

Politicians Are Not Going to Hold Saudi Arabia Accountable: But can we?

DESPITE THE manifold horrors inflicted by the Saudi regime over the years, it was not until the grisly murder of a well-connected exiled journalist in early October that public attention has finally been given to the monarchy's savagery.

U.S.-educated Jamal Khashoggi was perhaps Saudi Arabia's most prominent journalist, having served as editor-in-chief for the Saudi *Al-Watan* daily newspaper and as general manager and editor-in-chief of Al-Arab News Channel. A moderately conservative Islamist who became increasingly liberal in his later years, Khashoggi's writings emphasized the need for freedom of expression in the Arab world. Such rights, if exercised in his home country, could threaten the hold on power by the corrupt U.S.-backed Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, who had paradoxically been lauded in the U.S. media as a reformer.

In recent decades, the Saudi regime has executed hundreds of their domestic opponents. What made Khashoggi's murder different is that, as a *Washington Post* columnist living in the D.C. area, he was well-known and respected among leading journalists, members of Congress, influential pundits, and others. Khashoggi's prominence, along with the sensitivity regarding the protected status of journalists and the brutal nature of his killing, resulted in his death receiving the widespread attention denied to so many of the regime's other victims.

It is worth noting that the incident that led to Khashoggi's initial banning by the Saudis was not his criticisms of Saudi leadership (which came later), but his critique in 2016 of President-elect Trump's Middle East policies. The Saudi regime immediately prohibited Khashoggi from writing in newspapers, making appearances on broadcasts, and attending conferences, resulting in his exile.

While U.S. administrations of both parties have a sordid record of supporting the Saudi family dictatorship, previous presidents have at least pretended to show concern for human rights. By contrast, Trump's explicit insistence that arms deals are more important than taking a stand against the regime's atrocities shocked even hardened critics of U.S. foreign policy.

One factor in Trump's support for Saudi Arabia may be related to wanting Saudi support for possible military action against Iran, even though the concerns Washington has raised about Iran—human rights abuses, lack of democracy, support for extremist groups, and military intervention in other countries—are at least as true about the Saudis.

The U.S. has most directly supported Saudi crimes by providing weapons, delivery systems, strategic coordination, refueling, and other logistics for Saudi Arabia's air war in Yemen, which is responsible for more than 16,000 civilian deaths and injuries in three years (the majority from airstrikes), a massive cholera outbreak, and famine impacting as many as 14 million people. In March, a bipartisan effort in the U.S. Senate to suspend arms transfers to the Saudis failed when 10 Democrats crossed the aisle to join a majority of Republicans in supporting Trump's call to block the bill. A missile that struck a school bus in northern Yemen in August, killing dozens of children, was manufactured by U.S. defense contractor Lockheed Martin, CNN reported.

Yemen's civil war resulted from a U.S.-backed Saudi plan that insisted Yemen's authoritarian president Ali Abdullah Saleh (ousted in a largely nonviolent uprising during the Arab Spring) be replaced by Saleh's vice president, Gen. Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, instead of by the provisional government representing the majority opposition, as pro-democracy activists demanded, and followed by free elections. Houthi rebels, representing the country's Zaidi Shia minority, then seized most of the country. Though the Houthis are guilty of their own atrocities and opposed by most Yemenis, U.S. and Saudi claims that the Houthis are a proxy for Iran are greatly exaggerated.

Whether Khashoggi's murder will finally change U.S. policy or will be another Saudi atrocity that fails to alter decades of U.S. support will depend largely on pressure from the U.S. public. This may not be easy. The Democratic Party's 2016 platform rejected calls for conditioning U.S. support for the Saudi regime and allied monarchies.

As with successful campaigns in recent decades that forced an end to U.S. support for repressive regimes in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Southern Africa, it is up to proponents of human rights to mobilize to force a change in policy.