

## OPINION

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## THE SAUDI COVER-UP CRUMBLES

Evidence mounts of a ghastly crime in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. President Trump still seems inclined to buy the kingdom's lame denials.

If Secretary of State Mike Pompeo flew to Riyadh to read the Riot Act to Saudi rulers over the apparent murder of Jamal Khashoggi, he hid it well behind cheery smiles and professions of amity. But then outrage has been conspicuously absent from the Trump administration in the two weeks since Mr. Khashoggi entered the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul, never to be seen again.

Mr. Pompeo first went to see King Salman and thanked him for his commitment to a “thorough, transparent and timely investigation,” according to a State Department spokeswoman. He then went on to see the real power behind the throne, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and here President Trump joined in by phone. Mr. Trump on Twitter appeared to take at face value the prince's claim that he knew nothing of what happened in the consulate and his promise of a “full and complete investigation.”

“Answers will be forthcoming shortly,” the president promised. Later he said that blaming the Saudi leadership was another case of “guilty until proven innocent.” We'll see.

So far, the only investigations have been those carried out by the Turks. Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, said Tuesday that investigators who searched the consulate were looking into “toxic materials, and those materials being removed by painting them over.”

The Saudis have reportedly been searching for a cover story for the disappearance of the gadfly Saudi journalist, who had been living in self-imposed exile in the United States and writing columns for The Washington Post. Denial is no longer an option — Turkey appears to have pretty solid evidence that Mr. Khashoggi was killed by thugs flown in from Saudi Arabia — so the word in Washington is that the Saudis will try to claim an attempted kidnapping or interrogation gone bad.

On Monday, when Turkey had already leaked considerable evidence of a hit, Mr. Trump was behaving like a royal apologist. “Just spoke to the King of Saudi Arabia who denies any knowledge of whatever may have happened ‘to our Saudi Arabian citizen,’” he wrote on Twitter. A bit later he told reporters, “The denial was very, very strong,” adding: “It sounded to me like maybe these could have been rogue killers. Who knows?”

Actually, he probably does, if American spy agencies are doing their job. But evidence of big-time malfeasance has not prevented Mr. Trump from admiring the likes of Vladimir Putin of Russia, Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt or Kim Jong-un of North Korea (“we fell in love”).

On Mr. Trump's moral compass, these are not the real foes. Even as he was making excuses for the Saudi monarchy, Mr. Trump was railing about Democrats as an “angry left-wing mob” at a rally in Kansas and casting an approving smile as followers brayed “lock her up” about Senator Dianne Feinstein, the California Democrat who was among those who led the opposition to the Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh.

Some of Mr. Trump's more serious Republican supporters have taken a far less forgiving stance toward Saudi Arabia and its heir apparent. “This M.B.S. figure to me is toxic,” said Senator Lindsey Graham, who is normally a close ally of the president, using the crown prince's nickname. “This guy has got to go.”

There's no question that Saudi Arabia is an important American ally in the Middle East and that the relationship cannot be casually severed. Yet the White House should have been first to suspend participation in a major investment conference in Riyadh next week until the Saudis provided a credible account of Mr. Khashoggi's fate, rather than leaving it to American media organizations and business executives to take the lead in pulling out.

If Saudi Arabia is allowed to get away with some lame story about the apparent murder of Mr. Khashoggi, the world's growing gang of autocrats will feel even less constraint. There are plenty of measures at Mr. Trump's disposal that would send the right message, from personal sanctions against those behind the Khashoggi operation to a suspension of arms deliveries to Saudi Arabia. Mr. Trump's aides, members of Congress and allied leaders need to insist that he take the lead in demanding that Saudi Arabia acknowledge what really happened, and why it's terribly wrong.

## When all else fails, there's culture

Nana Asfour

What does it mean to be a Palestinian? In recent years, more and more individuals have turned to one creative field or another to offer up their own answer to that question, in the hope that a better understanding of it will bring real change.

“With the continued failure of the political process, many of us now believe that culture is where we should channel our resources, energy and hopes,” Zina Jardaneh, chair of the board of the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit, in the West Bank, told me recently, echoing the words and sentiments of a number of other Palestinians I have spoken to in the past two decades. Drowned out by other events, their efforts deserve broader acknowledgment and support.

What started out as independent artists wishing to express themselves has grown into a collaborative campaign of sorts, with individuals and cultural organizations banding together to promote Palestinian arts.

The Palestinian Museum, conceived and built by Taawon, a nonprofit civil society organization formed in Europe by a group of Palestinian businessmen and intellectuals, is one example. Since the opening of its sprawling home in 2016, it has become a symbol of the ambitions and determination of those

involved in this informal cultural “movement.”

So has the Qalandiya International, or Qi, a biennial festival of contemporary arts, the result of seven cultural Palestinian institutions joining forces, which is unfolding this month in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel, and in cities worldwide, including New York. As the organizers note: “Qi aims to place Palestine on the world's cultural map by producing a series of exhibitions, as well as performances, talks,

**As avenues toward peace hit a dead end, many Palestinians invest their time and resources in the arts.**

film screenings, workshops and tours, that open up channels for dialogue and exchange, both locally and internationally.”

Among the organizations behind Qi is the Ramallah-based A.M. Qattan Foundation, which this summer unveiled a multi-million-dollar center to host its projects. Over the years, it has nurtured untold Palestinian artists, musicians, writers, dancers and actors, and it now employs more than 100 people.

A.M. Qattan is far from alone. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, there are 625 cultural centers in the Palestinian territories, with 545 cultural centers in the West Bank and 80 in the Gaza Strip. There are also 32 museums — 27 in the West Bank and five in the Gaza

Strip.

These organizations have sprouted and have continued to operate despite many challenges, including travel restrictions between Israel and its surrounding areas, which complicates some Palestinians' ability to participate in their own cultural events.

One of the most immediate and wide-reaching art forms, of course, is film, and, in the last two decades, Palestinians have built a robust, internationally recognized cinema. While there are some recurring refrains, the narratives in the films are not delivering a monotonous dialogue, neither in pitch or content. “Wajib,” a new feature by the Palestinian-born director Anne-Marie Jacir about the generational and political differences between a father and a son, offers complexities of Palestinian perspectives that are not often seen or heard.

Ms. Jacir, whose films were recently on view at BAM in a mini retrospective, is one of the many Palestinians who understand the power that culture can yield. In 2003, she curated a festival of Palestinian films at Columbia University, which resulted in a book with a preface by Edward Said. Recently, alongside her sister, the award-winning artist Emily Jacir (whose solo exhibition is currently on view at Alexander and Bonin in New York), she has transformed her family's 128-year-old home in Bethlehem into an arts hub.

While those involved in this cultural mission are proud of the movement's

independence, its organic growth and the increasing sense of camaraderie and solidarity that accompanies it, many would like the Palestinian government to do more to help. Ms. Jacir said she “received a small but symbolic support from the Palestinian Ministry of Culture” for “Wajib.”

That's unlikely to change now that the United States has decided to withdraw the more than \$200 million in aid to Palestinians, which many educational and humanitarian institutions depend on. Yet it is important for the Palestinian authorities to continue to designate a portion of their budget — as “symbolic” as it may be — to the invaluable contribution of Palestinian artists and filmmakers. At a time when the status quo between Israeli and Palestinians seems intractable, such works supply visual documentation of Palestinian concerns and a more measured portrayal of the conditions under which they exist.

It's true that there is little precedent to suggest that national arts movements alone are capable of bringing about political change. But such cultural undertakings should be viewed as an essential component of the road to peace, one that provides vital possibilities for engagement, participation and cooperation among the generations of Palestinians who, individually and collectively, are painting distinct pictures of their myriad realities.

**NANA ASFOUR** is an editor in The New York Times Opinion section.



Historic Palestinian dresses were on exhibition at the Palestinian Museum in the West Bank village of Birzeit in March.

## America's dilemma in Saudi Arabia



**Thomas L. Friedman**

I have three thoughts on the Jamal Khashoggi saga.

First, I can't shake the image of this big teddy bear of a man, who only wanted to see his government reform in a more inclusive, transparent way, being killed in some dark corner of the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul by a 15-man Saudi hit team reportedly armed with a bone saw. The depravity and cowardice of that is just disgusting.

Second, I do not believe for a second that it was a rogue operation and that Saudi Arabia's effective ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is very hands-on, had no prior knowledge, if not more. And therefore, not as a journalist but as an American citizen, I am sickened to watch my own president and his secretary of state partnering with Saudi officials to concoct a cover story. The long-term ramifications of that for every journalist — or political critic in exile anywhere — are chilling. By the way, I don't think they will get away with it.

This leads to my third point: How should America think about balancing our values and our interests going

forward? The best way to answer that, for me, is to go back to the basics. I always knew that M.B.S.'s reform agenda was a long shot to succeed, but I was rooting for its success — while urging the Trump administration to draw redlines around his dark side — for a very specific reason. It had nothing to do with M.B.S. personally. Personally, I don't care if Saudi Arabia is ruled by M.B.S., S.O.S. or K.F.C.

It had to do with how I defined our most important national interest in Saudi Arabia since 9/11. And it is not oil, it's not arms sales, it's not standing up to Iran. It's *Islamic religious reform, which can come only from Saudi Arabia, the home of Islam's holiest cities, Mecca and Medina.*

I believe 9/11 was the worst thing to happen to America in my lifetime.

We can debate what was the right response to the attacks — Afghanistan, Iraq, the global war on terrorism, the Department of Homeland Security, or metal detectors everywhere. But we cannot debate the costs.

We have spent thousands of lives and some \$2 trillion trying to defuse the threat of Muslim extremists — from Al Qaeda to ISIS — dollars that could have gone to so many other needs in our society.

And I believe that the roots of 9/11 came from two terrible bargains. One was that bargain between the Saudi ruling family and the kingdom's religious establishment, where each blessed the other. The other was America's cynical bargain with the Saudis, which went like this: “Guys, just keep

your oil pumps open, your prices low and don't bother the Israelis too much, and you can do whatever you want out back — preach whatever hate you want in your mosques, print whatever conspiracy theories you want in your papers and treat your women however you want.”

On 9/11 we got hit with the distilled essence of everything that was going on out back. Which is why this column, since 9/11, had been highly critical of Saudi leaders for not reforming their version of Islam, something that would require economic and social modernization as well. They would arrest religious extremists, but Saudi leaders almost never engaged them in a public war of ideas.

**The country has a national interest in Jamal Khashoggi's saga.**

And so what most caught my eye about M.B.S. and made me most hopeful was his tentative willingness to engage in a war of ideas with his religious hard-liners, declaring publicly: “Do not write that we are ‘reinterpreting’ Islam — we are ‘restoring’ Islam to its origins.” He argued publicly that Islam in its origins was tolerant of other faiths and empowering of women and open to new ideas.

He seemed to be aiming to replace Saudi fundamentalist Islam, and its clerics, as the primary source of his regime's legitimacy with a more secular Saudi nationalism — one, to be sure, that had a strong anti-Iran and

anti-Qatar tenor.

Hey, maybe it was all just a fake to cover for a power grab and win Western support. But a lot of young Saudis I spoke to thought it was real and wanted more of it. On this question of Saudi Arabia's most toxic export that had affected America and the whole world — jihadi Islamism — M.B.S. was doing and saying stuff that had real promise.

As veteran U.S. Middle East negotiator Dennis Ross recently pointed out in an essay in The Washington Post: “M.B.S.'s appointment of Muhammad al-Issa as the head of the World Muslim League has sent a powerful new message of tolerance and rejection of radical Islamist teachings. His visit to the U.S. Holocaust Museum, his commitment to interfaith dialogue and his calls for peace mark a significant departure from his predecessors.”

But now M.B.S.'s government also has Jamal's blood on its hands. Should we all overlook that, as President Trump is doing? *We must not, and, in fact, we cannot.*

For starters, I believe that the promise of M.B.S., however much you did or did not think he could bring social, economic and religious reform, is finished. He's made himself radioactive — absent a credible, independent exoneration for Jamal's disappearance and apparent murder. M.B.S. may be able to hold onto power in Saudi Arabia, but his whole reform program required direct foreign investment — and money has been flowing out of **FRIEDMAN, PAGE 15**