

The disappearance of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the hypocrisy of the New York Times

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Even by the deplorable standards of America's "newspaper of record," the pose of moral outrage adopted by the *New York Times* following last week's disappearance of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi is staggering in its hypocrisy.

In a series of articles, including a comment by the war-monger Thomas Friedman entitled "Praying for Jamal Khashoggi" and an editorial under the headline "Saudi Arabia must answer for Jamal Khashoggi," the *Times* feigned shock and horror at the reports of Khashoggi's death, and demanded that Riyadh come clean about the journalist's fate.

The 59-year-old Khashoggi, who fled Saudi Arabia for the United States last year, enjoyed close ties to the Saudi royal family throughout a journalistic career that spanned some three decades. However, he came into conflict with the agenda of the powerful Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, including with denunciations of Bin Salman's arrest of regime critics and conduct of the brutal war in Yemen.

On Tuesday, October 2, Khashoggi visited the Saudi consulate in Istanbul to obtain divorce papers and has not been seen since. The Turkish authorities, which are leading the investigation into Khashoggi's disappearance, reportedly believe that the journalist was murdered in the consulate and that his body was subsequently dismembered and removed from the country.

If true, the murder of Khashoggi will be a horrific crime, underscoring the brutality of the blood-soaked Saudi dictatorship. But it will join a long list of acts of terror and brutality carried out by the Saudi regime, very few of which have troubled the *Times* as much as Khashoggi's disappearance.

The Saudi regime, which serves as a key strategic ally of US imperialism in the Middle East, is notorious around the world for its ruthless repression against its own population. Saudi authorities beheaded almost 150 people by sword in 2017. In the first four months of 2018, the regime put 48 people to death in the same way, including half for non-violent crimes.

In August, state prosecutors called for the beheading of 29-year-old Shia activist Israa al-Ghomgham and four others, who had posted videos of their protests against the Saudi dictatorship on social media. The main issues they raised were demands for equality and an end to the miserable social conditions faced by the Kingdom's Shia minority, which has repeatedly been the target of savage repression by Riyadh. The *Times* never felt the need to rush into print with an editorial to condemn this blatant act of state terror, nor to denounce any other state-sanctioned executions in the kingdom, which take place at a rate of more than 10 per month.

The *Times*, and the US political and media establishment as a whole, tolerate such vicious repression because Riyadh is the lynch-pin of Washington's strategy to consolidate its unchallenged hegemony over the energy-rich and geostrategically significant Middle East.

While the *Times* laments in its editorial that the "promising social reforms" initiated by Crown Prince Mohammed may be at risk if he turns out to be guilty of "a heinous murder," the *Times's* editorialists apparently sleep soundly at night knowing that Bin Salman, the butcher of Yemen, bears responsibility for the murder of at least 16,000 innocent civilians, many of them women and children, through his leading role in prosecuting Riyadh's near-genocidal war in the Arab

world's poorest country.

This war, which Saudi Arabia can conduct only thanks to the supply of weapons and logistical support from the US, has witnessed the most horrific war crimes, including the bombing of hospitals, schools, and school buses, and the starvation of an entire society. These terrible war crimes, largely ignored in the Western media, did not get in the way of the entire US ruling elite, the *Times* included, feting "M.B.S." as a great reformer during a trip to the United States in the spring of this year.

The *Times*, which regularly seizes on unsubstantiated reports of killings or disappearances allegedly involving the Russian government to denounce the Putin regime as a ruthless dictatorship, was careful to describe the accusation involving Khashoggi against the despotic Gulf monarchy as an unproven allegation. "Turkey should not leave its accusation dangling without official confirmation or evidence," intoned the *Times*, "and Saudi Arabia cannot dismiss it with blithe denials."

It is not hard to imagine how the *Times*, and the entire corporate-controlled media, would have reacted if the journalist in question had disappeared during a visit to a Russian or Iranian consulate. The newspapers and television broadcasts would be full of screaming headlines about the "murderous" Putin regime or the bloodthirsty dictatorship in Tehran. Friedman may have penned a column not to inform us of the contents of his daily conversations with the almighty, but to demand American military intervention in defense of "press freedom."

However hypocritical it may be, the *Times's* concern for Khashoggi's fate is bound up with a number of interrelated factors. Firstly, Khashoggi was no ordinary journalist, but enjoyed a decades-long career during which he built up close ties to powerful sections of the House of Saud, including serving as adviser to Prince Turki al-Faisal, a former chief of Saudi intelligence who went on to serve as Riyadh's ambassador to Britain and the United States. Khashoggi used his extensive knowledge of Saudi political life and contacts to act as an interlocutor with the Western powers, giving interviews to the media to explain political developments in the Kingdom.

Secondly, the *Times* is cynically exploiting the Khashoggi case to buttress its phony posture as an

advocate for "democracy" and "human rights," which it has used to give a "progressive" gloss to every US imperialist war of aggression from the Balkans to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Thirdly, the *Times* is well aware that the differences between the Crown Prince and Khashoggi that forced the latter to go into exile reflect broader divisions within the Saudi regime, which is sitting atop a social powder keg as opposition to state repression and social inequality grows.

It is concerned that the eruption of these divisions into open conflict could fatally weaken the Saudi regime, under conditions in which it could soon confront mass popular opposition.

Friedman's column, which was much more critical of Bin Salman than he was a year ago, when the *Times's* columnist hailed the Saudi Crown Prince for launching Riyadh's "Arab spring," complained that hardliners were pushing him "to put security issues ahead of the need to attract investors" to "create a vibrant and diverse private sector."

Finally, and perhaps most importantly of all, the *Times* is motivated by the concern that a weakened Saudi regime will undermine the pursuit of US imperialism's predatory interests in the region, including advanced preparations for war with Iran.



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