Why the Arab World Needs Democracy Now

Jamal Khashoggi
(1958 - 2018)
Introduction

Nader Hashemi

On October 2, 2018, Jamal Khashoggi walked into the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. He never walked out. A substantial body of evidence has surfaced to suggest that he was murdered—and his body dismembered—in a premeditated operation that can be traced to the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad bin Salman (MBS).

Khashoggi’s death has sparked a global crisis with few parallels in modern history. A group of prominent human rights organizations—Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, The Committee to Protect Journalists, and Reporters Without Borders—have demanded a UN-led international commission of inquiry. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is under the kind of international scrutiny not seen since 9/11.

In the United States, there has been a growing chorus of outrage. It has been led by the media, civil society groups, human rights activists and average citizens, all of whom are demanding accountability from Riyadh and a reassessment of U.S.-Saudi relations. A bipartisan group of Senators are pushing for sanctions against Saudi Arabia in accordance with the Magnitsky Act.

The assassination of a dissident intellectual by an authoritarian regime rarely evokes this type of reaction. How can we explain the global response to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi? Several factors are relevant here.

First, there is a love story. Khashoggi went to the Saudi consulate to obtain divorce papers so that he could re-marry. His fiancée, Hatice Cengiz, waited for him outside and then sounded the alarm when he did not return. Since then, her essays in the Washington Post and New York Times have revealed details of their relationship, their hopes, dreams, and future plans that make his story relatable to a wide audience.

Secondly, Khashoggi’s murder is being seen through the prism of human rights. This encompasses not just the monstrous brutality that led to his death, but also the significance of freedom of expression. A journalist who was a regular contributor to a major American newspaper was eliminated simply because the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia did not approve of his views. Commenting on this aspect of the Khashoggi crisis, Fred Hiatt of the Washington Post, observed: “this can’t be our world, where a government can lure a journalist to their own diplomatic compound in a foreign country … dismember him and have him disappear.”

Hiatt’s comments draw attention to the third aspect of this story, namely its global dimensions. There is a palpable sense that global order is unraveling. We are living in an era of democratic decline, rising authoritarianism, and the weakening of international norms. At the same time that Jamal Khashoggi disappeared, the former head of Interpol mysteriously vanished, and is reportedly in Chinese custody. A month earlier, the British government formally charged two men, who work for Russia’s military

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1 For a summary of what has been revealed see Martin Chulov, “Jamal Khashoggi: murder in the consulate,” The Guardian, October 21, 2018.
2 Merrit Kennedy, “Jamal Khashoggi’s Last Column Before Disappearance Calls For Free Expression,” NPR, October 18, 2018.
intelligence service, with trying to poison a former KGB spy and his daughter in Salisbury, England. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 44 journalists have been killed this year. President Trump’s silence on these issues, coupled with his admiration of Kim Jong Un, Vladimir Putin, and other global strongmen – including his own attack against the media/journalists – adds to the intensity and anger that surrounds this story.

Then there is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. President Trump chose Riyadh as the destination for his first state visit. From the outset, an intimate bond developed between the two heads of state. The president and the House of Saud viewed the world through the same lens and Trump’s new Middle East policy identified Saudi Arabia as its linchpin. This connection was solidified by the close personal relationship that developed between Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner and MBS. The president’s reluctance to hold Saudi Arabia accountable for what happened in Istanbul has fueled the interest in story, particular in the United States.

One final point. The American people believe that they have been lied to again. MBS was presented to the American public as a young, modernizing, liberal reformer. Prominent voices in the U.S. foreign policy establishment including Thomas Friedman hailed MBS’ arrival as the equivalent of “Saudi Arabia’s Arab Spring, at last,” and Dennis Ross forcefully argued that “America should get behind Saudi Arabia’s revolutionary crown prince.”

Earlier this year on an official state visit, MBS met with the most important and influential leaders of America’s political, business, and entertainment elite. That list included Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, Henry Kissinger, Michael Bloomberg, George W. Bush, George H. W. Bush, Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, Rupert Murdoch, Richard Branson, Mark Zuckerberg, the mayors of major American cities, the presidents of leading U.S. universities, and the editorials boards of key newspapers. Even Oprah Winfrey and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson met with MBS. While all of this was happening, other reports were slowly beginning to surface that suggested the crown prince was not the open-minded liberal reformer he was made out to be.

While imposing fiscal austerity on his own people, MBS kidnapped and held his own relatives in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh in a scandalous shake down. Next, he bought a $500 million yacht, a $450 million Da Vinci painting and a $300 million French chateau. Other transgressions included kidnapping of the Lebanese Prime Minister, imposing a siege on Qatar, and picking a fight with Canada that led to a major diplomatic row.

In the domain of human rights, MBS’s policies are more egregious. They include the arrests of women’s rights activists and reformist clerics, increased media censorship and a rising number of executions. Most significantly, there has been a pattern of clear and consistent war crimes in Yemen that have led to immense human suffering and for which MBS bears direct responsibility. This brings us to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

It is should be clear now that MBS aspires to despotic rule. He cannot tolerate criticism of his leadership. It is important to remember that Khashoggi was not a radical dissident or a revolutionary. His criticisms of Saudi Arabia were reformist in nature. As a former regime insider, he viewed himself as a Saudi patriot, and a member of the loyal opposition. While it is true that his criticism of Saudi policy increased the year prior to his death, it was always very measured. Even this mild form of dissent was unacceptable to MBS who calculated that he could orchestrate Khashoggi’s murder and get away with it.

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In honor of Jamal Khashoggi’s courage and heroism, we are pleased to publish for the first time an edited transcript of a speech he delivered on April 26, 2018, as the keynote speaker of the 19th Annual Conference of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID) in Washington, DC. Our Center for Middle East Studies co-sponsored this event and awarded Jamal Khashoggi the Muslim Democrat of the Year Award. The title of his presentation was “Why the Arab World Needs Democracy Now.”

In publishing this speech at this time, we join those around the globe who are outraged by recent events. We hope the publication of this speech will keep Jamal’s ideas alive. We also hope that it will contribute to the international effort that demands truth, justice, and accountability for the tragic and senseless murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

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Thank you very much for inviting me. I feel very nervous about giving a keynote speech. I am good with panels, but not a keynote lecture.

I am from Saudi Arabia, where the issues of democracy and Islam are very much relevant. When a Saudi Arabian official wants to brush away the question of democracy, in the past, he would always raise the theoretical debate as to whether or not democracy is compatible with Islam. Perhaps he would call Radwan Masmoudi to organize a conference in Saudi Arabia and explore the question of Islam’s relationship with democracy. In this sense, Saudi Arabia has a relevant connection with this organization, the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID).

The relationship between Islam and democracy is a subject that many people in this room have long discussed, debated, written books and essays on. Debate on the topic, or so we thought, conclusively ended with the coming of the Arab Spring when the people of the Arab world, especially the youth, even the Islamists, and including some Salafis, who were always critical of democracy, supported this event. Other Salafis remained very critical of democracy, viewing it as *kufr* (un-Islamic) based on the belief that democracy represents a rejection of religious values.

Many people in my country continue to believe that Islam and democracy are irreconcilable. Debate on this topic, however, should have ended with the coming of the Arab Spring, where we witnessed long voting lines in 2012 in Tunisia and Egypt. This clearly demonstrated that the people in the Arab world were ready for change, they wanted democracy, and they enthusiastically participated in democratic elections, including Islamist parties who in the past were often the focus of the debate on Islam’s compatibility with democracy.

The Arab world voted for democracy the moment the people agreed to participate in the Arab Spring and the moment that the people voted overwhelmingly for political change. This is an argument we can use against anyone who might claim today that the “Arabs are not ready for democracy.” Those pictures that are still available from 2012 that show long lines in Egypt and in Tunisia of men, women, young, and old who were going to the polls. This should be contrasted with the sham elections we see today in Egypt and in other parts of the Arab world.

Today, Saudi Arabia is struggling with different aspects of modernity – with cinemas, art,

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1 Radwan Masmoudi is the founder and president of the Center of the Study of Islam and Democracy, a Washington DC based non-profit think tank dedicated to promoting democracy in the Muslim world.
entertainment, mixing of the sexes, opening up to the world, rejecting radicalism, and the hegemony of the religious establishment on social life. The religious establishment have had a heavy grip on social life that has influenced the life of every Saudi man and woman. Even though we are gradually departing from this, the Saudi leadership is still not interested in democracy. We are pursuing all forms of modernity, but not democracy. The difference today, however, is that the old, lame excuse that democracy is not compatible with Islam is no longer being advanced. Instead, with confidence, a Saudi ruler will say to an American journalist – just as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman recently told Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic* – that absolute monarchy is our preferred form of government.2 Why?

We are living in the age of authoritarianism, the topic of this conference. Some people feel assured that there is no longer a need for democracy, that authoritarianism is a better form of political rule. They advance an argument that societies need a great leader to lead. Democracy will undermine the ability of the great leader to make the necessary decisions to guide his people to a better future. Today in the Arab world, around a dinner table in Riyadh, Cairo, or Amman, you would likely hear intellectuals, who were once considered liberal due to their past support for liberty, political change, and democracy, articulate a statement such as: “Arabs are not ready for democracy.” I am certain that many of you who have spent time in the Arab world recently would have heard such a statement lamenting the importance of democracy for the Arab world. If you push back against this argument, you would be told: “even if Arabs are ready for democracy, they don’t know how to take advantage of it; they always make the wrong choice.” A related argument is that: “the Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood, they have kidnapped the Arab Spring.” In my country, a variant of this argument is: “Saudis don’t know how to choose. If we have democracy, they will not vote out of their conscience, they will vote based on their tribal loyalties.”

In short, a popular argument in the Arab world today is that democracy is not good for us; we need a strong leader instead. This view is spreading around many parts of the Arab world. You can hear it in Egypt from an Egyptian businessman who supports the ruling regime. You can hear it from a doubtful Jordanian, maybe even a doubtful Tunisian, who seeks a return to the old status quo.

There are intellectuals, including a good friend of mine, a Saudi Arabian who was raised abroad, who openly defends the term “benevolent autocracy.” He is prepared to write about the value of benevolent autocracy in an American newspaper and thinks it is the best choice for Saudi Arabia. It is the old notion *al-mustabidu al-adl* (the just dictator) that died near the time of Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1855-1902).3 Regrettably, this idea is coming back in the Arab world in the form of the benevolent autocrat or the just dictator.

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3 Late 19th century Arab-Muslim reformist intellectual of Syrian origin.
Therefore, while there are many people who believe in democracy and want to promote it, simultaneously today there is a very strong chorus of voices of Arabs and non-Arabs who are anti-democratic. They are active, they have budgets, they have money, they use media and their lobbyists to try to influence the narrative to oppose democracy in the Arab world. Recently, at the Riyadh Book Fair, which I was not able to attend, one of the books on display was called *Against the Arab Spring*. The author of the book had the audacity to use this offensive title and put his name on it.

Democracy in the Arab world is also under attack from another group. In contrast to Arab liberals, we have the radical Islamists. They are making a comeback, in the form of ISIS, and in the form of many of the Salafi fighters who are fighting, for example, with Khalifa Haftar in Libya. They are also against democracy. They preach against it both in the form of violence that we see among General Haftar’s fighters and in the mosques. Thus, democracy is under attack from the unusual suspects, the Arab liberals and radical Islamists.

This is why the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy and the many believers of democracy around the world should resume your advocacy efforts to counter this narrative.

You must seek to reassure people in the Arab world who either have lost hope in democracy because of its perceived failures or because they fell victim to the concentrated propaganda attack on democracy coming from state television, on news channels, and by intellectuals who routinely are attacking democracy. This assault on democracy is affecting people; some are losing hope in democracy and there is a need for organizations such as CSID and other like-minded organizations to counter this narrative.

Since the time of Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, the man who pushed for reform in the late 19th century during under the Ottoman Empire, Arab and Muslim intellectuals have been supporting democracy or at least some variant of it. When I use the term “democracy” I do not literally mean democracy as we understand it today, but rather in the broad meaning of the term that overlaps with values such as liberty, checks and balances, accountability and transparency. We were aiming for these goals in the form of good governance, equality, and justice in the Arab world. There is another reason why we need democracy now in the Arab world: to stop mass violence.

Today, there are two kinds of Arab countries. Countries that need reform, such as my country, Jordan, and Morocco. These countries need democracy for good governance, and because democracy entails checks and balances so that they will not suffer from an economic hardship, for example. However, for countries like Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the only way out for those three countries is democracy. Some form of power sharing is needed. It can be along the lines of the Afghanistan arrangement, where you bring all of the Yemenis in one huge room and force them into an agreement on how to share power.

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4 A prominent Libyan army officer/warlord, formerly in Qaddafi’s army and backed today by the UAE and Egypt.
This is the only way forward and the chief reasons why wars are continuing in these countries is due to the lack of a mechanism for power sharing.

The immediate issue facing these countries is not good governance, but a mechanism to stop the killing. Inevitably, the question of good governance will emerge, but at the moment, it is not the priority. There is great hope for democracy in other countries that have not been marred in civil or internal conflict, such as Tunisia, which is struggling toward a true, democratic system.

What I found interesting is that many of my Tunisian friends, despite the progress they have made, are also worried about democracy. They tell me they really do not want to influence anybody. They do not want to preach or appear as preaching to the rest of the Arab world. What they really want from the rest of the Arab world is to simply be left alone. Allow us to pursue our own democracy, they say, we do not want to interfere in anyone’s internal affairs.

Notwithstanding this observation, I still think that Tunisians have an important responsibility. I believe we should, including this organization (CSID), support news channels that are supportive of freedom and political change in the Middle East. These channels, for example, should spend a considerable amount of time covering the upcoming Tunisian municipal election. Even though it is only a local election in Tunisia, every Saudi, every Egyptian and every Syrian should see what the Tunisians are enjoying on May 6, 2018. I hope it will inspire the rest of the Arab world to work for a similar form of government in the future.

Allow me to end with this message. Democracy is under attack today both violently and physically – but the concept of democracy is also under attack intellectually. It is the role of writers, intellectuals, and politicians to respond to this attack. We need to defend the rights of the Arab people to have democracy in our own countries, in our own localities, but at the same time we must speak to foreign leaders, foreign powers, and foreign parliamentarians about this topic. They also have a role to play and many of them have begun to lose hope in the prospects of Arab democracy. Some of them are now repeating the old racist statement: “Arabs are not ready for democracy [because they are Arabs].” This problem is exacerbated by the fact that there is zero interest from the current [Trump] administration to support democracy in the Arab world. Similarly, we also saw how Emmanuel Macron is openly expressing that there will be little political change coming in Egypt or in Saudi Arabia.

There are two further reasons why people are losing hope in democracy, both abroad and in the Arab countries. It is due to the failure of the Arab Spring revolts, especially those ugly pictures coming from Syria and Libya that make people fear that if we go down this road, we are going to end up like Syria. This argument is actively promoted by many regimes in the Arab world, their TV channels, their
writers, and commentators, are collectively trying to scare people by advocating and pushing this line down the throats of the Arab people.

The other factor that is affecting both local opinion and the views of foreign leaders is the limited reforms that Arab leaders are pursuing. In Saudi Arabia there are serious reforms that Prince Mohammed bin Salman is leading. Many of my Saudi colleagues are saying I should support them. I do support them. I am not against it. My position is that we should take what we have and build on it. Foreign leaders should also adopt the same approach.

When Macron stood next to Prince Mohammed bin Salman, he made this point and he was correct to do so. We need to support the Crown Prince in his effort to reform Saudi Arabia because if we let him down, we will put him under pressure from radical elements who are not willing to reform. Even President Sisi has pursued limited economic reforms. I am sure every Egyptian businessman, not necessarily every Egyptian worker or citizen, but most people in Egypt would agree that the cutting of subsidies and floating of the pound is reform. The World Bank is also supporting these reforms.

In short, these limited reforms and the general political condition of the Arab world today are adding strength to the argument of the anti-democracy forces, various people, writers, politicians, both in the Arab world and abroad. This unfortunate reality puts more responsibility on your shoulders to resume your work and to redouble your efforts in supporting democracy and pushing for democracy in the Arab world as a realistic choice for people and a solution to the failure of many Arab states.

Thank you very much.
Jamal Khashoggi
(1958 - 2018)

Jamal Khashoggi was a Saudi journalist, columnist, and author. Before becoming a contributor to the Washington Post, Khashoggi worked as a reporter for the Saudi Gazette, Alsharq Alawsat, and Al-Hayat. Khashoggi became widely recognized for his coverage of the Afghan War and the first Gulf War. As a foreign correspondent covering Afghanistan, Algeria, Lebanon, and Sudan, he became a known expert on political Islam and related movements. Khashoggi was also an editor of Arab News for four years.

He was appointed as the media advisor to Prince Turki Al-Faisal, the Saudi Ambassador in London and later Washington. Khashoggi launched the 24-hour news station Al-Arab, in Manama, Bahrain, in 2015, which was shut down by the government less than a day later. Khashoggi relocated to the United States in 2017, where he began writing for the Washington Post.
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