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The Saudi Atrocities in Yemen are a Worse Story Than the Disappearance of Jamal Khashoggi

The plot to supposedly murder Jamal Khashoggi, as apparently proved by Turkish audio and video evidence shown to US officials, is a grisly mixture of savagery and stupidity: Jack the Ripper meets Inspector Clouseau. Neither element is surprising because violent overreaction to minor threats is a traditional feature of dictatorial rule. As seems to be the case with Saudi Arabia today, Iraq under Saddam Hussein made immense efforts to eliminate exiled critics who posed no danger to the regime.

It is the purpose of such alleged assassinations and kidnappings to not only silence dissident voices however obscure, but to also intimidate all opponents at home and abroad by showing that even a hint of criticism will be suppressed with maximum force. But it is in the nature of dictators that their judgement is unbalanced because they never hear opinions contrary to their own. Iraq invaded Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990 with disastrous results. Saudi Arabia started its war in Yemen in 2015, with similarly catastrophic results, and now appears to think that it can get away with brazenly assassinating Khashoggi, as apparently proved by Turkish investigators. Saudi Arabia firmly denies any involvement in Khashoggi's disappearance and says he left the consulate safely that afternoon.

It is important to watch how long the torrent of criticism of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Saudi Arabia will last. President Trump has been muted in his comments, emphasising the need to keep on terms with the Saudis because of the \$110bn contract to sell them arms. Some of those most accustomed to kowtowing to Gulf monarchs, like

Tony Blair, are comically reluctant to criticise Saudi Arabia despite the compelling evidence of the murder produced by Turkey. The best Blair can do is to say that the issue should be investigated and explained by Saudi Arabia “because otherwise it runs completely contrary to the process of modernisation”. Even for Blair this is surely a new low, and it could also be a dispiriting straw in the wind, suggesting that political elites in the US and UK will not be shocked for long and criticism will be confined to the alleged killing of Khashoggi.

This is an important point because the killing (as suggested by the Turkish investigators) is by no means the worst act carried out by Saudi Arabia since 2015, though it is much the best publicised. Anybody doubting this should read [a report just published](#) which shows that bombing and other military activities by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen is deliberately targeting food supplies and distribution in a bid to win the war by starving millions of civilians on the other side.

There is nothing collateral or accidental about the attacks according to the report. Civilian food supplies are the intended target with the horrendous results spelled out by the UN at the end of September: some 22.2 million Yemenis or three quarters of the population are in need of assistance, 8.4 million of whom are not getting enough food to eat, a number which may increase by 10 million by the end of the year. “It is bleak,” UN humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock told the Security Council. “We are losing the fight against famine.”

But there are those in Saudi Arabia, UAE and their allies in Washington, London and Paris who evidently do not feel any regret and are intent on creating conditions for a man-made famine as the best way of winning the war against the Houthis who still hold the capital Sana’a and the most highly populated parts of the country. This is the conclusion of the highly detailed report called “The Strategies of the Coalition in the Yemen War: Aerial Bombardment and Food War” written by Professor Martha Mundy for the World Peace Foundation affiliated to the Fletcher School at Tufts University in Massachusetts.

The report concludes that “if one places the damage to the resources of food producers (farmers, herders, and fishers) alongside the targeting of food processing, storage and transport in urban areas and the wider economic war, there is strong evidence that the coalition strategy has aimed to destroy food production and distribution in the areas under the control of Sana’a.” It adds that the bombing campaign aimed directly at food supplies appears to have begun in 2016 and is continuing and becoming more effective.

Some aspects of the food war are easy to chronicle: on Yemen’s Red Sea coast no less than 220 fishing boats have been destroyed and the fish catch is down by 50 per cent

according to the report. It cites one particular incident on 16 September when 18 fisherman from the district of Al Khawkhah were seized, interrogated and released by a coalition naval vessel which then fired a rocket at “the departing boat carrying the fishermen, killing all but one of them”. The report of this incident has been denied by the coalition.

The Saudi-led coalition began its intervention in the Yemeni civil war in March 2015 on the side of the government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and against the “Houthi rebels” whom the coalition claims are backed by Iran. As Saudi defence minister at the time, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was the driving force behind the intervention code named “Decisive Storm”. The coalition air campaign is aided by US aerial refuelling and logistic support while UK military personnel are stationed in command and control centres.

At first, the targets were largely military, but this changed when the coalition failed to win the quick military success its members had expected. Professor Mundy says that “from August 2015 there appears a shift from military and governmental to civilian and economic targets, including water and transport infrastructure, food production and distribution, roads and transport, schools, cultural monuments, clinics and hospitals, and houses, fields and flocks.”

Copiously illustrated with maps and charts, the report shows the impact of bombing and other military activities on the production and availability of food to the civilian population. Lack of electricity to pump water and fuel for farm vehicles have all been exacerbated by the airstrikes. Mundy says that “livestock production has been devastated as families in need sold animals and also found it increasingly difficult to access markets”. When the farmers do reach a market, their troubles are not over. Coalition air strikes have become more lethal with the beginning of the siege of the Red Sea port of Hodeida by Saudi and Emirati-led forces in June. Some 70 per cent of Yemen’s imports enter the country through Hodeida, which has a population of 600,000. On 2 August the main fish market in the city was attacked along with the entrance to the public hospital where many people were gathered. In July, King Salman of Saudi Arabia issued a general pardon to all Saudi soldiers fighting in Yemen.

The lack of international protests over the war in Yemen, and the involvement of the US and UK as allies of Saudi Arabia and UAE, helps explain one of the mysteries of the Khashoggi disappearance. If the Saudis murdered Khashoggi, why did they expect to carry out the assassination without producing an international uproar? The explanation probably

is that Saudi leaders imagined that, having got away with worse atrocities in Yemen, that any outcry over the death of a single man in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul was something they could handle.