

CONFERENCE REPORT

The Assassination of Jamal Khashoggi: A Reflection of Regional Politics?



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This is a report on a public session titled “The Assassination of Jamal Khashoggi: A Reflection of Regional Politics?”, held as part of the TRT World Forum 2019. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2019, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.

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PUBLISHER

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE

FEBRUARY 2020

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Speakers



Ayman Nour

Leader of the Ghad el-Thawrah Party and Former Presidential Candidate of Egypt

Dr Ayman Nour is an Egyptian politician, a former member of the Egyptian Parliament and founder and chairman of the Ghad el-Thawrah Party. In 2005, hours after announcing his intention to run for the Egyptian Presidency, he was arrested and removed from the Parliament building. In the 2005 Egyptian presidential election he came in second among ten candidates. He was again subsequently arrested and spent four and a half years in prison. He was a leader of the January 25th protest movement that led to the removal of long time Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak.



Tawakkol Karman

President of Women Journalists without Chains

Tawakkol Karman is a human rights activist, journalist, politician and President of the Women Journalists without Chains organisation. Known as the "mother of the revolution" and "the lady of the Arab Spring," she serves as the General Coordinator of the Peaceful Youth Revolution Council and is a member of the several international human rights NGOs. Tawakkol Karman was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 in recognition of her work in non-violent struggle for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work in Yemen. On receiving the prize, Tawakkol became the first Yemeni, the first Arab woman, and the second Muslim woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize, as well as the youngest Nobel Peace Laureate to date.



David Hearst

Editor-in-Chief of Middle East Eye

David Hearst is Editor in Chief of Middle East Eye, an independent website based in London covering the Middle East in English and French. He appears as a foreign affairs commentator on the BBC, Channel Four, Voice of America, National Public Radio, Al Jazeera English and Arabic, TRT World and Al Araby TV. Before launching Middle East Eye, Hearst was Chief Foreign Leader writer for The Guardian, in addition to serving as the organisation's Associate Foreign Editor, Moscow Bureau Chief, Europe Correspondent, and Belfast Correspondent.



Yasin Aktay

Advisor to the Chairman of the AK Party

Yasin Aktay is a prolific writer, translator, academic, and political advisor. Originally serving as an academician at Selçuk University, Konya, he is currently affiliated with Yıldırım Bayazıt University in Ankara. He is the editor of the Tezkire Journal of Social Science, Thought and Politics and the Sivil Toplum Tezkire. Yasin Aktay has served in several positions within the AK Party, most recently as Deputy Chairman in charge of Human Rights and the Official Spokesman of the AK Party. He has presented many television programmes on several Turkish channels. He is currently the Chief Advisor to the President of the AK Party.



Yahya Ibrahim Assiri

Founder and Director of ALQST

Yahya Ibrahim Assiri is a Saudi Arabian human rights defender. Yahya is the founder and Director of ALQST, a UK-based Saudi human rights organisation. He has assisted with, and is on the board of, several other human rights organisations and has participated in a number of courses and seminars relating to human rights. He has a master's degree in Human Rights and Political Communications from Kingston University, London and has a bachelor's degree in Administration.



Hatice Cengiz

Fiancée of the Jamal Khashoggi

Hatice Cengiz is the fiancée of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who was murdered inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October, 2018. Hatice is a Turkish anthropology doctoral student focused on the gulf countries. She has previously lived and studied in Oman, Egypt and Jordan. Since Khashoggi's assassination, she has led a campaign for justice, calling on the international community to hold those responsible for Jamal's murder to account. She has published opinion pieces in the New York Times and the Washington Post, testified before a congressional subcommittee, and given numerous interviews on the topic.

Summary

The session “The Assassination of Jamal Khashoggi: A Reflection of Regional Politics?” discussed the murder of the prominent Saudi journalist and Washington Post contributor Jamal Khashoggi, which provoked an international outcry and continues to have strategic, political and legal ramifications.

The speakers unanimously mentioned that Jamal was a moderate citizen who wanted to make Saudi people more free by peacefully pushing the Saudi authorities to be more open towards human rights. David Hearst mentioned that Jamal’s ideal vision for the Middle East was to bring democracy through moderate venues, such as giving the Arab world access to quality news in Arabic.

According to Ayman Nour, who knew Jamal for over 30 years, “Jamal was pro-reform in the Arab world. But they (the Saudi leadership) did not understand his position...and saw him as an enemy.” Therefore, they targeted him “to kill the wave of reform.” Tawakkul Karman argued there might be similar Saudi people who have had the similar fate, but Khashoggi’s famous nature revealed the crime.

Regarding the political dimension of the Khashoggi murder, Yasin Aktay contended that the Saudi authorities wanted to harm the Turkish economy by targeting the tourism industry and the Turkish democratic model, which acts as a reconciliation

between democratic and Islamic values. According to Yahya Ibrahim Assiri, the Saudi state does not want any Muslim country to have democracy because of the potential that it could represent a model that the Saudi people could seek to emulate. Additionally, Hatice Cengiz, Jamal Khashoggi’s fiancée, elaborated that Khashoggi’s murder had a negative impact on Saudi reputation, especially Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman’s PR campaign to portray himself a reformer and champion of women’s rights.

On the West’s stance regarding the Khashoggi killing, Tawakkul Karman said that Western governments have turned a blind eye to the crime in exchange for securing economic benefits from the Saudi government. Finally, the panellists and participants arrived at the conclusion that Jamal Khashoggi has come to represent a powerful symbol of democracy for the region and a rejection of the counter-revolutionary efforts-led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Middle East. According to Hatice Cengiz, Jamal Khashoggi will remain a very important source of inspiration for the Arab youth in the years to come. Her views were echoed by Yasin Aktay who stressed that “Jamal was a moderate, but in death he has become a radical democrat. He has become much more influential now.”



Report

Targeting a Moderate Voice

The panellists described the personality of Jamal Khashoggi and his journalistic work as being 'moderate' in nature, representing a principled voice of reform in the Middle East. Jamal's eventual vision for the Middle East in general was to achieve democracy. David Hearst, editor in chief of the Middle East Eye, mentioned that Jamal had very specific projects in regards to his vision, such as setting up an institute, translating The New York Times into Arabic and establishing a television station. The theme behind all of these projects was to give the Arab world quality information in Arabic.

Yasin Aktay argued that Saudi Arabia targeted Jamal as a moderate voice due primarily to fear the spread of democratic ideals in Arab and Muslim countries. David Hearst noted that Jamal was an extremely reluctant dissident who always maintained the hope that he

could somehow achieve his mission of raising the level of democracy without becoming a vocal critic of the Saudi state. Ayman Nour, leader of the Ghad al-Thawrah Party as well as a former presidential candidate in Egypt, said that Jamal's position was best described as being 'pro-reform' and advocated a gradualist approach to change. This measured approach is perhaps one major reason why he was viewed as a threat by the Saudi Crown Prince and his inner circle.

Moreover, the panellists argued that many reformist-oriented Saudis have been imprisoned simply for being moderate in their views regarding their country and the region. For example, the prominent Saudi preacher Salman al-Ouda "is not in prison because he's radical but because he is a moderate scholar" according to Aktay.

It was mentioned that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman is trying to advance an image of himself as the champion of reform and the leader of the opening of Saudi Arabia. However, since the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, the repression has exacerbated in Saudi Arabia. According to Yasin Aktay the tragedy is that the opening of Saudi Arabia is not

about freedom of expression, but rather more dictatorship coupled with hedonism. His views were echoed by Yahya Ibrahim Assiri who expressed that a religious figure close to the Saudi Royal family issued a fatwa following Khashoggi's killing stating that the ruler is allowed to kill half of the population to bring stability for the second half.

Political Dimensions

Yasin Aktay stated that those responsible for Khashoggi's killing chose the Saudi mission in Istanbul for several reasons. First, those within the Saudi state responsible for the killing sought to harm the Turkish economy by targeting the tourism industry. Thus they hoped to portray Turkey as unsafe place for tourism for foreign citizens who usually visit Turkey. Aktay noted that a month before his murder, Khashoggi dismissed the possibility of anything happening to any Saudi citizen on Turkish soil. Jamal reportedly said the Saudi authorities "can do (killing) in Germany. They can do in Kuwait, Lebanon, and Egypt. But, Istanbul is impossible."

The Saudis also chose Turkey as it is the symbol of democratisation in the Islamic World and they wanted to destroy the Turkish image. According to Yahya Ibrahim Assiri, Turkey today represents a very dangerous model for Saudi Arabia under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman because the Turkish model represents a reconciliation between democracy and Islamic values. Accordingly, there is a fear among elements of the Saudi leadership who fear that it could represent a model for the increasingly open and connected Saudi society.

Saudi Image Tarnished

Saudi Arabia's reputation has suffered from the way Jamal Khashoggi was killed. The image of a reformer, which Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has so desperately wanted to nurture, especially the West, has been tarnished. Regarding this point, Hatice Cengiz noted that "even if the administration changes and takes different steps, it still will not clean the scar (left by the Khashoggi murder) from the history of Saudi Arabia."

Discussants, including Cengiz, Karman, Hearst and Aktay underscored that the Saudi leadership's fear from freedom of expression and democracy have led the destruction of their own profile. Before the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, Mohamed Bin Salman led a huge and successful PR campaign that sought to portray him as a reformer, a champion of women's

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rights and reliable partner for the West. However, one year since that tragic event, bin Salman's image has been destroyed in the eyes of civil society and human rights groups according to the speakers. The murder of Jamal Khashoggi will continue to shape attitudes of the international community toward Saudi Arabia and its leadership under the Crown Prince. Hatice Cengiz, opined that if Jamal was still alive, he would

have been upset by the image his country has come to have. She argued the Crown Prince's acceptance of the country's responsibility, while at the same time avoiding personal responsibility for the killing is contradictory and does not make sense. If the Crown Prince is responsible for the country, should he not then bear responsibility for what happens under his watch?

The West's Position

According to the panellists, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi revealed how Western governments have ignored their values and ethical dimensions in exchange of some bilateral economic relationships with the Saudi government. For example, the US President has openly defended the Crown Prince following the Khashoggi tragedy despite the fact that the US intelligence community has indicated that he was directly responsible for the killing. David Hearst argued that the Saudi leadership is highly dependent on US President Donald Trump. This link is not an institutional, but rather a personal relationship between the Trump family and the Crown Prince in particular, because the latter is at the forefront of attempts to normalise Arab relations with Israel. Ayman Nour stated that it is a shame on the Western countries "stood without doing anything." He called on the Western countries, especially the United States, to review the Khashoggi case regardless of the upcoming presidential election and whether Trump stays in power or not.

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The Khashoggi Impact

The session concluded with a discussion of Khashoggi's legacy, both as a journalist and as advocate of reform. The discussants agreed that Jamal will be a very important inspiration for the Arab youth for years to come. Tawakkul Karman stated that by killing Jamal Khashoggi, those who opposed him thought that they would also kill every hope of every dissident abroad. However, the opposite seems

to have prevailed. The incident created stronger opponents among Saudis themselves and from around the world. Jamal Khashoggi now represents a new horizon for democratisation in the Middle East. He is a symbol of the moderate voices of reform in the region. Furthermore, Cengiz mentioned the real importance of Jamal's death is that it was one of the most covered murder in modern history. Jamal had

extensive contacts with Western journalists and so he was treated by the Western media as one of their own.

David Hearst expressed Khashoggi's death came at a time when the counter-revolution against the gains of the Arab Spring is running out of steam. The

impossibility of this project is now being realised on the streets of Beirut, Algiers and Khartoum. For David Hearst, "Jamal, in death, has been far more eloquent than he could have been in life. He has become a symbol of everything that the [Saudi] regime pretended he was not."

Key Takeaways

- Jamal Khashoggi was a moderate, pro-reform figure who wanted to peacefully push Saudi authorities to be more open towards human rights and democracy.
- Jamal Khashoggi represents a powerful symbol of democracy in the Middle East and will remain a very important inspiration for the Arab youth for years to come.
- By choosing to kill Khashoggi in Turkey the perpetrators were seeking to harm the Turkish image and economy.
- The Khashoggi incident has left a great scar on the reputation of Saudi Arabia and its Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman. One year since that tragic event, MBS' image as a 'reformer' has been dismantled.
- The Crown Prince has answer to his own citizens and to the world on why Jamal was killed. Western governments have largely turned a blind eye to the Khashoggi crime in exchange for securing economic benefits from the Saudi government.

