

From Khashoggi to Al-Jabri: A Principal Question

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Brief Analysis

Local Saudi dissidents have taken up figures like Jamal Khashoggi and Saad al-Jabri as literal and figurative martyrs for their causes, but their depiction ignores both men's histories working inside the Saudi state. These dissidents expose, therefore, some of the weakness in their messaging, and they may lack the robust logical framework to support what they demand for as real change in Saudi Arabia at any point.

Since the rise of the current Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), he and his administration have faced a wave of heavy systematized criticism in some international media outlets, often including opinions or analysis from prominent Saudi dissidents. This wave of anti-MbS critique has only become more aggressive since the 2018 assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the recent developments of the currently unfolding legal suit filed in U.S. federal court by the Saudi former intelligence officer Saad Al-Jabri.

After his assassination, many Saudi dissidents started appearing in Arab, American, and European media outlets praising Khashoggi as a hero for their cause, in addition to promoting him in their social media accounts. Some dissidents also suddenly claimed connections to him after the fact. Others described his flight from Saudi Arabia to Washington as a sign of his honor, while still others began using the term shaheed (martyr) when referring to him, describing him as someone who has given up his life for a cause while upholding his principles and honour. A group of dissidents even launched an online platform named after him: the Jamal Khashoggi Academy of Freedom and Rights. This non-degree granting academy provides free virtual education taught by a number of Saudi dissenting scholars including Madawi Al-Rasheed and Abdullah al-Awdah.

Saad al-Jabri has won a sort of similar affection from the dissident community. Al-Jabri is claiming to be targeted by the Saudi authorities in a case under legal consideration in a U.S. federal court. The media began reporting news stories about al-Jabri's children, reporting that they were barred from visiting their father, and many Saudi dissidents have publicly expressed empathy with al-Jabri's situation.

However, despite shows of support from dissidents who oppose the Saudi state and its policies, Khashoggi and al-Jabri both share a long history of serving the Saudi government, especially in matters related to anti-terrorism and national security. As a journalist, Khashoggi covered the Afghanistan War in the 1980s before becoming media advisor to Prince Turki Al Faisal, the former head of Saudi Intelligence and former Saudi Ambassador to the United Kingdom and the United States. Similarly, al-Jabri was a state minister and the closest aid to the former Crown

Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, serving in special missions related to the war on terrorism. Both Khashoggi and al-Jabri served the Kingdom before losing their prestigious status with the new administration led by the young Crown Prince and his new vision for the country. Curiously, however, neither of them claimed to be a dissident, even when they did have deep differences with the Saudi government. Despite the few negative comments made by Khashoggi against the Saudi government, he has always insisted on his support to the Vision 2030 and the ambitions of Crown Prince.

Even considering his brutal murder, dissidents' willful disregard of Khashoggi's complicated past opens significant questions about these well-known dissident pundits and their views. What are their criteria for distinguishing good people from bad? Specifically, does the sad ending of his life justify much of Khashoggi's former career, which is not favored by those dissidents who claim to be against the major policies of Saudi government? How would they describe Khashoggi had he passed away naturally before leaving the country in June 2017, given that he endorsed most of the formal Saudi actions that the dissidents are criticizing?

The essence of these questions also pertains to al-Jabri's case. Publicly active dissidents, in their discussion of his claims of being targeted by the Saudi state, are ignoring the major part of al-Jabri's story, al-Jabri himself. Considering their views on the Saudi administration, one would expect Saudi dissidents to also hold a strongly negative attitude towards al-Jabri given his major role in dealing with domestic opponents to the Saudi state. All of the dissidents' critiques of Saudi security policies should be applied to al-Jabri, the engineer of the security system they characterize as oppressive and harsh. It seems the dissidents are applying the "enemy of my enemy is my friend" approach in their views of al-Jabri.

Moreover, what would be their response if al-Jabri were to reach a deal with the Saudi authorities in his case? It seems that, in reality, the vocal dissident community is momentarily standing with their less dangerous enemy, al-Jabri, against their major enemy, the Saudi state. This strange positioning suggests a weakness within those publicly dissenting from the Saudi state. Despite the high intellectual level of those dissidents, they are building their public arguments against the state on a personal basis rather than one founded by principles.

The same questions arise with media outlets who commonly celebrate Khashoggi and Al-Jabri. Al Jazeera, which has adopted an aggressive stance toward Saudi Arabia after the Gulf Crisis, has focused constantly on the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, holding it as evidence in the political crime case against the Saudi government. Al Jazeera has now produced numerous reports on al-Jabri's allegations, and made it the major news story covered on daily news and some regular shows for a period of time. One of its shows, "Above the Power" described al-Jabri as a living martyr.

Regardless of the actions of the Saudi government and their alleged involvement in unethical acts against these two figures, Khashoggi's and al-Jabri's histories do not reflect a fierce dedication to the types of opposition espoused by dissidents who claim them as martyrs for their cause. As such, it is unclear what these dissidents look for when evaluating their enemies and their friends.

Indeed, unwavering support for two men who do not necessarily represent their viewpoints is likely to cast doubt on the credibility of those willing to express it. Opposition figures who view themselves as academics or activists claim they want to change the equation in Saudi Arabia and seek radical reform that will bring a better life for their people, but the recent valorization of al-Jabri raises the question of those opposition figures' competency in providing an alternative vision for the country. ❖

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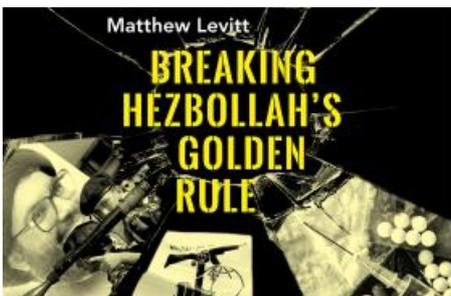
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