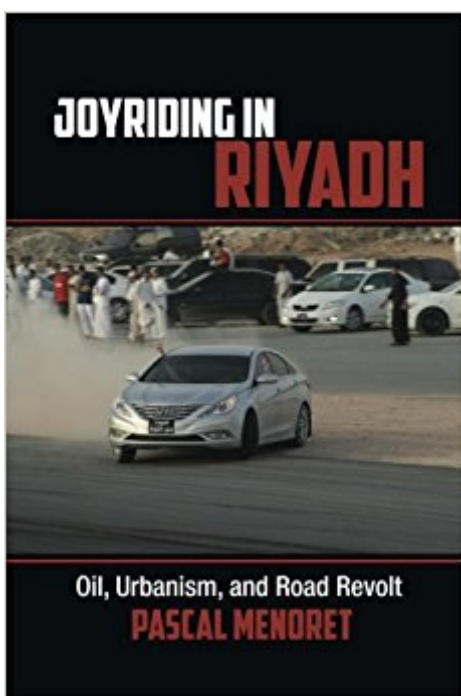


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# Joyriding In Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism, And Road Revolt (Cambridge Middle East Studies)



## Synopsis

Why do young Saudis, night after night, joyride and skid cars on Riyadh's avenues? Who are these "drifters" who defy public order and private property? What drives their revolt? Based on four years of fieldwork in Riyadh, Pascal Menoret's *Joyriding in Riyadh* explores the social fabric of the city and connects it to Saudi Arabia's recent history. Car drifting emerged after Riyadh was planned, and oil became the main driver of the economy. For young rural migrants, it was a way to reclaim alienating and threatening urban spaces. For the Saudi state, it jeopardized its most basic operations: managing public spaces and enforcing law and order. A police crackdown soon targeted car drifting, feeding a nationwide moral panic led by religious activists who framed youth culture as a public issue. The book retraces the politicization of Riyadh youth and shows that, far from being a marginal event, car drifting is embedded in the country's social violence and economic inequality.

## Book Information

Series: Cambridge Middle East Studies (Book 45)

Paperback: 263 pages

Publisher: Cambridge University Press (April 21, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1107641950

ISBN-13: 978-1107641952

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.6 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #148,675 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #17 in [Books > History > Middle East > Saudi Arabia](#)

## Customer Reviews

"Good anthropologists aim to enter into the minds of their subjects, sharing their lifestyle, acquiring their language, studying their moods and responses but always maintaining an objective self-awareness. Pascal Menoret is better than good." *The Economist* "An excellent ethnography of youth culture in Saudi Arabia that unpacks the connections between the social practice of joyriding as a form of political dissent with the questions of oil, urbanism, and power. It provides new insight into the categories of masculinity and gender in the Middle Eastern context and the spatial politics of the Saudi state. This work contributes to a growing body of critical scholarship ... *Joyriding in Riyadh* is an excellent and scholarly work that makes a valuable contribution to the field of Middle East

Studies. It will appeal to anyone that has an interest in youth culture, urban and gender studies, urban history, and anthropology of the Middle East. Moreover, the book can be assigned to classes on Middle Eastern politics, Arab Uprisings, or any course that deals with the issues of social violence and economic inequality in a comparative or global framework." Feras Klenk, Middle East Media and Book Reviews Online"Menoret has written one of the best books on contemporary Saudi Arabia. I applaud the author's bravery in undertaking fieldwork among violent, repressed, and disenfranchised young men in the kingdom during the years of the War on Terror. He elegantly combines an intimate portrayal of Saudi male youth culture with a profound analysis of the national and global networks of government, business, and expertise that gave rise to joyriding." Jörg Matthias Determann, American Historical Review"This is an insightful, important and unique book. It is extremely readable and will be accessible to students of all levels, as well as others inside and outside academia with an interest in the Gulf, urban history and politics, and gender and sexuality in the Middle East." Michael Farquhar, LSE Middle East Centre Blog ([blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec))

Why do young Saudis, night after night, joyride and skid cars on Riyadh's avenues? Who are those "drifters" who defy public order and private property? Based on four years of fieldwork, *Joyriding in Riyadh* explores the history and social fabric of Riyadh, as well as that of Saudi Arabia. For young rural migrants, car drifting is a way to reclaim threatening urban spaces. It is now the target of a nationwide police crackdown. The book shows that, far from being a marginal event, car drifting is embedded in Saudi Arabia's social violence and economic inequality.

In her recent video, the Londonese singer M.I.A. mixes car high-speed stunts in the Arabian desert and "Bad Girls" dressed in leopard bodysuits veiling their faces with only the eyes showing, dancing on the beat. At some point M.I.A. files her nails whilst leaning out the window of a car driving on its two side tires. She was inspired by the videos on Youtube showing Arab men in sedans doing crazy stunts in the desert – from drifting through traffic to changing a tyre while a truck is tilted on two wheels or skating on their shoes while standing outside of the passenger door with the car running at full speed. Two-wheel driving, cars rotating to perform a doughnut clouded in rubber smoke, front-wheel-drive cars drifting through traffic and passengers dancing out the car at highway speed: these images of Gulf states' „subculture have recently gone viral, and are now associated with the term “Arab drifting.” The video director Romain Gavras explains he wanted to feature many Arabian clichés – oil barrels burning in the desert, running horses, men in white

dashadeesh standing on roadside water pipes, veiled women in luxury brand outfits, while also insisting on the federative aspects of car drifting that straddle gender and age boundaries. Other commentators also pointed out the intended support for women fighting for the right to drive in Saudi Arabia. Whether these stereotypes about Arab men and women can be empowering or not remains an open question. But the clip is fun to watch, and is a success even in the U.S. while presenting Arab men and women in a positive manner.

Pascal Menoret's book is titled like a music video or a magazine article, but it isn't. It is an anthropological essay that grew out of a PhD dissertation, although it covers different material and with a different angle. The author wrote his doctoral thesis on the politicization of youth in Saudi Arabia, a timely subject that matched the priorities of the French public agencies that supported his fieldwork with a research grant. Social science research is based on objective facts and detached observation, and the ethnographer seldom intervenes in the text. By contrast, *Joyriding in Riyadh* is an essay in reflexive anthropology that makes explicit the position of the ethnographer as a French doctoral student in contemporary Saudi Arabia. It was inspired by the book *Yemen Chronicles*, that Pascal Menoret once wanted to transform into a graphic novel. Like in *Yemen Chronicles*, the author gets entangled in various political plots, and the end product of his research is far away from his original plan. The book does not only deal with joyriding; in fact, the author had very few occasions to observe car drifting rallies firsthand or to discuss with joyriders. But he takes this form of juvenile delinquency as an entry point into youth culture, urban planning, uneven development, and political expression.

Pascal Menoret's main thesis is that in Saudi Arabia today road violence is a form of political violence. By this, he first means that Saudi Arabian young men, particularly the Bedouins uprooted from their land and brought up in Riyadh's suburbs, are venting their frustration and anger on the road because they are prevented to express any other form of political protest. As Menoret highlights, "Joyriding is not only a thriving subculture, but also a way of confronting the state in its most basic operations: managing public spaces, protecting private property, and enforcing the law." The only way to manifest political opposition in Saudi Arabia is through radical religious discourse or through road delinquency. Both ways are profoundly nihilistic: the politics of opposing the Saudi state is a politics of death. The young Bedouins described by Menoret are modern rebels without a cause, and their revolt should sound familiar to many Americans and Westerners who would not otherwise relate to their plight. Indeed, the videos of car drifting and improvised stunts have become a global hit on Youtube, and they are viewed by people who have otherwise no contact with, and very little knowledge of, Saudi Arabia. Menoret brings Saudi Arabia close to home: "by

bringing Riyadh back into the mainstream of dysfunctional urban societies, it shows the deceptive ordinariness of Saudi Arabia. But there is a deeper meaning in the author's identification of road violence with political violence. Violence is not only something that people do—it is also the constraints and limitations that prevent them to live meaningful lives. A prison is a violent institution, even though physical violence is banned from day-to-day interactions. In Saudi Arabia, the system formed by roads, public infrastructures, and the reliance on the automobile inflicts a kind of structural violence on individuals. Roads and cars are dehumanizing: they turn human beings into mere cogs in a disciplinary mechanism that generate a state of apathy and depoliticization. This violence is not only abstract: it leads to the highest number of deaths on the road in the world. Nature is being violated: the kind of development fueled by oil money and imitative of American suburban life is clearly not sustainable. Road violence is also a form of violence against women: in Saudi Arabia, only men are allowed to drive, and the movement of women is severely constrained by an urban environment in which cars are the only means of transportation. There are many ways in which car traffic is being politicized. Urban planning has created an environment where families and individuals live scattered in individual houses and small apartment buildings, far away from each other but under the surveillance of the state. Real estate is in the hands of senior princes and rich families who build roads to nowhere on empty lands waiting for developers and contractors. Menoret links these local developments to global network of expertise, capital and power. Based on archival work, he shows how Riyadh's extension was planned by a Greek architect, Constantinos Doxiadis, with the support of SCET International, a French public company, and other international experts. From the 1970s onward, individual villas financed by government loans and individual cars running on public roads would be generalized to the whole city of Riyadh. Rural migrants and Bedouin slum dwellers were relegated to distant suburbs, while foreign labor migrants occupied a deserted and dilapidated inner city. The real estate market became a way to get rich fast, and the old tribal ethics based on honor, pride and generosity were replaced by ambition and greed. The car-centered suburbia fueled despair (tufush) and generated economic and social segregation. As the author puts it, "joyriding was the tree that hid the forest of social despair and urban dereliction, the tip of an iceberg of poverty and violence that was rarely reported on. Joyriding in Riyadh offers a rich description of Saudi youth subculture, with its celebration of an aggressive masculinity, of violence against boys, against society, and against the self. It also illustrates the vitality of French social science. This book could only have been written by a Frenchman. Or to be precise, it could never have been written by an American. Negotiating

access to the field and establishing contacts with informants was hard enough for a Frenchman: he was always suspected of being a spy for the Saudi police or an agent for the French secret service. Friends, interviewees, and informants constantly reminded him of his position: that of a French doctoral student doing fieldwork in Saudi Arabia during the US-led war on terror. He could only establish a relationship with prospective informants through perseverance, people's skills, and sheer luck. Interviewing young religious activists on their political opinions or observing gatherings of car drifters was hard enough for him: it would have been practically impossible for an American to research such a politically loaded topic. Access to the field determines in a large part the type of research being conducted. Many American anthropologists gained their first experience in a developing country through service in the Peace Corps. Paul Menoret first came to Saudi Arabia as a young teacher taking opportunity to serve as a *coopérante* abroad instead of doing his (by then compulsory) military service back home. His resolution to write a philosophy thesis on Hegel's *Philosophy of Religion* didn't last long. Instead he learned Arabic and the local Bedouin dialect and then, having to return home, he enrolled in a PhD program in social science. He came back as a doctoral student under French government sponsorship and affiliated to a social science research center in Sanaa, also supported by France. As he recalls, "my decision to study the politicization of youth was congruent with the preoccupation of the French Foreign Office, which granted me a doctoral scholarship and a rare four-year research visa to Saudi Arabia." He maintained close contacts with the cultural section of the French embassy in Riyadh, which by the end of his stay led to a curious episode in which he was informed by the French ambassador that Saudi authorities were to expel him from the country but then nothing happened, and he stayed in Riyadh for six more months. As the author recalls, "it took a long time for the question of urban space, surveillance, and car drifting to emerge as central for my research." His first impulse was to write an ethnographic study of a rural Bedouin community in the Upper Najd region. Through a friend he attends a wedding in a village where he plans to do longer fieldwork in order to study local Islamic groups and the relation between youth and their parents. As he notes, "the village not only harbored colorful figures, it also seemed perfectly suited for a study of youth, religion, activism, and intergenerational politics." The village is divided between loyalists, islamists and jihadists, and the anthropologist's presence raises tensions that force him to leave the site after only two days. The urban environment is more secure, but raises other challenges for the anthropologist.

There are very few public spaces or venues where people can discuss their opinions. Young men gather in small, informal groups called shilal that meet in a rest house or apartment, away from the gaze of the repressive state. Islamic groups are even harder to approach for the author, who is often pressed by his interlocutors to convert to Islam or otherwise suspected of being an informer for the secret police. As he recalls, "meetings were canceled at the last minute, phone calls were left unanswered, and promises were broken on a regular basis." The author's French upbringing also shows in his theoretical references and conceptual framework. As he discloses, "this book is inspired by the anthropological tradition developed by Pierre Bourdieu and his students. Bourdieu, who defined sociology as "fieldwork in philosophy," has launched the academic career of several French social scientists now working in American universities: the names of Loic Wacquant and Philippe Bourgois come to mind. Now teaching at New York University's Abu Dhabi campus, Pascal Menoret can be added to the list. He is more interested in field methods and working assumptions than in abstract theory and philosophical discussions. Compared to similar books published by young American PhDs, Joyriding is rather light on theory. You won't find the long, abstract discussions about Foucault and other philosophical luminaries that have become de rigueur in anthropological dissertations. But what the author lacks in theoretical deftness, he compensates with empirical relevance and a keen sense of the fieldworker's position with respect to his informants.

Well, there is no other book like this, that I know of. So if you're looking to read about Saudi drifting culture, this is it. My perception was that Menoret's main tenet was to link joyriding to political violence (done upon Saudi youth and then re-enacted by them). He does a good job of linking oil, municipal architecture, and power together to form the political & physical "landscape" where drifting takes place. From watching Saudi drifting videos on YouTube, you would never guess about the male-to-male relationships (sexual and courtly love) and power struggles described in the book. But I wanted him to go further to elucidate this strange haram-like relationships that he encountered. I also wished for two more things: 1. A more technical analysis of the physicality of drifting. If this was a book about music, it shouldn't be without scales, instruments, and even the callouses that form on your hands (although plenty of ethnomusicologists would write this way). Similarly, I wanted to know about the instruments of drifting: the cars and the mechanics behind the performances. I want to know specifically about the aesthetics of the "figures" performed by the drivers, and what made a

good show vs a mediocre one, and finally, how that would interplay into the relationships of these networks.<sup>2</sup> The book seemed very light on analysis from the perspective of subcultures. I would have expected references to Dick Hebdige or other authors I've never heard about. Perhaps it was Menoret's intention for readability to omit all the heavy academic references. But I felt it was omitted from the substance, as well as the style. I never got a deeper sense of these networks. Menoret admitted the enormous troubles faced with gaining and maintaining trust, which was no doubt a factor. Great book, worth the read.

Difficult to read, but insightful. Lots of specialized sociological terms.

AMAZING. Accessible, fun, best assigned-reading yet. A window into an often mis/understood country. Also eerie parallels to the United States and the failures of our own urban planning.

Unique insight into a difficult topic. Pascal Menoret has penetrated the Saudi youth underclass like no outsider has been able to do. A must read for all those interested in Saudi politics and society.

Phenomenal

This book wonderful

This is a comment, not a review: two of the three reviewers who gave this 5 stars are an Ali and and Abdulla. The third, a Narayan. Heads up, don't buy, is my response.

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