

Blind Ambition: Repressing Dissent and Stifling Public Opinion in Saudi Arabia

By Amy Hawthorne and an unnamed individual inside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
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Brutal repression and a growing climate of fear not only are devastating for the rights and well-being of Saudi citizens but also undermine the Kingdom's stability and governance.

Editor's note: POMED is unable to disclose the identity of the co-author due to concerns for his/her security.

The Saudi government abduction and killing of Saudi journalist and Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi at its Istanbul consulate has provoked international outrage and caused the Kingdom's worst public relations crisis since the 9/11 attacks. U.S. intelligence officials **reportedly suspect** that de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) himself is culpable.

Khashoggi, a longtime Saudi insider, had grown concerned about MBS's authoritarian and impulsive style, feared arrest, went into self-imposed exile in Virginia in 2017, and emerged as one of the few elite Saudis to **openly criticize** the young ruler, calling on him to engage with detractors rather than to silence them. Especially because Khashoggi was not a radical—he supported the monarchy, had worked for important royal family members, and advocated gradual reform—his disappearance and presumed killing has caused waves of fear among Saudi activists and other Arab dissidents. If such a close “partner” of Western powers could take this action against someone as prominent and well-connected as Khashoggi, and outside Saudi borders no less, the obvious message is that no one is safe.

Even as the Trump administration appears to be **negotiating an exit** that would absolve MBS of responsibility, the crown prince and his enablers within the Kingdom continue to stifle what little remains of Saudi public sphere—with potentially far-reaching consequences.

SOVIET ARABIA?

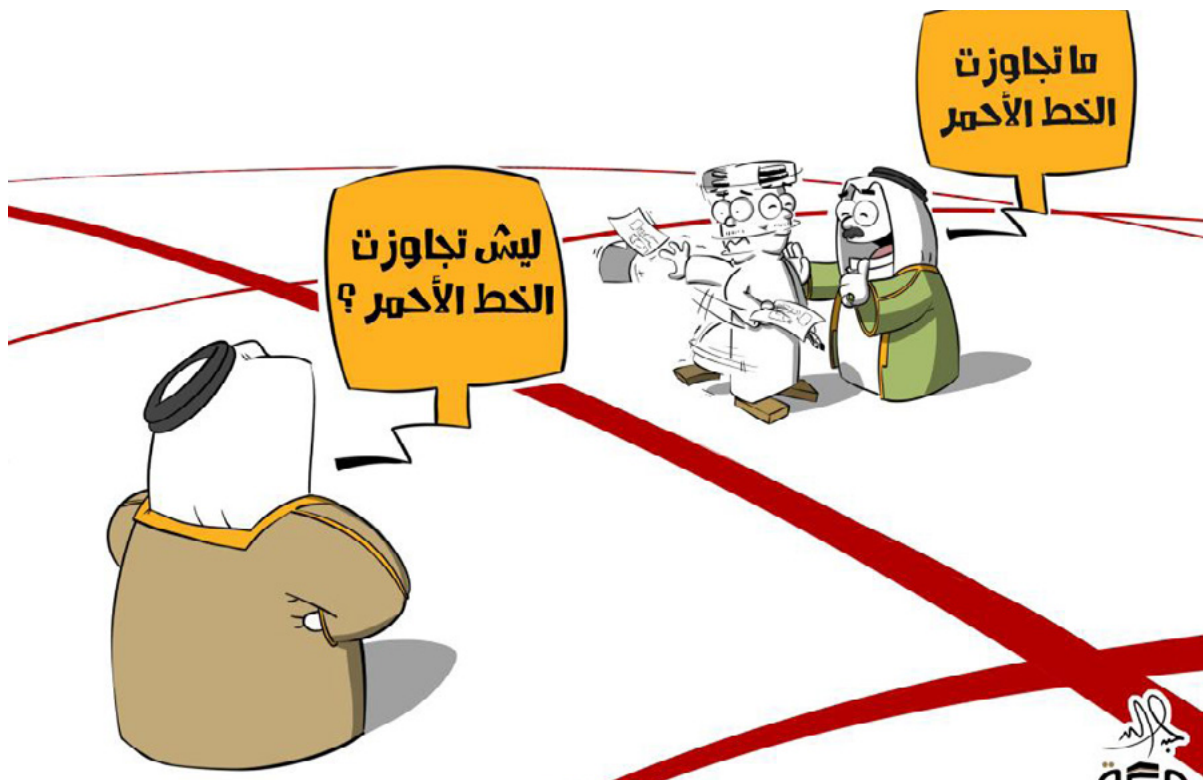
Shocking as it is, the Khashoggi incident is in line with the despotic tendencies that MBS has displayed since his father King Salman named him heir to the throne in June 2017. The Kingdom, an absolute monarchy, has long been one of the world's most conservative and

repressive countries, a place where basic rights are denied and accountable political institutions do not exist. But MBS has contrived to tighten control even more to secure his path to the throne.

He has dispensed with Saudi Arabia's traditional form of consensus-based family rule, concentrating power and sidelining important royals. He has narrowed the parameters of permissible public discourse, using legal penalties as well as online harassment and other forms of intimidation to keep the Kingdom's citizens in line. And he has responded to even mild challenges to official narratives or perceived disloyalty with extreme punishment. Since last fall, **waves of arrests** have detained dozens of prominent figures across the spectrum—members of the royal family, clerics and religious scholars, women's rights advocates, Shia activists, academics, and top businessmen. Those targeted appear united only by their potential to serve as naysayers, nonconformists, or simply independent voices amid the authoritarian consolidation pursued by MBS and his inner circle.

Many of those rounded up are **held incommunicado** or in **solitary confinement** and prosecuted in **opaque** or even **secret trials**, tarred as **traitors** allegedly working with **foreign governments** and **conspiring with terrorist groups** to plot the downfall of the Kingdom—crimes that can bring the death penalty. There are **credible reports of torture** and other forms of physical abuse against detainees, as well as **house arrests**, **travel bans**, and **restrictions on family members**. Under MBS, neither elite status, nor international ties, nor outright wealth offers protection.

The sheer breadth of the arrests, as well as the regular reminders from the authorities of **draconian penalties** for “rumormongering,” have left Saudis unclear as to what, if any, opinions can be expressed. *Makkah* newspaper cartoonist Abdullah Jaber recently sought to capture the confusion **with a drawing** of a Saudi citizen caught between two government officials—one trying to convince the citizen that he has crossed a “red line” of acceptable speech, the other seeking to tell the citizen that he is fine.



The result is that, reminiscent of life in the Soviet Union, many Saudis have become afraid to say anything negative about the government, even at private social gatherings or at home with their families. Sensitive discussions take place with SIM cards stripped from cell phones and the phones themselves placed under seat cushions, so fearful are individuals that agents at the Ministry of the Interior or the intelligence services are listening in.

THOUGHT POLICE AND THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

The climate of fear not only is destroying what meager space reform-minded Saudis had worked hard to carve out in past years for debate and expression, but also has troubling implications for the Kingdom's governance and longer-term stability. MBS's consolidation of power is part and parcel of his ambitious modernization program, *Vision 2030*, that aims to rapidly transform the country by reducing economic dependence on oil exports, shrinking the role of the state as the employer both of first choice and last resort (in favor of the private sector), boosting government efficiency, and attracting massive foreign investment. Alongside this, *huge Saudi investments in Silicon Valley* aim to develop a post-oil "knowledge economy" driven by Western technology companies and employing the Kingdom's highly educated young workforce. As another part of the Vision 2030 agenda, MBS has pushed through reforms previously deemed far too controversial, such as reining in the religious police, allowing women to drive, and re-opening movie theatres.

While some have excused MBS's authoritarianism as *necessary* to maintain stability as Vision 2030 is carried out, the unrelenting crackdown on all criticism may blind the Kingdom's leaders to the costs of the reforms and the strains they may impose on society. Indeed, many of the reforms are controversial and already have caused the dislocation of numerous constituencies. These include clerics whose public role has been sharply curtailed, businessmen who face *mounting competition* from the giant Public Investment Fund chaired by MBS (which threatens to crowd out the private sector with substantial domestic investments) and *rising labor costs*, religious conservatives *unhappy* with the whiplash pace of cultural change, and liberals who have been arrested or *gone to ground* for fear of imprisonment.

The successful implementation of such extensive reforms requires a certain minimum flow of information—from citizens, so the government can catch any grumbling about its actions before popular frustration boils over; among government officials, to coordinate a wide-ranging and extremely complex set of policy changes; and between the government and potential investors, so that firms can assess the risks and potential gains of investing in a historically opaque economy. Some influential supporters of MBS previously had argued for the value of limited consultative and feedback mechanisms as a means to promote good governance. As Saudi businessman and Arabia Foundation founder Ali al-Shihabi wrote in his 2016 book, *The Saudi Kingdom: Between the Jihadi Hammer and the Iranian Anvil*,

...Saudi leaders urgently need to expose themselves to unfettered local public opinion. High-quality domestic political feedback and information, which the Saudi monarchy today lacks, are critical for effective governance...it is certainly better for Saudi rulers to learn to endure a sometimes hostile media that will alert them to hot-button issues... mistakes in policy, and other problems that can be corrected in real time, rather than to awake to such problems when they explode into a crisis... (p. 151).

MBS clearly has gone in the opposite direction.

Today the Saudi media, never exactly a source of diverse viewpoints or outspoken expression, shies away from anything that could be construed as diverging from the official line. Columnists

know to stick to safe topics such as praising the Kingdom's leadership, denouncing enemies Qatar and Iran, or conveying (at most) minor annoyance at bureaucratic inefficiency. The boldest commentary on [last November's detentions](#) in the Riyadh Ritz-Carlton, for example, was the polite suggestion by Okaz writer Khalid Suleiman that the relevant authorities might be more transparent about [who exactly was being charged, and why](#). Since Khashoggi's disappearance, columnists have engaged in [a bidding war of outrage](#) in support of the government's position denying any knowledge or responsibility. "All of us stand shoulder-to-shoulder with you [MBS] to protect and reform the nation," pledged one writer amidst the deluge of negative international coverage. The fiercest rebellion any Saudi outlet can offer right now seems to be simply avoiding the topic altogether.

HI-TECH SOLUTIONS?

In [an October 8 interview](#) with Bloomberg, a foreign reporter asked MBS about whether Saudis were now too scared to talk openly, remarking upon "the kind of fear that I haven't seen before in Saudi Arabia." The crown prince brushed off the comment, asserting, "I don't know those people...what I believe is the majority of Saudis based on most indicators of public opinion—so a lot of companies and centers globally and a lot of companies and centers in Saudi Arabia have taken public opinion numbers—we have a huge percentage of majority support in Saudi Arabia."

The Kingdom's leadership appears to remain supremely confident of its ability to accurately take the pulse of the public while guiding enormous changes. Officials insist that Vision 2030 is informed by and responsive to popular desires. They have been assisted in such "opinion measurement" by global consulting firms such as [Palladium and McKinsey](#), which have helped construct "happiness meters" to gauge the Saudi public's reception of the new policies. [Adaa](#), the national agency charged with measuring progress toward Vision 2030 goals, boasts of its considerable efforts to measure citizens' ["satisfaction with government services."](#) The National Center for Public Opinion Polls also regularly conducts countrywide surveys, although only data on benign questions are released—for example, just [seven percent of citizens](#) say that celebrity endorsements on social media encouraged them to buy advertised products. The government also employs versions of [commercial monitoring platforms](#) in use throughout the Gulf both to enforce digital red lines and to gather public feedback on specific issues, such as the Western celebrities [brought in to perform](#) for Saudi youth. More sinister [surveillance technologies](#) also have been used to target and intercept online activities by particular activists, both at home and abroad.

Occasionally under MBS, Saudis have resorted to social media to express frustration over government failures in providing citizen services. Early in 2018, for example, the announcement of cuts to fuel and electricity subsidies provoked days of [widespread complaints](#) on Twitter. In response, despite efforts to portray the outcry as foreign [media manipulation](#), the government reversed course and announced a [new, multi-billion dollar handout](#) in the form of short-term salary bonuses to state employees (and launched a new Center for Government Communication to [improve messaging](#)).

But surveys, focus groups, and social media monitoring can only reveal what Saudis are willing to say openly. The growing fear is having a chilling effect across society and likely will distort whatever information the government claims to obtain. Even on social media, pro-government accounts—spurred on by close MBS advisor [Saad al-Qahtani](#), head of the Center for Studies and Media Affairs at the Royal Court—stoke a fierce sense of nationalism and victimization among Saudi users, pouncing on critics of Saudi Arabia the world over to correct "false" media narratives. Since the Khashoggi story broke, [hashtags](#) extolling the virtues of the Kingdom and

swearing loyalty to its leaders have dominated trending topics for Saudi Arabia on Twitter, egged on by these *watanjiyya* (ultra-nationalists) and **automated accounts** deployed to boost select messages.

Economist Ronald Wintrobe refers to the phenomenon as the “**Dictator’s Dilemma**”: the more an authoritarian ruler uses fear to instill loyalty, the more that citizens will avoid expressing any displeasure, and the less the ruler can hope to understand about what the population really thinks. The same fear encourages bureaucrats and other officials to stay silent as well, wary of being the bearer of bad news to those in power and jealously guarding plans and data from counterparts for fear of political reprisals. And from what little we know about MBS’s inner circle, the same is true even at the **highest levels of government**. Basic political facts, such as the degree of public support that MBS enjoys, may be not only unknown, but unknowable.

DARKER TIMES AHEAD

The more immediate implications for Saudi Arabia’s rulers will be subtle but wide-ranging, including a steady corrosion of the idea that Vision 2030 serves as an effective reorientation of the Kingdom’s economy and society, rather than as a vehicle for MBS to consolidate control and gain international support and financial backing. When push comes to shove, Vision 2030’s goals may be subordinated to the government’s desire to make criticism of its actions not only costly but practically unthinkable. The costs may include foreign investors hedging their bets (or **pulling away**), citizens quietly funneling money abroad, bureaucrats insisting on high-up approval before making the slightest change, and ultimately, dissent bottling up in parts of the society where the state cannot see. As Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Mark Blyth **argued** in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings, the more that authoritarian rulers seek to clamp down on what they deem citizens’ troublesome “agitation,” the more likely that grievances will pile up under the radar until they result in dramatic and unpredicted upheaval.

For all these reasons, what happened to Jamal Khashoggi is not only an immense injustice, a tragedy for his family, friends, and colleagues, and a frightening development for dissidents everywhere. It is also one of the clearest omens yet of the dark times ahead in Saudi Arabia if the Kingdom’s leadership continues to rule through fear and to silence its citizens.