

Khaled Beydoun: The Saudi Regime Does Not Represent Islam (Part Two)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



He has also liberalized Saudi society. It may seem from a Western perspective to be a minor matter, but it was huge for the Saudis: giving women the right to drive represents an enormous step forward, in curbing the misogyny of mainstream Islam. At the same time, recognizing that he would have to proceed cautiously so as not to alienate the reactionary religious establishment, and even some conservative family members, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) did have some women activists arrested. Not content with the freedom to drive, they had been demanding more reforms, such as giving women the right to vote. MBS likely shares their desires, but he wishes to proceed more cautiously. He has to worry, as the activists do not, about a conservative backlash.

Finally, MBS has made clear, with his plans for a \$500 billion Economy City, or NEOM, that this is one of his mega projects designed to reshape the Kingdom and its economy. "We try to work only with the dreamers," the crown prince told investors in Riyadh. "This place is not for conventional people or companies."

Plans call for the city to be powered entirely by renewable energy, while also making use of automated driving technology and passenger drones. MBS must become less dependent on oil. He would also like to encourage a work ethic among Saudis, many of whom are used to 3-4 hour work days in government offices, while the real work in the Kingdom is done by a vast army of foreigners. To change Saudi work habits remains a tall

order.

Khashoggi, who represented honesty and evenhandedness, courage and the possibility of journalistic freedom in a nation entirely devoid of it, offered the world a living counterexample of what it meant to be Saudi. He was proud of both his faith and his national origins; his work and his very being stood as an affront to the Saudi regime and the assent of its unpredictable strongman, Mohammed bin Salman.

Khashoggi's brave journalism was inspired in great part by Islam, and indicting it on account of the vile actions of the Saudi regime, is a double injustice: first, to the memory of a courageous journalist, who post-mortem will continue to symbolise the quest for a journalistic freedom wholly denied in Saudi Arabia; and second, to a global religion that stands apart from the vile actions of the Saudi regime, or any single state or government that wields it to further its earthly objectives.'

No one, despite Beydoun's insistence, is "indicting [Islam] on account the vile actions of the Saudi regime." Bedouin need not worry. All criticism has been directed, as it should be, to MBS and, in some cases, to his father as well.

Beydoun's praise of Khashoggi does leave out the fact that he was not exactly "evenhanded" when it came to Israel, where his opposition to the Jewish state never wavered. Indeed, one of his main reasons for opposing MBS was the latter's willingness to enter into an informal alliance with Israel against Iran. Khashoggi was no secularist, either. He had been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood since the 1970s, and he remained a supporter of that organization. He stood by Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood's presidential candidate in Egypt, whom real secularists deplored.

It is not clear why Beydoun declares that Khashoggi's journalism was "inspired in great part by Islam." The Western

democratic ideal is that a government's legitimacy depends on whether it follows the will of the people, however imperfectly expressed in elections. The Islamic ideal is that a government's legitimacy depends on whether the ruler follows the will of Allah, as expressed in the Qur'an. The ruler may or may not be a despot, but he must be a good Muslim. Khashoggi supported democracy as a way to bring about Islamic rule, as had happened in Egypt with Mohamed Morsi.

Beydoun refers to the "vile actions of the Saudi regime." That is one thing we can all agree on. Murdering Khashoggi was indeed a "vile action." But Beydoun's belief that Islam itself is being blamed, and not Saudi Arabia, or the Saudi royals, is simply not true. He claims that Saudi Arabia has made itself synonymous with Islam. Saudi Arabia might well have wanted that, but it simply hasn't happened. There are hundreds of articles online about Khashoggi's murder that castigate not Islam, but only MBS, his underlings, and in some cases, King Salman.

It is Beydoun himself who raises the issue of blaming the faith because, he claims, the powerful Saudis have persuaded the world that their country represents the true Islam. But who believes that outside of Saudi Arabia? No Westerner, and very few Muslims, thinks that because the Saudis control Mecca and Medina, and have spent tens of billions paying for Wahhabi mosques and imams around the world, they have become the de facto leaders of the Camp of Islam. Does Erdogan think that Saudi Arabia represents Islam? Does the Ayatollah Khamenei? The Saudi writ does not run very far, not beyond the handful of Gulf Arab states that have joined Saudi Arabia in attempting – so far without success – to change Qatar's pro-Iranian and pro-Muslim Brotherhood policies. Just how powerful can Saudi Arabia be if it can't bring even tiny Qatar to heel?

Though there was plenty to admire about Khashoggi, there was also plenty to deplore. His deep animus toward Israel, his support for the Muslim Brotherhood, his underestimating the

need for MBS to proceed with social reforms – especially more rights for women – at a cautious pace that would not cause a rebellion among the religious, are in the debits column. But in the column of credits, there is Khashoggi's remarkable bravery in continuing to criticise a regime that, as he well knew, did not take such criticism lightly, though just how far it was prepared to go to shut down his voice must, on the afternoon of October 2, have astonished even him.

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