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RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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07 October 2005

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Saudi Arabia: Forced and arranged marriages; people who arrange the marriages; whether such marriages take place within the extended family; the age of couples who are married through forced and arranged marriages; whether one can refuse an arranged marriage; whether arranged marriages are limited to a particular religious or social group (2003 - 2005)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

The sources consulted by the Research Directorate provided limited information on forced and arranged marriages in Saudi Arabia, whereas information on whether arranged marriages are limited to a particular religious or social group was not found.

According to *The Saudi Gazette*, women are still forced into marriage by their families, who "loo[k] down on marriage outside the family circle" (15 July 2003). A history professor at King Saud University, quoted in *The Straits Times*, said that "[i]n the north and south of the country, forced marriage is a big issue" (5 May 2005).

In April 2005, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Sheikh, Saudi Arabia's grand mufti, declared forced marriage to be against Islamic law and also said "those responsible for it should be jailed" (BBC 12 Apr. 2005; *The Straits Times* 5 May 2005). According to the Associated Press (AP), this is an "unprecedented stand" on the part of the mufti, who holds the rank of minister in the country's government (12 Apr. 2005).

According to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), "[t]he high number of forced marriages in Saudi Arabia is believed to be a factor in the country's steep divorce rate" (12 Apr. 2005).

The Saudi Gazette, citing an article by the Arabic newspaper *Al-Watan*, recounted that a young woman, divorced after her first forced marriage and refusing to enter a second contracted by her family, brought her case before a number of judges and religious leaders who informed her that the marriage contract was not valid and "must be revoked" (15 July 2003).

In May 2005, *The Jerusalem Post* reported that the American-born daughters of Pat Roush, kidnapped by their Saudi-born father when they were just seven and three years of age and who are now both in their twenties, "were wedded in arranged marriages to Saudi men" (25 May 2005; see also IED/HLP 20 Mar. 2003, para. 3).

According to *The Globe and Mail*, "[a]rranged marriages, often with cousins, are still the norm" in Saudi Arabia, although "relations between the sexes are changing" (9 July 2003; see also IED/HLP 20 Mar. 2003, para. 11). The *Houston Chronicle* reported that conservative Saudis believe that allowing women to drive would be detrimental to the traditional practice of arranged marriage (19 June 2005).

An ANSA article indicated that under the "rigid" traditions of arranged marriages, "couples are banned from knowing or meeting each other," yet "[t]he traditional pillars . . . have now become somewhat wobbly as one in four marriages end in divorce and young people more often feel the need to get to know their partner" before the wedding day (29 June 2004).

ANSA also reported that "Saudi families demand money from their daughters' future husbands" and that marriage in the country "is usually conducted as a commercial deal which has just become too expensive," prompting many Saudi men to look abroad for a partner (26 Sept. 2003).

In May 2005, *Arab News* reported the creation of a marriage services office where marriage-minded men are put in contact with families whose daughters are available for marriage (29 May 2005). More than 40 families seeking assistance in getting their daughters married had registered with the service and, within two months of opening, the office had facilitated 10 unions (*Arab News* 29 May 2005). As for the procedure involved, the man fills out an application and meets with the family once they have examined his background (*ibid.*). If the man is acceptable to the family, he then meets his potential bride at an official engagement ceremony, where, should all agree to the marriage, a date is set for the ceremony (*ibid.*). The marriage conditions, including the amount of the dowry, are discussed between the man and the woman's family (*ibid.*).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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