

Jamal Khashoggi, Saudi Arabia and the Labour Movement

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MURDER OF A JOURNALIST

Details of the premeditated murder and apparent butchery of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the country's Istanbul consulate are still emerging. Mainly this is taking the form of leaks through Turkish media close to the Erdogan regime. Their phased release is interpreted by some as a tactic aimed at pressuring the Saudi and American regimes toward a settlement to the regional advantage of Turkey. (1) Meanwhile, after initially shielding Mohammed bin Salman from allegations of direct responsibility, Trump has shifted to acknowledging that the Crown Prince *"is running things over there"*. (2) The U.S. President's strategic defence has been transferred to the ageing King Salman, implying the option of displacing the present Crown Prince as a means to perpetuate the monarchical dictatorship as such.

What is undeniable is that an atrocity has taken place. Whether or not we discover the full story, Khashoggi is a victim of state murder by agents of a regime synonymous with repression and his death has provoked global outrage.

The killing is anything but an isolated event. Infamously the militantly sectarian Saudi regime presides over aggressively, sometimes murderously patriarchal social forms. It is the leading force in the coalition currently devastating Yemen. To draw attention to this context is not in the least to diminish the significance of Khashoggi's killing. On the contrary, and notwithstanding his earlier closeness to the regime, Khashoggi became a target by making cautious but challenging calls for reform of the system of rule.

The limits and boundaries of Khashoggi's opposition are apparent from a widely reported late interview with Rula Jebreal. (3) There he stated: *"I don't see myself as an opposition. I'm not calling for the overthrow of the regime, because I know it's not possible and is too risky, and there is no one to overthrow the regime. I'm just calling for reform.."* Such sentiments expressed publicly were sufficient for a former insider to provoke the wrath of the regime, not least *pour encourager les autres*. Fatally, he questioned the reforming credentials of Mohammed bin Salman, whose centralisation of power was a key theme of Khashoggi's critique. (4)

In an article published by *Washington Post* on 18 September 2017, a year before his death, Khashoggi's allusion to the *"climate of fear and intimidation"* accompanying the rise to power

of Mohammed bin Salman was specific and revealing: *“In recent months, Saudi Arabia has instituted several new and extreme policies...[including]... encouraging citizens to name others to a government blacklist.”* (5) Unsurprisingly, at least in retrospect, Khashoggi paid with his life for such condemnation of the internationally celebrated *“reforming”* young Crown Prince.

LABOUR AND THE POVERTY OF OIL WEALTH

Khashoggi drew on personal experience while depicting the wider social malaise of contemporary Saudi Arabia. As is generally acknowledged, the critical work of the final phase of his life displayed both insight and courage. Nonetheless there is a conspicuous selectivity in his writings on Saudi injustice which mirrors dominant Western media perspectives.

Less reported than the oppression of women and the military destruction of Yemen, both of which Khashoggi denounced, is the systematic contempt for workers’ rights consistently displayed by the Saudi rulers. It is regrettable that the latter dimension of Saudi rule was at most marginal to Khashoggi’s campaign for reform. Another of his *Washington Post* reports condemns the arrest of *“Saudi intellectuals, clerics, journalists and social media stars”* within the round-up ordered by the Crown Prince. (6) Independent-minded and outspoken members of those professions have long been subject to state reprisals. They clearly merit the broadest international support and solidarity. These are indeed regime victims, but Khashoggi’s defence of such social strata divorced them from the everyday experience of workers, who were and remain among the most persistent targets of regime repression. The story of the Saudi working class must be sought elsewhere.

One obvious starting point is the literature of the labour movement itself. The International Trade Union Confederation report *2018 Global Rights Index* ranks the country number nine in its *“World’s Ten Worst Countries for Workers”* listing. These are the main grounds for the indictment:

Basic civil liberties remained blatantly denied, and all workers were still deprived of their rights to freedom of association and to bargain collectively. Protests were brutally repressed and sanctioned. In this oppressive climate, the 8.3 million migrant workers in the country (over 90 per cent of the private sector workforce) remained particularly affected by the kafala system. They were often tricked into accepting lucrative jobs in Saudi Arabia, only to have their passports confiscated upon arrival and to be forced to work in job positions they have not agreed to. Meanwhile, the authorities continued to crack down on migrant workers with irregular status, arresting, detaining and deporting thousands. In March 2017, the Ministry of Interior launched a campaign called “A Nation without Violations”, giving migrant workers 90 days to regularise their status or leave the country without penalties. (7)

The picture will be familiar to those acquainted with our solidarity work in relation to Bahrain.

The regimes of both countries preside over well documented despotic “*kafala*” migrant labour practices. (8) As much as their rivals in Iran (9), the Saudi and Bahraini rulers recognise trade unions and other forms of independent working class organisation as social bases for opposition to social and political conditions. In both contexts “*national*” or “*citizen*” as well as disadvantaged migrant workers are severely restricted in terms of rights of association. Finally, both regimes are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) regional alliance, which supported the violent Bahraini suppression of 2011. Saudi troops were prominent among the enforcers.

Even under these conditions, workers’ resistance is not unknown, as the persistence of labour movement centrality to Bahraini opposition bears witness. Additionally, and notwithstanding harsh constraints, worker dissent sporadically erupts in Saudi Arabia. As the killing of Khashoggi became front page news, video clips were emerging showing confrontation between employees of the Azmeel contracting corporation and police at Dhahran in the Saudi Eastern Province. (10). The incidents marked escalation of a long-running dispute over unpaid wages. According to one report, rocks were thrown at police in response to gunshot injuries including the killing of at least one worker. (11) Another account describes the workers finally receiving overdue payment and being repatriated. (12) The last point is indicative of the draconian labour controls of Saudi Arabia, where bureaucratic exclusion may well be enforced on migrant workers who have the temerity to demand payment from employers.

THE IMPERIAL FOUNDATIONS OF SAUDI DESPOTISM

It is the responsibility of the labour movement and its allies to find ways to oppose the specific crime of Khashoggi’s killing in the context of the systematic violence of the Saudi state and the ruling class which it sustains. This is particularly the case in Britain, where the relationship is profound and historically grounded. Longstanding British imperial association took on a new significance following OPEC’s 1970s oil price rises. Inseparable from proliferating Western arms sales throughout the Middle East, these led to a reconfiguring of the centrality of the region to global political economy.

The core relationship, inevitably, is between Saudi Arabia and the United States. Since the now legendary price surges, Saudi oil exports, whatever the nationality of the purchaser, have been paid for in US currency. Some of these petrodollars reappeared as investments in North American corporations. Less conspicuously, or more discretely, larger numbers reinvented themselves as US Treasury holdings, transforming Saudi Arabia into a formidable underwriter of American deficit spending. (13)

In the post-World War Two context, development of the Gulf including Saudi Arabia had both a regional and global character. As one leading contemporary analyst observes, it took place as

“...a unique, spatially specific, expression of the concatenation of tendencies underpinning the development of global capitalism.” (14) Concretely, emergent American ascendancy acquired timely and novel underpinnings as Middle East oil, initially viewed as a convenient low-priced support for European Marshall Aid, morphed into a crucial prop of US economic weight and leverage.

As successive post-war British governments prioritised continuation of a global City role, that country became a significant subsidiary beneficiary of the petrodollar phenomenon.

AngloArabia, an important recent book by David Wearing, outlines the consequences for the trajectory of British capitalism:

“As well as direct investment in the British economy and investment opportunities for British industry in the Gulf, Whitehall sought a wider influx of surplus oil revenues into the financial system, whereby recycled petrodollars would play a similar stabilising function to the recently expired Bretton Woods system of managed exchange rates. By 1975, the Saudi kingdom held the equivalent in today’s prices of around £20 billion worth of investment in the British economy, as well as supporting the pound by holding large proportions of their surplus funds in sterling. The petrodollar boom also turned the Gulf into a leading global south export market for the UK.” (15)

By the period that Wearing is discussing, oil wealth had come to predominate over defence of trading routes to the East as motive of imperial control. Earlier developments, however, are crucial to understanding defining features of the contemporary situation.

Over some two centuries, British then American military and diplomatic influence have underpinned absolutist rule within the region. Indeed to a large extent its distinctive despotisms were and remain imperial artefacts. The geographically small monarchies now associated with Saudi Arabia within the GCC were consolidated through treaties imposed by colonial Britain through the 19th century. Into our own times, widely perceived exemplars of *“advanced capitalism”* in the form of Britain and the USA have been pivotal to reproduction in this area of social backwardness and associated religious fundamentalism. Protected by, even while at times resenting imperial support and de facto overlordship, the *“ruling families”* (or clans, or tribes) presided over archaic, often feudal-like social forms within a global capitalist division of labour. (16) Today’s migrant labourers, in large measure the working class of the region, are modern victim-heirs of these hybrid forms of surplus extraction.

Recent reliance on the fruits of *“oil wealth”* and its associated poverty have complex long-term consequences for the old colonial power. As Wearing argues, such expedient dependence for a time helped mask and thereby perpetuate the trade imbalances of increasingly post-industrial Britain. Though the term and concept are not those of Wearing, the post-1970s *ruling class*

strategic turn toward finance capital, by facilitating investment in increasingly risky products, contributed to the British manifestation of the crisis of 2008. (17) These developments, however, by no means led to loosening of the late imperial alliance with key Middle East dictatorships. Though no longer *the* global hegemon, the British state persists in not only helping arm its phenomenally reactionary Saudi ally, but in addition training and supporting its senior military and security personnel. (18)

MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN: ANOTHER BRICK IN THE WALL

As recent events in Dharan make clear, migrant *kafala* workers as well as prominent cosmopolitan journalists are being murdered by those regime gangs. Beyond such state savagery the workforce as a whole is ferociously if unevenly exploited, while social oppression is general. The death penalty is legally available for such offences as adultery, atheism, apostasy and “sorcery”. The status of women is notorious globally. A labour movement worthy of the name will do everything in its power to oppose these arrangements and support all manifestations of progressive opposition. (19)

But to be meaningful and potentially effective, solidarity must address despotic rule and exploitation as a system. Denunciation of Khashoggi’s killing is necessary and the labour movement, following the lead of the International Federation of Journalists, should be part of that process. With all the limits of our resources and means, the labour movement is uniquely placed to contextualise Khashoggi’s death within the framework of a broader, more fully social way forward.

In the posthumously published interview with Rula Jebreal, cited earlier, Khashoggi explained his decision to limit his call to regime reform by asserting: “...*there is no one to overthrow the regime.*” It is regrettable that his interviewer did not press for an explanation of *why* no credible options for radical regime change could be considered. To do so would inexorably lead discussion away from the Crown Prince to the House of Saud as such, the entire history of which has focussed on elimination of any actual or potential challenge to absolute rule. Scrutiny would rapidly centre on the role of Anglo-American imperialism in construction and ongoing reproduction of the despotic regime, including in its Neoliberal turn proclaimed by Mohammed bin Salman. (20)

While the murder of Khashoggi must be condemned, the narrative he constructed depicting the current Crown Prince as the essence of the problem is unhelpful. More precisely it is an obstacle to the understanding required for overcoming the uniquely regressive barrier to human development known as Saudi Arabia.

Notes

(1) Zaman, A. "MBS chats with Erdogan as Khashoggi leaks flow":

<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/10/erdogan-phone-call-mbs.html>

(2) This was reported in *Middle East Eye* on 24 October 2018:

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/khashoggi-killing-trump-says-saudi-crown-prince-mbs-could-have-been-involved-1328670338>

(3) The interview appeared in *Newsweek* after the murder of Khashoggi:

<https://www.newsweek.com/jamal-khashoggi-secret-interview-saudi-murder-prince-mbs-islam-america-1178489>

Rula Jebreal discusses the interview and its context here:

https://www.democracynow.org/2018/10/23/rula_jebreal_my_secret_interview_with

(4) In January 2018, shortly after the round-up of elite Saudi royals and business figures, the *Wall Street Journal* noted: "The purge ...has helped the crown prince consolidate power and sideline opponents." Benoit, F *et al* "Saudi Arabia Moves Elites to Prison, Threatens Trial":

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-moves-elites-to-prison-threatens-trial-1517001454>

That centralisation of control is the core of Khashoggi's opposition. See his 28 November 2017 talk at Stanford University Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law:

<https://cddrl.fsi.stanford.edu/events/saudi-arabia-can-economic-reform-succeed-without-political-change>

(5) Khashoggi, M. "Saudi Arabia wasn't always this repressive. Now it's unbearable",

Washington Post, 18 September 2017:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/09/18/saudi-arabia-wasnt-always-this-repressive-now-its-unbearable/?utm_term=.936dfe0de613

(6) Khashoggi, M. "Saudi Arabia's crown prince wants to 'crush extremists.' But he's punishing the wrong people", *Washington Post*, 31 October 2017:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/10/31/saudi-arabias-crown-prince-wants-to-crush-extremists-but-hes-punishing-the-wrong-people/?utm_term=.e27ac9ea90a2

(7) <https://www.ituc-csi.org/ituc-global-rights-index-2018>, p. 26

(8) Dito, M. "Kafala: Foundations of Migrant Exclusion in GCC Labour Markets", in Khalaf, A., AlShehabi, O. and Hanieh, A. *Transit States: Labour, migration and Citizenship in the Gulf*, London: Pluto Press, 2015.

See also, on this website, the discussion in the "Trade Unions and the Logjam in Bahrain" section of the 2013 text *Defend the Bahrain Teachers: An Open Letter to UCU Members*:

http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/6002/David-Binns-Defend-the-Bahrain-Teachers-An-Open-letter-to-UCU-Members.-Sep-13/pdf/davidbinns_bahrainopenletter_sep13.pdf

(9) See the UCU London Retired Members branch report of 17 March, 2016:

<http://ucu-retired-london.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Release-teacher-union-leader-Esmail-Abdi.pdf>

(10) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxZSKlfbXMk>. Dhahran is a core historical centre of Saudi oil extraction and administration with roots in the activities of Standard Oil Of California during the 1930s.

(11) The report in question is published by Iranian state-owned website *Press TV*:

<https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2018/10/03/575947/workers-Saudi-Arabia-unpaid-salaries>

Nonetheless its key points are consistent with the content of other accounts. For example, see:

<http://www.labournet.de/category/internationales/saudi-arabien/arbeitskaempfe-saudi-arabien/>

(12) The resolution of the dispute is reported in *constructionweekonline.com*, which cites the Philippines News Agency as a key source:

<http://www.constructionweekonline.com/article-50559-saudi-arabia-ensures-filipino-staff-paid-after-azmeel-lock-out/>

(13) Spiro, D.E. *The Hidden Hand of American Hegemony: Petrodollar Recycling and International Markets*, Cornell University Press, 1999.

(14) Hanieh, A. *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p.16.

(15) Wearing, D. *AngloArabia: Why Gulf Wealth Matters to Britain*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2018, p. 39.]

(16) Ayubi, N.N. *Overstating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2001. Achcar G. "The Saudi Predicament", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, March 2018: <https://mondediplo.com/2018/03/05saudi-arabia>

(17) Wearing, D., *op cit.*, pp. 88-101.

(18) Disrupting political stereotypes, late last year the right-wing *Mail on Sunday* exposed the role of "up to 50" British Army personnel in training "Irregular Warfare" techniques to Saudi troops for use in Yemen. See Nicol, M. "Britain's secret role in Saudi Arabia's dirty war":

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5117571/Britains-secret-role-Saudi-Arabias-dirty-war.html>.

The matter was briefly raised in the House of Commons:

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2017-11-29/debates/5699652F-D628-4D7E-B6E1-315D785DA33F/Yemen>.

(19) A concise overview of resistance manifestations, including activity of women activists can be found in a report Arabian activist Ameen Nemer in the latest MENA Solidarity Network magazine issue (#9):

<https://menasolidaritynetwork.com/2018/09/30/kingdom-of-fear/>

While Nemer does not directly address labour movement repression and resistance, his account of Saudi state brutality against human rights activists – the focus of his account – is revealing and should be read widely.

(20) The key elements of *Vision 2030*, the blueprint for the Neoliberal platform advanced by the Crown Prince and his faction, are summarised by Simeon Kerr and Anjali Raval in “Redraw of Saudi economy will test public’s political loyalty”, *Financial Times*, 26 April 2016. Among others, Juan Cole has questioned the feasibility of a dynamic and transformative post-oil trajectory along the lines of rapid industrial and services diversification anticipated in *Vision 2030*. Noting the immense, costly and ring-fenced military ambitions of the kingdom’s political elite, while casting a sceptical eye over identifiable Saudi financial and industrial potential beyond that associated with existing oil resources, Cole plausibly observes: “*Without petroleum, it is difficult to see what would be distinctive about Saudi Arabia economically.*”:

<https://www.juancole.com/2016/04/reinventing-saudi-arabia-after-oil-the-princes-2-trillion-gamble.html>