



Road rage and the value of feeling safe in Saudi Arabia

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Khaled Almaeena

The traffic situation in the Saudi city of Jeddah has reached an almost unbearable point – both for motorists and pedestrians.

Long queues of cars, blaring horns and at times fist fights and other acts of road rage are almost a daily feature.

To top it all and make the problem worse is the almost daily changes in road directions. For example, the geniuses who thought of building U-turns at every second or third km on the King's Road did so without even referring the matter to the residents or motorists who use this important artery of Jeddah.

By building these U-turns they thought they would be able to do with the four traffic lights from Al-Tahlia intersection to the globe.

In fact now they have built seven or eight traffic lights as the U-turns have themselves become traffic lights.

This is because the road is almost blocked by three lanes of traffic as cars make a 90 degree turn to go to the other side.

Apparently no time and motion study was made nor computer program utilized as is done in advanced countries. Driving culture in Jeddah is already poor, carelessness among drivers is high and there is total disregard for safety.

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This in addition to a devil-may-care attitude makes the problem one of nightmarish proportions. As speeding drivers cut between the narrow spaces between other vehicles oblivious to the danger they are causing, there does not seem to be a policeman in sight.

If he is there in his car, he can be observed playing with his cell phone! At times on Tahlia Street you can observe a cluster of police cars, but they seem not to be doing anything except at times stopping the flow of traffic and pushing it to another area — for no apparent logical reason.

Fancy cars break traffic rules with impunity. All that people see is a poor limousine driver with his head in a police car window pleading to be let go for an offense he may or may not have committed.

It's high time that policemen should come out of their cars and come to us rather than we go to them as is done in advanced countries.

The government has put them there to serve us and not vice versa. Another widely discussed topic is “Wasta”.

No discipline

One is hit by a car with a teenage driver racing dangerously, no license, no insurance and arrogance written all over his face. You can be complaining as a victim and filing a report when you observe the boy or young man walking out of the police station with a smirk on his face!

And no one can tell me that it does not happen a lot. A phone call, or the intervention of somebody's relative and you might even find yourself accused of being the perpetrator of the accident!

Our society is not a disciplined one. We don't follow rules and to make matters worse, we don't have the mechanism to implement and enforce rules and regulations.

The traffic police personnel are members of this same society. They have to be trained in various aspects of public safety and behavioral skills.

Moreover, many drivers drive in Jeddah as if they are ferocious cats fighting. They weave and swerve, push and pull and have contempt for fellow drivers.

The traffic police, if and where they are found, do not have the professional and personal capacity to deal with these wildcats!

Therein lies the tragedy. Add to this poorly built roads, no overpasses or underground passage for pedestrians to cross the road, no civic sense and you have a doomsday scenario.

Unfortunately, all these “five year plans” overlooked the need for a public transport system, drawing us into the mess we are in today.

Meanwhile, public disenfranchisement with the traffic system continues to grow. We fear for our children's safety every day when we drop them at school.

No one feels safe anymore. We have one of the highest rates of road accidents in the world. This is costing the state billions of riyals.

It is about time we implement sustained road safety awareness programs. Parents should also be made to share their responsibility by disciplining their young.

There should be a strategic partnership between traffic police, the municipality and the public, and the municipality should play a bigger role in providing safe roads.

We do not want to lose more lives. Let us all work together to make our roads safe. Immediate action is needed.

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