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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

OCTOBER 24, 2018

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25.10.2018

Why Do Yemen's Dead Not Merit the Attention of Jamal Khashoggi?



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The apparent murder of Saudi Arabian dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi is a shocking crime that merits the international attention it has received, but nonetheless it is impossible not to wonder why the death of a single person receives vastly more coverage than ongoing Saudi atrocities in Yemen.

Is it that a dramatic story involving a single personality is easier to grasp than a war fought over complex political and ethnic issues, or does the differing levels of attention signal that Mr. Khashoggi has achieved the status of an honorary westerner while the tens of thousands dead in Yemen represent a distant “other”? Some combination of both of these

are likely at work, and that he is a fellow journalist makes his fate all the more compelling for reporters and editors. Geopolitical considerations are certainly at play here, with the towering hypocrisy of the Trump administration on full display, a hypocrisy that stands out even in the dismal history of U.S. government policies toward Saudi Arabia.

President Donald Trump's transparent attempts to exonerate Saudi Arabia's de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, by "speculating" that "rouge agents" might be behind Mr. Khashoggi's demise inside the consulate is beyond laughable, or would be if the issue weren't so serious. Billions of dollars of arms sales are at stake (not to mention a reliable supply of oil), so minor trifles like human rights or cold-blooded murder can be swept aside. Whatever evidence the Turkish government possesses has not been made public, and it would seem the most likely reason is because Ankara has bugged the Saudi consulate. If so, a sensitive matter that the Turkish government would rather evade.

The thuggish behavior of the crown prince has to be laid partially at the doorstep of the White House because President Trump has heartedly embraced him, giving the green light to Saudi Arabia's bottomless contempt for human rights. We might even speculate that President Trump wishes he could do away with opponents as firmly as the crown prince. And never mind the atrocities the United States (along with Britain and France) facilitate in its all-out support of Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen — what is human life (especially the lives of "others") when profits are at stake?

By any standard, the conduct of the war in Yemen is inhumane. Nobody knows how many people have died as a result of the fighting, although the independent group [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project](#) (ACLED) estimates that almost 50,000 people were killed from January 2016 to July 2018. Implying a much higher total, Save the Children estimates that at least [50,000 children died in 2017](#) alone, or about 130 per day. The charity further estimated that almost 400,000 children will need treatment for severe acute malnutrition.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs offers [this sobering assessment](#):

"An alarming 22.2 million people in Yemen need some kind of humanitarian or protection assistance, an estimated 17.8 million are food insecure — 8.4 million people are severely food insecure and at risk of starvation — 16 million lack access to safe water and sanitation, and 16.4 million lack access to adequate healthcare. Needs across the country have increased steadily, with 11.3 million who are in acute need — an increase of more than one million people in acute need of humanitarian assistance to survive."

The United Nations Human Rights Council [reports that Saudi-led](#) “coalition air strikes have caused most direct civilian casualties. The airstrikes have hit residential areas, markets, funerals, weddings, detention facilities, civilian boats and even medical facilities.” Both sides are reported by the council to forcibly conscript children between the ages of 11 and 17 to fight.

A study written for the World Peace Foundation, [The Strategies of the Coalition in the Yemen War: Aerial bombardment and food war](#), by Martha Mundy reports 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.”

To what end are these atrocities committed? Professor Mundy writes:

“While the US and UK back their Coalition allies unfailingly in their wider political and strategic objectives, the two major Arab actors in the Coalition, Saudi Arabia and the [United Arab] Emirates, have different economic priorities in the war. That of Saudi Arabia is oil wealth, including preventing a united Yemen’s use of its own oil revenues, and developing a new pipeline through Yemen to the Indian Ocean; that of the Emirates is control over seaports, for trade, tourism and fish wealth. The attack on al-Hudayda [a major port] explicitly aims to complete the economic war militarily. That the immense suffering of Yemen’s people has still not brought surrender by those in San’a [the Yemeni capital] does not give credibility to the tactic of further hunger and disease. Yet for the Coalition, as a senior Sa’udi diplomat responded (off the record) to a question about threatened starvation: ‘Once we control them, we will feed them.’ ”

Yemen is highly dependent on food imports, and the blockades of its ports have put Yemenis at risk of famine. Professor Mundy draws this conclusion:

“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 Coalition strategy has aimed to destroy food production and distribution in the areas under the control of San’a. ... [F]rom the autumn of 2016, economic war has compounded physical destruction to create a mass failure in basic livelihoods. Deliberate destruction of family farming and artisanal fishing is a war crime.”

There is little coverage of this ongoing humanitarian disaster in the corporate media. Why are millions of lives almost an afterthought while one privileged life merits such intense

attention? Again, the fate of Mr. Khashoggi and the spotlight it shines on Saudi practices merit the widespread commendation it has attracted. But why such indifference to millions of others? Where is our humanity?