

The Case for Muhammad bin Salman

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Brief Analysis

In the tragic Khashoggi affair, the Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS) certainly bears responsibility. As the face of the new Saudi Arabia, and as a young, daring, risky, and even reckless autocratic leader, MbS's connection to the crime should certainly be examined with a significant degree of scrutiny.

However, outside commentators should make a clear distinction between issues of political liability, moral accountability, and criminal culpability. MbS is certainly subject to the first, and is right to be questioned about the second. But unless and until available facts can actually implicate the prince, Western media should not treat MbS any differently than others connected to crimes—innocent until proven guilty.

From a principled standpoint, arguments that political, security, and economic interests militate against assuming the prince's guilt—including those voiced by the US President—are irrelevant.

Yet denouncing Prince and Country in an attempt to reject the influence of these material connections is equally in error. MbS is certainly not less guilty because Saudi Arabia is an important partner in a troubled region, and so he should not be considered more so due to avoid the appearance of catering to the importance of the partnership with his country.

Many arguments have been advanced to bolster the narrative of the Prince's guilt. Critics have pointed out that he has been ruthless and reckless in multiple prior cases; some claim that he has evolved into a de facto absolute ruler, and as such no operation of this magnitude would occur without his approval and direction. Moreover, the way in which Saudi explanations of the incident have shifted drastically while remaining incredible also leads to questions around the extent of the Saudi government's role.

MBS is indeed an autocrat, seemingly on the path to inherit an absolute monarchy. It is, however, important to note that his ascent to power is domestically unprecedented, and as such MbS may not have the type of central control expected of other autocratic governments. What is certain is that MbS should have known. Circumstantial evidence available so far does not show that he did.

Moreover, the trend in implicating MbS in reports on the Khashoggi affair seems partly motivated by a feeling of revealing a hypocrisy in MbS's prior image as a forward-thinking reformer, cultivated through his own extensive efforts and expense. Yet recognizing and exposing the cracks in thinly-veiled hagiographic portrayals of the prince should stand on their own merit.

Instead, pundits and politicians speaking on the Khashoggi affair have pointed to the very elements of Saudi Arabia MbS is seeking to reform in order to implicate him: Saudi-funded mosques and madrasahs across the globe, school curricula condoning exclusion and violence against non-Muslims, and oppressed women and persecuted minorities. Pundits have even returned to the fact that fifteen out of the nineteen plane hijackers on September 11 stemmed from the Kingdom as a type of ‘coup de grace.’ These themes reflect a long-standing critical narrative comfortable with blaming Saudi Arabia for much of the security, cultural, religious, and economic upheavals that have shaken the world in the past decades. As an ‘alien’ and ‘medieval’ Kingdom, Saudi Arabia has often operated as a convenient scapegoat in a deeply complicated region where few political systems actually act in ways palpable to Western audiences.

While criticism of Saudi Arabia is often polemically charged and reflecting of partisan stands, it is not void of substance. Saudi and American values have traditionally diverged in many instances, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. However, the assassination and dismembering of a respected journalist is an act incompatible with both value systems. Attempting to indict Saudi culture and society for this particular act is misrepresentative of the Kingdom’s values.

Moreover, the recent references to September 11 are particularly concerning. Attempting to connect the terrorist attack to the country of Saudi Arabia ignores how Al-Qaeda purposely recruited Saudis for the attack, in large part as an attempt to dislodge the Washington-Riyadh partnership. If not a bad faith smear, the invocation of this event reveals a radical lack of understanding of how the Kingdom’s social and political evolution over the past seventeen years.

Muhammad bin Salman is not alone in seeking a new social and cultural model for Saudi Arabia. His appeal to large constituencies in the Kingdom is reflective of his success in articulating a long-frustrated desire to challenge the religiously-framed totalitarian regimentation suffered by Saudi society. Paradoxically, the narrative that proclaims his guilt places it in the context of the socio-religious system that he has sought to dismantle, with wide popular support.

And while the possibility of MbS ordering the murder of Jamal Khashoggi is not out of the question, other more plausible alternative theories should also be considered, unless and until clarity is achieved through a credible criminal investigation. MbS has relied on a number of controversial aides in his ascent to power, many who have displayed questionable behaviors both online and in real life. Some have openly fancied themselves as king-makers and power-brokers in their own domains, be it sports, media, or cyberspace. Moreover, these inclinations have in some cases degenerated into immoral and illegal actions—from assaulting a former wife in the streets of Cairo to pirating Qatari cable networks.

It is consequently reasonable to imagine that a request from the prince to cover and maybe even rendition a dissident metastasized into the absurd crime that ended Jamal’s life through the high-octane actions of his aides. Nor would it be difficult to imagine the confusion and clumsy attempts at damage control in Riyadh as the work of bureaucrats striving to navigate uncharted waters in an attempt to mitigate the disaster.

From Yemen to Qatar, through the abduction and forced resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri and “shake-down” arrests at the Riyadh Ritz-Carlton, MbS has demonstrated a proclivity for questionable and badly measured actions. However, the large hit-team operation conducted at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul under the evident scrutiny of the intelligence services of a hardly friendly rival, Turkey—is beyond bad judgment. In addition to the crime’s inherent cruelty, it can only be understood as a mindless action that jeopardizes MbS’s interests — especially given the timing of his flagship event “Davos in the Desert.” Nor is it logical to believe that MbS would be so full of confidence over his sense of importance to Western powers that he would believe the world community

would simply forgive and forego a brutal murder that so quickly linked back to the Saudi government. Evidently, this does not absolve MbS, who may, however unlikely, thought he enjoyed unlimited impunity. But it also calls for wariness in assessing possible scenarios.

For the critics and opponents of Saudi Arabia, the Khashoggi murder is an additional argument, even if not yet an irrefutable proof, that the Kingdom and its rulers are a malignant or a malevolent agency. For the proponents of a US-Saudi partnership, some action may eventually be warranted, but the thrust ought to be avoiding the degradation of the relationship as a result of one incident, however grave, if no direct link to the country's top leadership is exposed.

In the likely outcome that no incriminating evidence arises to directly implement MbS, the Crown Prince is not merely entitled to a presumption of innocence. He also ought to continue to be recognized for who he has demonstrated to be: an autocratic, charismatic leader, prone to excess, but still governed by visionary ambition and some degree of common sense. ❖

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