on the other hand, their public life is always religious and disciplined. Such a discrepancy suggests that they have a Goffmanian presentation of self in daily life [58].

Particularly, drug trafficker, dealer, and abuser use impression management skills to control or shape how society view them. Although Saudi Arabia seems to be politically and culturally unified, there are cultural differences and institutional differences in law enforcement among regions. Islamic cultural and institutional control moderate the relationship between drug crimes and Saudi double life. Such a phenomenon is also applicable to other culturally illicit behaviors such as drinking, dancing, singing, and gambling among Saudis. The logic can be illustrated with following graph (Graph 1).

Conclusion

Drug trafficking, dealing, and use are serious crimes in Saudi Arabia. What is contrary to people's perception on Saudi society is that drug crimes are prevalent. Common drugs are hashish, amphetamine, and khat. Drugs are trafficked to Saudi Arabia mainly through three routes, namely Eastern route, North route, and South route. Drug trafficking is not a result of Islamic culture, but a response to economic conditions in Saudi Arabia. Drug use is a consequence of social pressure, psychological needs, fun-seeking, peer influence, and loose informal social control which are led to by structural change, globalization, and cultural change, etc. Given the strict Islamic rules and social pressure, Saudi drug wrongdoers have to hide their illicit behavior and present to the public a religious life, resulting in a sort of double life. Therefore, prevention of drug crimes in Saudi Arabia should take a systematic approach, focusing on the economy and job creation, and then focusing on a leisure industry to foster healthier lifestyles.

The study tries to shed light on how drugs are trafficked, sold and abused in Saudi Arabia, but also faces limitations. First, subjects are recruited via snow-ball sampling, and male only, therefore it should be cautious to generalize to the whole Saudi population. Second, drug trafficking faces a death penalty, therefore no drug traffickers are successfully interviewed due to the problem of trust. First-hand data on drug trafficking is missing. Given these limitations, future studies can help further understand the drug problem in Saudi Arabia by obtaining data from females, uncovering the mechanisms by which drugs are delivered from upper-level dealers to lower-level dealers, and exploring how drug problems are connected to other social problems such as violence, burglar, homicide, and corruption, and divorce.



Graph 1 How drug crimes emerge in Saudi Arabia

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