Target Saudi Arabia: An Examination of Damaging Narratives

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Special Report
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# Table of Contents

Introduction ............................. 5
Post 2015 Publications .................. 7
The Power of the Word ................... 9
Pascal Menoret and Saudi Arabia ........ 10
   Joyriding in Riyadh .................. 11
   Repression and Protest in Saudi Arabia 16
   Graveyard of Clerics .................. 21
   Concluding Remarks on Menoret ...... 27
Christine Ockrent and Saudi Arabia ... 30
Jonathan Rugman and *The Killing in the Consulate* 36
   A Detailed Account .................. 37
   From Ankara to Washington .......... 41
Ben Hubbard and Saudi Arabia ......... 44
   Financial Troves ..................... 45
   The Sa‘ad Hariri “Kidnapping” .... 49
   The Khashoggi Murder ............... 50
   Khashoggi and Maggie Mitchell Salem 52
   Family Life .......................... 53
   Obama and Saudi Arabia ............ 55
   Trump and Saudi Arabia ............. 58
   A Note on Sources .................... 62
   Trove of Trivia and Strange Details 63

Conclusion .............................. 67
Introduction

For reasons that are difficult to understand, Saudi Arabia has been a magnet for particularly egregious studies that aimed to show what an allegedly unpleasant country it is, led by a downright horrible ruling family, and which produces little more than dictators who rule over a docile population. For some experts, the place is repulsive, its rulers nasty, and elites gorging on public wealth. Many anticipate the system’s imminent collapse, salivating doom and gloom, hoping for a military or palace coup d’état, praying for the establishment of an Islamic State according to their definition (whereas the Kingdom is an Islamic state based on the Quran and the Hadith), and otherwise wishing to see a republican government replace the monarchy that, presumably, would better serve the peoples of Arabia. Above all else, supporters of these ill-considered ideas are in a hurry, lest time overtake their unrealistic pipedreams. In short, the Kingdom is apparently ghastly, since it produces bad economic news, unscrupulous sycophants who pollute society, political and security incidents galore, and cruel activities with shocking consequences.

Orientalist preferences aside, few have bothered with the intricacies that shaped dramatic religious, socio-political as well as economic transformations, which analyzed a dynamic monarchy embarked on nation-building. Like most societies around the world, Saudis experienced various challenges, sometimes meeting them successfully and sometimes not. Like most cultures, they confronted internal anxieties, with the added burden of preserving tribal and sacred traditions. Like most economies, they experienced poverty and wealth. In a nutshell, Saudis lived normal lives that changed with time and circumstances.

Still, negative assessments have continued to be published by authors intrigued to explore, but never patient enough to understand, adjudicate, and empathize. Notwithstanding difficult working conditions, this has been the case save for a few honest studies published during the past eight decades, and which added value.\(^{(1)}\) As discussed in this essay, poor quality and highly

\(^{(1)}\) Among numerous studies published on the Kingdom during the past few decades, several stand out for their erudition, scholarship, and accuracy. See, for example the trilogy translated from the Arabic by Peter Theroux and authored by Abdelrahman Munif, Cities of Salt, London: Jonathan Cape, 1988; The Trench, New York: Pantheon, 1991; and Variations on Night and Day, New York: Pantheon, 1993. See also Soraya Altorki and Donald P. Cole, Arabian Oasis City: The Transformation of `Unayzah, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989; Anthony Cave Brown, Oil, God and Gold: The Story of Aramco and the Saudi Kings, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999; Donald Powell Cole, Nomads of the Nomads: The Al Murrah Bedouin of the Empty Quarter,
biased assessments outnumber the more scholarly fare. In the age of instant communication that prizes irrelevance over substantive evaluations, and that tolerates “Kool-Aid” experts of the just add water variety, the ready access to published materials has allowed some to reproduce tome after tome through repeated clicks on a computer keyboard. Most simply recap the same stories over and over again, rewriting sentences and paragraphs, or adding tidbits that did not clarify. The number of such volumes increased dramatically, especially after the 1973 [Ramadan or October] War between Israel and several Arab countries led to a sharp increase in oil prices, along with embargoes on the United States and The Netherlands. Seldom had a regional country received such attention, allegedly because it gouged global consumers over exponential increases in the price of oil, sponsored extremism after the 1979 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and “motivated” via what they call its “Wahhabi” creed the tragic September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States.\(^{(2)}\) The classic standby, sponsoring terrorism in all its varieties, gained momentum after 2003, and received a booster shot in late 2010/early 2011 as the Arab Uprisings mobilized public opinion. In 2015, the motherload of concerns emerged when Prince Muhammad bin Salman was chosen by King Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz to fill several critical posts, as analysts derided the decision. This hysteria reached new heights after the Minister of Defense was elevated to the heirship in 2017 that, barring unpredictable developments, ensured his eventual accession to the throne.

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\(^{(2)}\) While the topic is beyond the parameters of this essay, Saudi nationals and/or charitable organizations they supported were singled out for opprobrium in the aftermath of 9/11, as supporters of terrorist groups. The most prominent such individual was Khalid bin Mahfouz and the Muwafaq Foundation, which were routinely identified as sponsors of ‘Usamah bin Ladin, often in extremely strong language. Bin Mahfouz sued his accusers and won all of the cases in courts of law both in the United States and France. For example, and after Cambridge University Press published a book by J. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins, respectively a former USAID relief coordinator in Sudan and a historian and titled \textit{Alms for Jihad} in 2006, CUP was ordered to apologize, pulp all unsold copies of the Book and write to over 200 libraries worldwide that purchased the book telling them of the settlement and asking them either to insert an erratum sheet within the book, or if they were not prepared to do so, to withdraw the book from their shelves. Cambridge University Press also published a detailed apology on its website and paid “substantial damages.” Likewise, and after Jean-Charles Brisard and Guillaume Dasquié published \textit{La Vérité Interdite} [The Forbidden Truth], which made highly defamatory allegations, a British Court ordered each of them to pay £10,000 in damages (the maximum permitted under the relevant provision of the UK Defamation Act of 1996) and also ordered M. Brisard to pay interim costs of £150,000. The Judge further ordered Brisard and Dasquié to print an apology in relation to the allegations made in the book, granted an injunction against Brisard, and continued an injunction already made against Dasquié to prevent them from repeating libelous statements. Others were equally motivated by hatred and unknown agendas. A Paris Court ordered in June 2009 Nouveau Monde Editions along with Yvonnick Denoël, the editor and author of \textit{Le Livre Noir de la CIA} [The Black Book of the CIA], to apologize and pay damages for defamation. For additional details on these and several other cases, see the bin Mahfouz web-page at http://www.binmahfouz.info/en_index.html.
Of course, serious scholars continued to delve into critical concerns and produced lasting tomes, but populism dictated that novice journalists with limited skills embarked on writing instant books that sold thousands and sometimes hundreds of thousands of copies, to satisfy anxious consumers in search of answers in easy reads. Junior scholars in search of academic backing penned highly negative volumes too, on the assumption that such approaches would establish and strengthen their credibility and, far more important, ensure financial support from anti-Saudi institutions and foundations. Media frenzy became par for the course, fueled by tragic developments that mesmerized, which were complemented by agenda-driven discourses whose sole purpose was to further malign an entire society, lock, stock, and barrel. In the age of complicated and expensive wars that mobilized public opinion, increasingly facile studies filled our bookshelves, all pretending to offer in-depth analysis when what they barely produced was sensationalism.\(^{(3)}\)

**Post 2015 Publications**

After 2015, and long before the tragic murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, several books appeared to denigrate Saudi Arabia and its conservative society. What has been written in newspapers, magazines, and professional journals over the course of the past five years is dizzying, with no end in sight. Most are of dubious quality but few will ever feel shortchanged as every imaginable point of view has been articulated ad nauseum. Just like famous Spaghetti Western movies, writings on Saudi Arabia embraced “the good, the bad and the ugly.”

One imagined a “Black Wave” descending on the Arabian Peninsula while another concentrated on the rivalry with Iran.\(^{(4)}\) One discovered the “Wahhabi Code,” and another perceived the country as a business enterprise pursuing profits and power, while a fifth proposed to dig deep inside the Saudi “Religious Project.”\(^{(5)}\) This last one was a humdinger that delved into “facts”

\(^{(3)}\) To be sure, one benefits from the vast majority of these studies though it is truly sad to see so many anti-Saudi books, in Arabic, English and French [along with selected volumes in other languages], particularly when the more vicious hatchet-jobs fill one’s library. Beyond political, sociological, economic, religious, and philosophical volumes, even scientific papers that deal with oil, water, and management, ostensibly to better ascertain trends that may be invisible to the naked eye, fall into the negation business, though most of these were left out of this paper.


regarding how Riyadh spawned Salafi movements that increased Islamic fundamentalism around the world even if the Kingdom was the target of extremists.\(^{6}\) A historian assembled several useful papers in an edited volume, though she rammed in her personal opinions to belittle the country and its leadership, boldly calling on a super-power to distance itself from what she concluded was a toxic regime.\(^{7}\) And after the Khashoggi murder, a Houston, Texas resident concluded the American head-of-state and the Saudi heir apparent were the sons of Satan, while an equally perplexed author offered secret files.\(^{8}\) For his part, a policy wonk provided an assessment of American-Saudi ties through the lens of presidents and kings, while a university professor discerned how the Kingdom became a “Graveyard of Clerics,” though his focus was on propagation of the creed.\(^{9}\)

The French got into the act too, with a slew of anti-Saudi books, though at least two rose above the fray and genuinely added value.\(^{10}\) For the most part, however, French-language books on the Kingdom went beyond the sensational variety: they actually reached the realm of fantasy and absurdity. The series was led by a feverish tome composed by an Iranian-French attorney who served powerful members of the elite.\(^{11}\) Another discovered a clash of titans.\(^{12}\)

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(6) The Varagur tome, part of the Columbia Global Reports series that is published by Columbia University Press, is a salacious study. According to the publisher, these commissioned “novella-length books offer new ways to look at and understand the world that can be read in a few hours. Most readers,” Columbia Global Reports editors assert, “are curious and busy. Our books are for them.” Mercifully, there is no claim for accuracy, since the goal is to cater to busy readers who cannot possibly be bothered with more comprehensive studies. See Varagur, The Call, inside back cover.


(8) Baaba [G.] Masaud, President Trump and Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman: The Sons of Satan, Houston, Texas: Student Study Guide, December 24, 2018. A similar effort by the same author, and titled The Beast Mohammad Bin Salman, was published on December 11, 2018. The first was a 38-page “publication” while the second stood at 44 pages. According to the amazon.com pages for the two books, proceeds from their sales would go to “starving children around the world,” although one is not told through which mechanisms. President Trump and Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman: The Sons of Satan apparently “documents the evil committed by President Trump, Mohammad bin Salman and his father and his family, the House of Saud, the evil dictators,” the Amazon blurb continues, adding: “We seek to show God (Allah) the evidence; we want to show the Almighty that His mercy, kindness, and generosity has been excessive on these evil people, the sons of Satan! The Sons of Bitches!” That amazon.com would allow such language on its pages was astonishing, to say the least. See also Owen Wilson, Khashoggi and The Crown Prince: The Secret Files, London: Gibson Square Books Ltd, 2019.


(11) Ardavan Amir-Aslani, Arabie Saoudite: De l’influence à la decadence, Paris: L’Archipel, 2017. Amir-Aslani authored several books on Iran before writing his very negative study on the Kingdom. The book contains so many errors that can easily discourage, and while entertaining, one can quickly give up even if it takes a strong stomach to absorb its blows.

ministry of defense official engaged in a Jekyll and Hyde play in words, but focused on some sort of a machine to decipher the truth about radical Islam and Saudi Arabia, ostensibly because English-language readers demanded answers whereas their French counterparts understood the *jeu de mots* without elaboration.

The frenzy continued with a former newscaster who enjoyed tight connections with the intelligence community, and whose volume projected to unscramble the mysterious heir apparent, as if the office holder was so enigmatic that one needed the assistance of journalists who played psychoanalysts to untangle truthfulness. The long list was topped by an AFP editor who aspired for grandeur as he asserted that Saudi Arabia was a Kingdom of darkness and that “Wahhabism” had taken Islam hostage.

As stated above, the more recent books on Saudi Arabia concentrated on Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman and the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, though it was critical to note that the systematic criticisms of the young prince predated the 2018 tragedy. What were the primary motives to belittle Prince Muhammad bin Salman and, more importantly, why was the Kingdom a target for systematic intellectual condemnations? Though the Khashoggi murder deserved careful analysis, several questions arose, including the reasons why all of the studies published to date relied more or less exclusively on dubious Turkish sources? Moreover, and as clearly demonstrated by highly critical books, why have authors skipped through due process in their investigations? Was the Khashoggi death an additional justification, even a journalistic windfall, to further demean an entire society?

**The Power of the Word**

Analytic studies published by scholars and by sophisticated journalists remain powerful tools that can and do change the world. With evolving technologies, including near-instantaneous...

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access to unimaginable detail from many sources in various languages, twenty-first century researchers have seen the scope and nature of their investigations evolve dramatically, often for the better. Yet, and no matter how much today’s media focuses on celebrities and trends, good research, including of the journalistic variety, is still paramount to understanding increasingly complicated developments in every corner of the globe. Simultaneously, it is critical to also note that *en masse* access has weakened most investigations, especially with the introduction of relatively easy electronic manipulations that allow one to copy and paste texts that cover the same stories over and over again. Journalists who penned 500- to 800-words articles were now engaged in churning out 100,000 words in just a few weeks or months. As Dwight Eisenhower, a former President of the United States, declared in 1964, the press is composed of “sensation-seeking columnists and commentators” whose writings mark them as little more than intellectualoids, though it took another head-of-state, Donald J. Trump, to coin his “enemies of the people” label that demeaned him as well as the partisan trade.(17)

This brief study is not exhaustive but aims to identify major problems, evaluates various arguments presented by four writers, and assesses the new political realities that confront Saudi Arabia. The five books selected here, by Pascal Menoret, Christine Ockrent, Jonathan Rugman, and Ben Hubbard, who are well-known and widely read on account of their positions, represent a fair and representative collection. Consequently, they must be taken seriously, which this essay does. The paper closes with an evaluation of the negativity “trend” and raises critical questions that intrepid authors prefer to overlook in their zeal to vilify an entire society.

**Pascal Menoret and Saudi Arabia**

Professor Pascal Menoret has written several books on the Kingdom that run the gamut between enigmas and graveyards.(18) In all of these publications, he has displayed academic rigor, while

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(17) President Eisenhower uttered his famous sentence at the Republican Party Convention in 1964, when he stated: “My friends, we are Republicans. If there is any finer word in the entire field of partisan politics, I have not yet heard it. So let us particularly scorn the divisive efforts of those outside our family, including sensation seeking columnists and commentators, because, my friends, I assure you that these are people who couldn’t care less about the good of our party.” Of course, these words were delivered to a partisan crowd but in hindsight, they also were prescient. See “Transcript of Eisenhower’s Speech to the G.O.P. Convention,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 1964, https://www.nytimes.com/1964/07/15/archives/transcript-of-eisenhowers-speech-to-the-gop-convention.html.

he has also highlighted preferences for sensationalism that, in the case of a country like Saudi Arabia—which is undergoing the agony associated with socio-political development—led him to make unsubstantiated generalizations. As is increasingly common among a generation of young scholars who seek the limelight, academic rigor gives way to journalistic impressions, which is regrettable. While “easy” books entertain for a few news cycles, they add precious little to our understanding, which is a pity, because talented scholars waste so much of their aptitude on impressions instead of adding value to knowledge.(19)

The purpose of this first section is to highlight several discrepancies in *Joyriding in Riyadh* and, second, to offer a few comments on an August 2016 essay published by the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University, under the title “Repression and Protest in Saudi Arabia.” A different and longer version of part one appears in a paper titled “Who writes Arab History?,” though both illustrate the intellectual trend that targets Saudi Arabia.(20) A third section assesses the author’s newest contribution, *Graveyard of Clerics*.

**Joyriding in Riyadh**

When Menoret, an urban historian, wrote an opinion piece in the London *Guardian* under the title “Riyadh Rage: Inside Saudi Arabia’s Joyriding Craze,” he asserted that a number of young Saudis were “fuelled by boredom, anger and alienation,” which apparently encouraged them to steal cars and race “them at terrifying speeds through Saudi Arabia’s biggest cities.”(21) “Even Osama bin Laden’s bodyguard,” avowed Menoret, “cut his teeth as a joyrider fighting pitched battles with local police.” The opinion piece was meant to introduce the author’s study, published by the prestigious Cambridge University Press, which provided the scholarly version of what was little more than significant disapproval. Yet, and even if the academic prose purported to show that dejected young Saudis opted for thievery and other illegal activities to express anger with society and frustration with socio-economic challenges, the book contained serious errors whose legacy will endure.(22) To the author’s credit, the study covered a major discussion

(19) This section of the paper was first published by the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies as an internal memo to the Chairman.
(22) Menoret, *Joyriding in Riyadh*. Page number references for each author in this paper refer to the book under discussion.
of important urban development concerns, which merited coverage and certainly marked the book out for its erudition, though the “tafhit phenomenon,”—drifting, rather than joyriding—was described in very pejorative terms. Unlike other contributions in the same genre, Menoret delved into valuable academic sources, conducted field research over a long period of time, and otherwise familiarized himself with his topic. While he certainly was entitled to form whatever opinions he wished to draw from his fieldwork, something he dwells on in so much detail that an entire chapter is devoted to the concept, the presentation remained problematic, and not just for the numerous errors it contained.

At the outset, it is worth noting that this ambitious work could not and ought not to be dismissed like others because the account of how the Kingdom was transformed in the second half of the twentieth century, when decision-makers embarked on a full-scale integration of the country into global markets, is very well done. Had Menoret focused on and simply analyzed how internal migration and economic shortcomings led to urban expansion and various crises associated with such efforts, his contribution would have added significant value. By concentrating on joyriding in the Saudi capital, however, the author embarked on a tangential topic that illustrated his agenda to defame an entire society for the excesses of a few.

Indeed, and before addressing the joyriding issue, it is important to note how Menoret—in chapters three and four of the book—covers and shares valuable insights on what the Greek city planner Constantinos A. Doxiadis, who drafted a 1971 master plan for Riyadh, accomplished. Drawing on the Doxiadis archives, Menoret traces why the “high modernist” vision for the city ultimately failed, allegedly because royals and merchant families subverted the system. This is not new, as others have claimed such interference, though how the city grew and progressed amid displacement and chaotic suburban sprawl was worth contemplating.(23) That there were major urban transformations when Saudi authorities launched massive development plans was unquestionable but where is the evidence to back the assertion that “Prince [now King] Salman bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, the governor of the Riyadh province since 1963 and the capital’s strongman, wanted to send the ‘Bedouin’ back to the desert, where a special ghetto would be built for them” (p. 75)?

Menoret continues this last sentence with this gem: “Because the city counted around 300,000 inhabitants, the Saudi administration was in fact preparing for the deportation of one-fifth of Riyadh’s population,” which is simply incorrect. To claim that “Riyadh’s residents would cast Bedouin as out-of-place, unruly, and untrustworthy, a set of stereotypes that has survived to this day,” is a shocking statement to read from an author who lived in the Kingdom for about four years and who had many opportunities to observe how Saudis behaved with each other. Even worse, to then state that the Badu were deported because “they were residing in slums located in the very areas that showed the sharpest increase in land value” (p. 75), is astonishing. Similar observations pepper the text, including “the Bedouin hinterland was now the target of an internal colonization enterprise that, under the guidance of US and German experts, fostered rural displacements and urban squalor” (p. 85). Internal colonization instead of development?

Students of the Kingdom’s contemporary affairs understand that land speculation increased in the post oil-boom era, though it takes a vivid imagination to assert that “Properties situated outside of the city proper belonged to the royal family and had been granted by the king to various princes and princesses. These lands were known under the term iqta’, which also meant fief or feudal estate and had earned the Al Sa‘ud the nickname of iqta‘iyin, feudal lords” (p. 106). Where is this coming from? Who gave the Al Sa‘ud this nickname and how accurate was Menoret’s assertion?

If these two meaty chapters contain a good deal of material that bewilder, the introductory chapter, which presumably aims to tie various themes together and places contemporary history in perspective is, instead, entertaining. “A Night with ‘Ajib,” the title of Chapter 1, describes various night escapades and car-races, even if Menoret returns to the topic only in the fifth and sixth chapters. Whether the author’s consideration that “young disenfranchised Saudis” re-appropriated this new urban space “through their use, misuse, and abuse of cars” (p. 20) is an accurate reading is open to debate. Like similar cultural developments, drifting is certainly part of reality, though any moralization regarding its repression by authorities—who determined that the sub-cultural displays were criminal acts—is over the top. In a book-length study, the reader is never told how many individuals are engaged in this sub-cultural practice, which matters. Are we talking about 1,000 individuals, or 10,000 or even 500,000? In a country of
38 million residents, one is bound to find hundreds, perhaps thousands, of young men who practice joyriding as well as some of the sexual mores described in detail in the book. Can a scholar really generalize, especially when Menoret informs his reader that “in most cases, it was impossible to even chat with drifters” and that he only had a “few” such conversations (p. 174). This is alarming to discover so late in the narrative though Menoret brilliantly covers his steps by reporting various conversations—some verbatim—sprinkled with so many Arabic words throughout the text that one cannot but be truly impressed.

Where the discussion goes haywire is the claim that there is an open war between joyriders and the police. Such an assertion is, at best, a figment of the author’s vivid imagination, and starts off with what Menoret witnessed when “[a] police patrol car soon reached us. Before he opened his window, the policeman popped a captagon (amphetamine) pellet into his Power Horse energy drink and swallowed it with a gulp” (p. 5). Putting aside the incredible observation skills, and assuming that all of this was true, how did Menoret know that the pill allegedly swallowed by the police officer was a captagon? Since the author repeatedly clarifies that as an outsider few of the joyriders ever trusted him, this would mean that a scholar ought to be super careful not to accept as fact, what some fed him as far as tales are concerned. That the police—not the “secret police” as the reader is often told in the book—would want to keep an eye on drifters is no surprise, especially since serious accidents occurred from time to time that, to put it mildly, required law enforcement attention. In fact, drifters frequently threw stones at police cars to stop their pursuit and occasionally attacked stations, which drew appropriate responses. Since when is it permissible for anyone to attack law enforcement personnel, destroy public property, and injure, disable or even kill a cop in the name of joyriding or any similar “cultural” practice(s)?

(24) Authorities arrest those who break the law on a regular basis but the numbers seldom reach the hundreds or thousands. See, for example, Rodolfo C. Estimo, Jr, “4 Car Drifters Arrested,” Arab News, June 29, 2016, http://www.arabnews.com/node/946551/saudi-arabia, and Mohammed Rasooldeen, “90 Car Drifters Arrested,” Arab News, April 12, 2016, http://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/909116. In early August 2016, and to cut back on severe physical injuries, Riyadh increased the penalties against drifting twentyfold, with a graduated scale: first offenses would henceforth receive a SAR 20,000 [US$5,333] penalty in addition to the car being impounded for 15 days; second-time offenders would be fined SAR 40,000 [US$10,666] and be referred to court to determine a jail sentence (with cars impounded for 30 days), and third-time violators would be fined SAR 60,000 [US$15,999], along with a trial, as well as having their vehicles permanently confiscated. Previously, “the minimum drifters’ penalty in Saudi Arabia was approximately SAR 1,000 [US$267] and the maximum SAR 2,000 [US$533].” See “Saudi Arabia: Stringent Penalties on Drifting,” Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, August 9, 2016, http://english.aawsat.com/2016/08/article55356096/saudi-arabia-stringent-penalties-drifting.
What Menoret never resolves in his book is to elucidate how drifting became a political act, though he made the claim in his *Guardian* essay. In that piece, he wrote: “The most famous [drifter], Yusef al-Ayeri, earned his spurs as a joyrider on the streets of Dammam, a city in the country’s Eastern Province, where he was known as ‘Abu Saleh’.” According to this narrative,

Al-Ayeri dropped out of school in 1991, flew to Afghanistan, became a bodyguard for Osama bin Laden and created the Saudi branch of al-Qaida in the late 1990s. Before being killed by Saudi security forces in 2004, he wrote strategic treatises that show an intimate knowledge of Richard Nixon’s memoirs, the theories of political scientist Francis Fukuyama and the writings of Thomas Friedman. His trajectory shows that there is no single path that leads a person to become an armed militant. And Al-Ayeri’s case is not an isolated one. Militants appear to view joyriders as potential foot soldiers of the future. Unlike academics, religious figures and human rights activists, joyriders confront the security forces in the real world on a day-to-day basis. Sometimes they even inflict painful defeats. Their story is crucial to building an understanding of everyday violence and rebellion in the Middle East.(25)

Though the author is aware that he ought not present drifting as “a fight for freedom” (pp. 16–19), he nevertheless shows his hand when he writes that “[a] tyrannical society produced tyrannical families, which in turn produced tyrannical children, who knew only how to either submit or revolt” (p. 184). Even when he adds nuances to his analysis, Menoret is at pains to make the leap from “road revolt” to what some drifters allegedly are engaged in, “a war on the state” (p. 198). It may be correct to affirm that the very description of drifting as “a way of confronting the state in its most basic operations: managing public spaces, protecting private property, and enforcing the law” (p. 11), and that this is what some of these young men are engaged in, though none of these activities are revolutionary in nature or substance. As the Saudi sociologist Salih al-Rumayh apparently told Menoret, drifting could simply be “the opium of the downtrodden” (p. 196), something that Saudi authorities must come to terms with.

(25) Menoret, “Riyadh Rage.”
Published by Cambridge University Press, Menoret’s tome naturally received attention and was adopted by many college and university classes, which meant that thousands of readers absorbed its contents quite innocently. Skeptics might ask a few questions but most will simply read the book and absorb its contents, lock, stock, and barrel. A few will detect errors—the author says that ARAMCO was nationalized (pp. 9, 119), for example, which is not the case since it was purchased—while others will raise their eyebrows at some of the contents. In a section of Chapter 4, which discusses “The Saudi Exception” (pp. 114–19), Menoret claims that the Al Saʿud worked on “proof that theirs was indeed the chosen people” (p. 115). The assertion is repeated on page 125 where he writes: “Framed by the state and religious scholars as a godsend to the chosen people, oil wealth slowed innovation and risk taking and participated in what was called the resource curse of the country” (pp. 125–6). The last sentence has a footnote that reads: “See Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, Bureaucrats*” (p. 223 note 43), without citing a specific page number to document the idea. In fact, the words “chosen people” do not appear in Hertog, and the insinuation—that the Al Saʿud appropriated what Jews identify themselves as—is blatantly untrue. Of course, disparaging the Al Saʿud is common practice but what is the real purpose of such an effort, except to add to the litany of denigration that could permanently damage? A solid clue emerges in this unique Menoret sentence: “Besides the abolition of slavery, the difference between the 1970s and the 1950s was that princes no longer granted pieces of meat, new cars, or stipends, but huge real estate fiefdoms and import licenses, which would allow their owners to become kings in their own domain and to create their own commercial dynasty” (p. 119). Have the Al Saʿud now branched out into the butcher trade, cutting up and giving away meat?

One can cite many other examples, though what is important to note is that *Joyriding in Riyadh* is not unique, but part and parcel of a recent tradition that aims to belittle instead of elucidating key concerns.

*Represenfion and Protest in Saudi Arabia*

The August 2016 Menoret essay published by the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University updates some of the assertions made in the author’s books, even if his
conclusions are far more acerbic.\footnote{Pascal Menoret, “Repression and Protest in Saudi Arabia,” Middle East Brief, No. 101, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University, August 2016, https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/middle-east-briefs/pdfs/101-200/meb101.pdf.} The following observations are not meant to be exhaustive but only to highlight hazardous intellectual jaunts.

On page 1 of his pamphlet, Menoret claims that “In the past decades, dozens of [sic] thousands have been jailed and thousands killed in the name of regime continuity,” a footnoted statement that reads:


A quick examination of the \textit{Reuters} essay reveals the following line, which presumably provided the author with his confidence: “Thousands of people have disappeared into the black hole of Saudi prisons without charge or any indication of when they could be released, Saudi and international rights groups say.” What is interesting in this sentence, in other words, is that the \textit{Reuters} reportage exposes certain details that, in turn, are based on what “international [human] rights groups” posited, a caveat that Menoret overlooks. Furthermore, the \textit{Reuters} piece quotes Interior Ministry spokesperson Mansur al-Turki’s denials, and advances the number of “5,696 people [who] had been detained by the authorities in ‘militant’ cases, adding that 5,080 of them had now appeared before courts as the authorities try to get through a backlog of people detained since at least 2003.”\footnote{Asma Alsharif, “Detainees Disappear into Black Hole of Saudi Jails,” \textit{Reuters}, August 25, 2011, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-detainees-idUSTRE77O34O20110825, p. 2.} It is critical to report that Menoret simply relies on “rights groups” assertions for his statistics without letting his readers know how these numbers can be verified, and ignores what the Ministry of Interior advances. Although space is always a key limitation as to what can be included in a short essay, this is too important a concern to brush aside, and merits the utmost care when so much controversy surrounds the issue. Even worse, the Sloan essay is mostly devoted to Iran but has two short items that pertain to Saudi Arabia: “Not only has Saudi imprisoned up to 30 times more political prisoners, conditions in Saudi jails are also notably worse than in Iran.”\footnote{Alastair Sloan, “Who Are the ‘Political Prisoners’ in Saudi and Iran?” \textit{Middle East Monitor}, May 3, 2014, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140503-who-are-the-political-prisoners-in-saudi-and-iran/, p. 3.} Sloan does not inform his readers how he knows this, since he...
does not provide any data, although there is a convenient quotation from an Iranian-American professor at the end of his piece to back this assertion: “The Saudi government maintains one of ‘the most draconian’ prison systems in the world, according to Nader Entessar, a Professor at the University of South Alabama.” Sloan continues with his Entessar quotation: “Of course, no prison system is a country club, but compared to the prisons in Saudi Arabia, Iran looks rather benign.”(30) This is simply hearsay that is not backed up with any evidence, and which does not belong in any academic essay, though journalists do get away with this sort of thing all the time. Of course, neither Sloan nor Menoret bothered to provide any glimpse into Iranian prisons and/or their conditions even though reportage at the time tended to be rather negative.(31)

Menoret continues his assault on page 4, where he writes: “with dozens of activists shot in the streets or executed, including Nimr al-Nimr, executed in early 2016,” in reference to the death sentence carried out on the firebrand Shi’ah cleric who was included among the 47 men executed on January 2, 2016. The incident led to a diplomatic spat between Saudi Arabia and Iran after Iranian hooligans torched the Saudi embassy in Tehran, and its consulate in Mashhad, and after Tehran authorized its Lebanese ally Hassan Nasrallah—the Secretary-General of the Hizballah militia—to spew anti-Saudi venom on the airwaves that further destabilized Lebanon. Menoret does not mention that the Shaykh was tried in a court of law for calling on followers to destroy public property, kill law enforcement officials, and overthrow the ruling family. These are critical pieces of information that are deliberately omitted either through ignorance or malice, and they are unbecoming in an academic essay. Menoret is entitled to criticize the Kingdom for its executions policy, and he would be in his right to voice such criticisms openly, but he is not entitled to keep vital information from his readers about the fate that befell someone convicted in a court of law.

On the same page 4, we have yet another claim, as follows: “On November 25, 2009 (“Black Wednesday”), strong rains provoked unprecedented floods that swept the city, killing between

one hundred and four hundred residents and destroying housing and infrastructure, especially in low-income areas.” This will come as news to observers of the Kingdom since the number of those killed in the 2009 floods was 123. Menoret says nothing about the 45 officials arraigned for various offenses, and whose trials for negligence were the talk of Jiddah for months, certainly an unprecedented development in a conservative society where few similar cases were aired in public. Even if the trial results were not as satisfactory as some would have preferred, the mere fact that such charges were levied, that trials were held, and that judgments—monetary fines, denial of retirement benefits and several jail sentences—were imposed, deserved to be mentioned.

The Jiddah floods, still on page 4, has the following, too: “On November 28, 2009, lawyer and human rights activist Waleed Abu al-Khair, along with families of victims, sued the city of Jeddah.” He provides a footnote, number 17, which reads: “Naill Momani and Ayman Fadil, ‘Changing Public Policy due to Saudi City of Jeddah Flood Disaster,’ Journal of Social Sciences 6, no. 3 (2010), pp. 425, 427–28.” The document is available online and can be easily verified.

On page 425, this is what Momani and Fadil have:

Saturday 28/11/2009: Declaration of the high death toll to 106, the Saudi lawyer Waleed Abu Al Khair says he will sue Jeddah Municipality, stressing that the families of victims of the floods to [sic] support these endeavors and that he intended to condemn the failure of the sewerage system in the city[.]

The reader will notice what Al Khair said: that he “he will sue,” though we do not know if he actually did, even if Menoret affirms that al-Khair “sued the city of Jeddah.” There is also a figure of 106 dead on November 28, 2009, which is fewer than the 123 recognized by Saudi authorities.

Continuing on page 4, Menoret affirms that “[a]fter al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula launched a campaign of anti-Western bombings in 2000–2005, thousands were ‘disappeared’ by the security services. As of 2010 there were anywhere between twelve thousand and thirty thousand political prisoners in the country.” which, again, is followed by a footnote that is from the same Reuters report cited above. Repeating it does not transform it into a fact, and nowhere do we have the necessary caveats that a careful scholar would use, such as allegedly “disappeared” or, “according to opposition sources,” etc. Menoret avows at will as if these were irrefutable facts.
On page 5, he claims that the anonymous prince he quoted at the beginning of his Brief, someone

working in government [who] declared during an interview: We, who studied in the West, are of course in favor of democracy. As a matter of fact, we are the only true democrats in this country. But if we give people the right to vote, who do you think they’ll elect? The Islamists. It is not that we don’t want to introduce democracy in Arabia—but would it be reasonable? (page 1)[.]

and concludes that he, the prince, was both right and wrong. In fact, Menoret affirms that municipal “elections were convened and Islamists won, but those elections showed that the Al Sa’ud and the state-supported elites were not the only ones willing to engage in electoral politics.” Scholars of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia who rely on unidentified princes, or civilians for that matter, add to the scorn that non-area experts regularly throw at them. This is the case because quoting a single anonymous prince or princess does not mean: (1) that every prince or princess in the family shares his or her views; and (2) that in a large ruling family composed of several thousand members, opinions would all be the same. How a scholar handles such assertions is critical, and it behooves the astute analyst neither to rely on one nor to make wild generalizations based on a single source.

Still on page 5, we have: “Donated by princes in exchange for allegiance, land is the basis for the enrichment of a large chunk of the business community. Developers, realtors, and homeowners all benefit from free public loans and are linked to the state by way of debt as well as by their financial hopes. (Private mortgages were not introduced until 2012).” This topic is not new and was addressed by Menoret in Joyriding in Riyadh, but he repeats it here as if it were a universal fact. In the event, the land issue comes up regularly and is a favorite of several scholars, including Madawi al-Rasheed and others, though most prefer to overlook the country’s development policies that proved to be controversial and trying. This theoretical argument, first developed by Immanuel Wallerstein, who traced the rise of the capitalist world economy from feudalism to modern financially advanced economies—where control of land in the hands of small upper classes granted the latter clear advantages—can also be applied to the Al Sa’ud,
although the evidence is scant.\textsuperscript{(32)} In other words, this is an academic theory that probably has some truth to it, though it must be presented with required caveats. It is not an exclusive Saudi phenomenon, and Menoret probably knows that Saudi authorities apply a generous welfare system, which grants tangible benefits to millions of their compatriots, including parcels of land and financial means to build on them, along with many other allowances.

Finally, on page 6 of the brief, Menoret writes:

There surely were protests in 2011: Hundreds of Saudis marched against corruption and demanded transparency. For several days in January 2011, protests were held in front of municipal buildings and key ministries; a few self-immolations occurred between 2011 and 2013 in response to the suicide of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, which marked the beginning of the Tunisian revolution. The major demonstrations happened in the Shiite areas of the Eastern Province. But these protests did not coalesce into a nationwide uprising.

As far as is known, there were no immolations in Saudi Arabia, and calls for an uprising on February 11, 2011 came to naught. There were but a handful of people in the streets, even in ‘Awamiyyah (Eastern Province), which meant the “Day of Rage” was not one!

\textit{Graveyard of Clerics}

In his latest contribution, Menoret sets out to assess Islamic movements in the Kingdom further, concentrating on the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist groups.\textsuperscript{(33)} He concludes his personalized study with the following observations:

Islamic movements are not remnants of ancient political traditions, about to be swallowed in a democratizing wave that would make them obsolete or undermined by an authoritarian state that detains, tortures, and buries . . . In the face of this sheer violence, taking over the state was never an option. Organizing in its cracks was, which means that the Islamic Awakening is probably not dead, but in abeyance, and may resurface when the conditions are ripe. (p. 209)

\textsuperscript{(33)} Menoret, \textit{Graveyard of Clerics}. 
To be sure, this was an oft-heard opinion, but Menoret reaches these conclusions based on “field research” in the Kingdom between 2004 and 2007 that added gravitas to the matter. Remarkably, the bulk of the book is based on conversations Menoret held with a handful of Islamists, whose quotations fill most pages. This is quite a feat as the intention is to show that the professor is methodically rendering—almost always verbatim—his interviewees’ views, most of which he finds persuasive. In fact, one is literally overwhelmed by the quantity of these passages, even if Menoret cautions—once again in this volume—of his limited access. “Most of my interlocutors, in fact,” he writes on page 176, “would meet up with me once, exhibit polite interest in my research, and disappear without leaving a trace.”

The scantily connected book itself is divided into four parts, which intends to highlight what an inhospitable place the country supposedly is, both for Islamists and others. His first chapter reproduces materials previously published in the *Crown Center* brief analyzed above, and repeats the 12,000 to 30,000 political prisoners in 2011 canard, though he cleverly adds that some were “personally processed by FBI officers” (p. 6). He quotes the Palestinian writer Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who reportedly coined the term “Saudi Arabia is a graveyard of clerics and a prison for preachers” back in 1989 (p. 7), accepting al-Maqdisi’s opinion that “Saudi Arabia is a ‘morgue of clerics’ and true believers should leave the country, lest they end up behind bars, beaten, and tortured” (p. 7). Al-Maqdisi was deported from the Kingdom for preaching Kharijite rhetoric and other heretical dogmas, critical points that the author fails to mention, but which explain the preacher’s hatred toward the ruling establishment. In the event, Menoret adds his own slant with the following gem: “Saudi Arabia was not the Islamic utopia it claimed to be but an irreligious dystopia where state violence ruled supreme” (p. 8), which reveals his state of mind as he describes various adventures, including securing an office at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS). Unabashedly, he brags about his ability to interview one of his Islamist contacts, Nawwaf, at the Center (p. 15), oblivious to his breach of protocol.

Seldom lacking a sense of humor, Menoret jumps through various hoops, as for example, when he declares that “[i]f Saudi Arabia was a graveyard of clerics, then Radio Quran was the voice
of the undertakers” (p. 16). Or as when he delves into the devilish invention of the car that was a tool of repression, he maintains. This is one of the more bizarre soliloquies in the book, as he writes: “A car went out to dinner or to the desert as a car: four activists and their supervisor-driver. Cars could be accused of individualizing mobility and society, of separating people into distinct, quasi-private spheres, hermetic extensions of their bodies; but activists turned these atomizing tools into bonding devices” (p. 42), which highlighted incredible perceptions into an inanimate object that apparently was used for repression.

In the second part of the book, Menoret extensively quotes a young Muslim Brother, ‘Adel, who familiarizes the author with everything that is wrong with the Kingdom. He quotes ‘Adel’s wry humor along with the latter’s “salacious jokes—‘during Ramadan, we can fuck only after sunset’”—which smacks as a pure fabrication (p. 46). Beyond his frequent reliance on crude language, which he apparently heard from these young Islamists, Menoret looks into various operations, like the 1979 Makkah Mosque takeover, which necessitated the intervention of foreign commandoes, and other actions that strengthened Islamists. He devotes time to the Makkah incident to show further how bad Saudi security forces were. (34) He writes that the Al Sa’ud sent the army and the National Guard, which bombed the Great Mosque, destroying several walls and five of the seven minarets. After a failed chemical attack by the CIA, Al Sa’ud then turned to France’s Gendarmerie Nationale, which flooded the basement with polluted water and used CB gas, a potentially lethal riot-control gas. The French had brought a ton of it, “enough to poison an entire city.” (p. 60) [The source for this paragraph is Trofimov, The Siege of Mecca, pp. 191–7 and 207–12, and while Trofimov describes it as CB gas (dichlorobenzylidene-malononitrile), other reports claim that it was CS gas (chlorobenzylidene-malononitrile – tear gas)].

To be sure, there was extensive damage to the facility but five of the seven minarets were not destroyed, and it is still unclear—after all these years—how much CB gas was used. One ton of CB could have poisoned the entire city of Makkah but this did not occur and many inhabitants

(34) In this volume, Menoret claims that he is using International Journal of Middle East Studies transliteration protocol, but uses Mecca for Makkah, Sheikh for Shaykh, ‘Otaybi for ‘Utaybih, ‘Obeikan for ‘Ubaykan, etc. He even has Egyptian English, when he reproduces Al-Harra Al-Shargiya [The Eastern Lava Field], for Al-Harra Al-Sharqiyah.
survived. Dozens of Islamists were arrested, which means that CB, if used in the doses contemplated here, did not have an effect on them. The paragraph is followed by exaggerated figures, even if the GIGN “said that four thousand insurgents, pilgrims, and military personnel had died,” while the official Saudi data confirmed 135 deaths (p. 60).

To further illustrate the “progress” of Islamists in the Kingdom, Menoret then launches into a discussion of urbanization, chiefly around Riyadh. Much of this material was covered in Joyriding in Riyadh (see above), though we have a wonderful example concerning the then Governor of Riyadh, “who was trying his best to avoid paying [French] planners who were contracted to oversee the capital city’s expansion” (p. 62). It was unclear whether this information originated in the source that is provided at the end of his paragraph, the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignation, or whether an independent source provided the kernel that, as it stands, seems to be highly doubtful.

King Salman is not the only royal Menoret vilifies. According to the author, Islamism was apparently on the rise throughout the 1970s and 1980s, since “[p]eople had just lived through King Faysal’s repression of nationalist and leftist movements” (p. 67). There is no point in rehashing earlier evaluations of such declarations except to add that repeating them—albeit this time by putting these words in the mouth of one Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ilah—did not certify either accuracy or veracity. Yet repeating such statements is so frequent that one cannot but admire his consistence, something at which Menoret is excellent.

Be that as it may. Menoret recounts several encounters with Islamists, all to highlight gradual progress and, more importantly, Riyadh’s alleged inability to handle challenges. Indeed, part 3 of the book concentrates on many Islamist achievements, starting with a chapter titled “The Harry Potter Dissent” (pp. 99–104), and closes the short six-page chapter with the following avowal:

... the militant group had been forced by people who could not express their excellence anywhere but underground. Dictators, in a way, were successful rebels—hence the activists’ interest in their biographies. To be crushed, or to crush others: this was the painful alternative that young activists faced at all stages of their mobilization. This political battle started in school and continued in the neighborhood. (p. 104)
Inasmuch as this reflected what Islamists planned to do, namely to take the battle from schools to neighborhoods and, in time, to the seat of power, one simply wonders how authorities could tolerate the use of violence in their society?

As the narrative progresses, Menoret concentrates on the Muslim Brotherhood, whose more educated foot soldiers took it upon themselves, he informs us, to infiltrate the education system. “After he graduated from college, Thamir [another Menoret contact] started teaching religion, first in a rural town and then in Tumiya [a Riyadh suburb from where he hailed]. He could have aspired to a more prestigious high school in a wealthier neighborhood, but he preferred not to teach bored and arrogant middle-class kids” (p. 117), which presumably exposed Menoret’s perception of certain communities. Thamir, according to the author, concluded that “he would be more useful” in “Riyadh’s Bedouin belt . . . from Nasim to Tumiya and from al-Dakhl al-Mahdud to Nazim” where “rural migrants” hosted “schools [that] could be anarchic and noisy, and [where] provocations, insults, and fights were an everyday reality” (p. 117). Thamir, in short, was well placed to carry the Islamist torch as he indoctrinated rural youngsters. Several chapters follow this discourse to show substantive Islamist initiatives that were supposedly necessary because one Ministry of Education employee told the author: “Imported behaviors are on the rise [in the country], but the truth is, corruption starts in the street—violence, deviance, that type of behavioral deviance we call homosexuality” (p. 153). Such values, Menoret reminds us, were not realistic in the Kingdom because the “idealized past, where fathers exercised a relative authority over sinful youths,” has now given way “to a corrupt present in which fathers had lowered their guard and caved in to globalization and its lures” (p. 153). This is, at best, a misreading of Saudi society and its evolving norms that required far better attention than is available here.

The author recounts several disputes with officials as he visited schools and summer camps, even if his original research project concentrated on municipal elections. After an unpleasant encounter with a Ministry of Education deputy director, who accused him of being “dishonest by not revealing right away” his research focus, the author retorts that he was transparent and that he published on the elections, “including an article in Arabic, which came out with the
authorization of Prince Turki al-Faysal, the director of the King Faysal Center” (p. 163). Dropping the “name of a prince was all it took,” he writes, as the deputy director who was unhappy with Menoret apparently “stood, gathered his belongings, and walked toward the exit” (p. 163). He acknowledges that he “waved the name of Turki al-Faysal to protect [himself],” though the official “had sent a complaint to the emirate of Riyadh” (p. 165), before the event subsided. This was not the only time Menoret waved Prince Turki al-Faisal’s name though an “adviser” told him over the telephone that “[t]he Prince cannot do anything for you,” adding “[b]e strong” (p. 201). The phone call was made on Valentine’s Day 2016, after Menoret was detained for scribbling in his notebook: “Fahd, you donkey, you sold Mecca for one dollar,” which he claimed he heard from an Islamist. The allegation that King Fahd sold Makkah was preposterous as well as comical but Menoret evidently wished to record it so that he was able to verify the quotation at a later time. In the event, he was released within a few hours, but the episode colored his emotional state.

Menoret concludes his book by praising the Muslim Brotherhood, whose project certainly included acts of violence, and compares the group, now designated as a terrorist organization, with Salafists, when he opines that:

The political situation was terrible and had to be changed; activists did not have the luxury of retreating into intellectual debates of waiting for others to act on their behalf. Something had to be done now, with the meager political resources at hand, and those resources consisted of the circles and groups of the Islamic Awakening. (p. 194)

He added:

The Salafis and the Muslim Brothers were involved in Islamic action at two different levels. The Muslim Brothers were patiently building their influence and their networks, organizing their own movement in the hope that, one day, they might encompass the whole society around them. The Salafis saw themselves as more academic, more rigorous, and more scientific than the Brothers, and that is precisely why they saw it as their duty to intervene when the wrong people, in their eyes, were becoming influential in society. They criticized those they thought were false elites, these liberals and secularists who opposed Islamic action. (p. 197)
The paragraph could not be clearer as to what Menoret hoped for Saudi Arabia. His writing revealed a preference that, to say the least, wished for the Islamists to prevail.

**Concluding Remarks on Menoret**

In his conclusion to his “Repression and Protest in Saudi Arabia” essay, Menoret provides a few clues on “The Future of Saudi Politics” as he perceives it. Given that the sub-title is about politics, there is an assumption that the author is fairly confident that the country will endure, though he quickly focuses on more sensational statements. First, he avows that “Saudi authoritarianism is particularly unsophisticated, and comprises a ban on political action, frequent resort to police violence, opacity, and disinformation,” which is followed by an acknowledgment that ARAMCO and Jordanian, Egyptian, French, British, and US “inputs” in the “design of a brutal repression machine” were facts. If everybody participated in this design, one cannot but conclude that it was quite sophisticated. Unless, that is, Jordanians, Egyptians, French, Brits, and Americans, among others, were the unsophisticated ones.

Second, Menoret then focuses on Islamists and how they were coopted, without informing the reader what the strength of these Islamists is. What are we talking about here? Are there 1,000, 10,000, or 100,000 Islamists roaming the streets throughout the Kingdom? If some were, in fact, integrated into the education system, media outlets, and Islamic Affairs ministries, should we not assume that these are also quite sophisticated to have penetrated the security dragnets that are presumably in place? One cannot have it both ways. The Al Sa‘ud are either sophisticated or unsophisticated. This is not a smorgasbord and to make such wild generalizations is unbecoming.

Third, Menoret then commits an egregious error in his analysis when he affirms that “[t]he repression of the 1990s arguably contributed to the radicalization of a fringe of Islamists, to the creation of al-Qaeda, and to an escalation of violence in the region and in the world.” He does not say it outright but, somehow, he lets his negative views seep out with the “creation of al-Qaeda” item. This is a loaded topic that necessitates detailed knowledge of al-Qa‘idah and ‘Usamah bin Ladin, which I do not claim to have, though the reader is advised to read Lawrence Wright’s 2006 book, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* for an erudite evaluation. (35)

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Wright confirms that al-Qa’idah was formed at an August 11, 1988 meeting in Peshawar (Pakistan) between “several senior leaders,” including ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam, a Palestinian Muslim Brother, and bin Ladin, which means that this was a Muslim Brotherhood concocted effort, at least partially, though opposition to the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan played a role too. Moreover, and as the former British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook wrote in a 2005 *Guardian* essay, al-Qa’idah and bin Ladin were “a product of a monumental miscalculation by western security agencies,” and “Al-Qaida, literally ‘the database,’ was originally the computer file of the thousands of mujahideen who were recruited and trained with help from the CIA to defeat the Russians”[the reference by Cook is to the CIA’s Operation Cyclone].(36) In other words, this had and has little to do with what Menoret alleges, which, he underscores, led to “[t]he repression of the 1990s [that] arguably contributed to the radicalization of a fringe of Islamists, to the creation of al-Qaeda, and to an escalation of violence in the region and in the world.” Of course, Menoret chooses to ignore the many steps taken by Riyadh to deal with various threats posed by al-Qa’idah and bin Ladin, but he does not mention any of these as they contradict, or at least significantly weaken, lame arguments. In the event, and based on just Lawrence Wright as well as Robin Cook, it was not the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that “created” al-Qa’idah.

The author then jumps into: “The arrival of King Salman to power in early 2015 does not bode well for the future of Saudi politics, which seems bleaker than ever,” which strikes one as being farfetched. How does Menoret know this? Why is King Salman so bad? What has he done to earn such opprobrium? Is the claim that King Salman “has remained silent about political reforms” true? Has the monarch said nothing worthwhile about reforms and political and security steps since he ascended the throne on January 23, 2015?

Menoret concludes the penultimate paragraph of his diatribe with: “In the absence of political reforms and as state spending drops, police repression will remain the alpha and omega of the Saudi political system.” What kind of scholarly analysis is this? Police repression is the alpha and omega of the political system? There is nothing good to say about anything that occurred—

and occurs—in Saudi Arabia? When one bears in mind that “alpha and omega” has a divine connotation, should one conclude that this is mundane theatrics in the context of an otherwise sensationalist essay? The brief ends with confused affirmations: opposition forces are held in check by “state violence,” which overlooks the fact that the destruction of public property, calls for violence, acts of terrorism (attacks on law enforcement officials, calls for murder, and the overthrow of the ruling family, etc.) are not illustrations of peaceful acts. When one reports that officials are really bad because they commit “state violence,” one simply is under the impression that Riyadh is an utterly violent government that wants to prevent the many peaceful calls for assassination, or the actual “peaceful acts of murder” that opposition forces engage in, including the Molotov cocktails launched on police cars in the ‘Awamiyyah (near Qatif) hotspot in February 2014. Are state officials—whose duty is to protect citizens after all, and in every single country on this planet, including Saudi Arabia—not empowered to prevent such acts of violence? Why should Saudi officials be exempt from defending their citizens? Why are scholars willing to tolerate violence when alleged peaceful opposition forces conduct such acts? Is this not a recipe for disaster? Did the British Government roll over and accept the Irish Republican Army’s peaceful bombings during the tragic events that rocked Ireland? Did the German Government welcome the Baader-Meinhof Gang into their midst in the 1970s? Have French and Spanish authorities accepted Basque separatist movements to redraw the maps of the two states? One can draft a long list of governments that secured public support to uphold the law. Menoret might not like Saudi law, and he is free to say so, but he is not—as a scholar—allowed to disparage. If he were an objective researcher, he would have pointed out the concrete reform steps, made suggestions for more, and otherwise evaluated how events developed on the ground. Being judge, jury, and executioner is not a scholar’s writ.

To its credit, and despite the comments above, it is necessary to acknowledge that the Menoret studies contained scholarly analyses, some of which were qualitatively valuable. More recent assessments of the Kingdom, and especially of Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman, offered state-of-the-art bias against him, to which we turn next.

Christine Ockrent and Saudi Arabia

In producing a gossipy book par excellence, Christine Ockrent, a Belgian journalist who graduated from the Institut d’Études Politiques in Paris before she embarked on a distinguished career on French television, added her name to the growing list of authors who belittle Saudi Arabia in general and Muhammad bin Salman in particular. (38)

Ockrent starts off with classic insults, affirming that Saudi Arabia is too “retrograde” and an “intolerant” country that treats women as second-class citizens, and foreigners as suspects. She goes on to claim that Riyadh holds Western economies hostage to petroleum needs and regrets that leading powers like the United States, Britain, France and others will compete to sell weapons they apparently cannot be permitted to use (p. 11). She asserts that power in Riyadh was and is held by old men, as every son of the founder, ‘Abdul ‘Aziz bin ‘Abdul Rahman, assumed the throne at an advanced age. (39) Except for the last two rulers of the Kingdom, the founder’s four successors were between 51 and 61 when they acceded the throne, hardly advanced ages.

Be that as it may, Ockrent launches an attack on King Faysal early on, acknowledging that he was the most pious and wisest monarch (p. 12) but, she emphasizes, it was Faysal who declared the petroleum war against the West and adopted “religious diplomacy,” which is her code word for saying that Faysal encouraged extremism. She recalls how Faysal refrained from looking at her during a 60 Minutes interview she conducted—as a last minute substitute to CBS television’s Mike Wallace, who missed his flight—allegedly because he did not wish to answer questions from a woman, confusing respect and modesty with obstinacy. (40) Incidentally, although Ockrent worked for CBS in New York, she does not seem to know the United States all that well. When she discusses Bandar bin Sultan, the long-serving Saudi ambassador to Washington, she focuses on his alleged commissions on various military contracts, and advances the astonishing figure

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(38) Ockrent, Le Prince mystère de l’Arabie.
(39) Of course, this is largely incorrect as King Sa’ud, who was born in 1902 and became ruler in 1953, was 51; King Faysal, who was born in 1906, acceded the throne in 1964, at 57; King Khalid was born in 1913 and was 61 when he was entrusted with rulership; King Fahd, born in 1921, was 60 when he assumed power in 1982; King ‘Abdallah was born in 1924 and became monarch in 2005, at the age of 80, though he was a Regent in 1995; and, finally King Salman was born in 1935 and became monarch in 2015, at 79.
of US$1 billion in kick-backs Prince Bandar purportedly received, in part to acquire a private
Airbus 340. She writes that the plane was painted in blue and silver, the colors of his favorite
“baseball team” (p. 61), whereas Bandar bin Sultan was a supporter/fan of the Dallas Cowboys,
an American football team, which he first followed when he was a student at Lackland Air
Force Base near San Antonio, Texas.

Unbelievable information fills page after page in the Ockrent opus, though her focus quickly
turns to Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman who, she opines, embarked on a revamp of
his staff in June 2018 at the height of the month of Ramadan when most believers were far
more pious and seldom spent time at their offices. She writes that Muhammad bin Salman’s
dark anger—throwing files at staff members, breaking two television sets, and firing several
assistants—did not endear the Palace to those serving him nor, presumably, reflect well on his
piety (p. 107). Of course, she fails to cite any sources for these revelations and one is tempted to
ask how she knows such details: was it one or two television sets that were broken and, while at
it, why not raise the ante and state that the actual number was four or six? This is really a pitiful
discussion that reveals ill-intention since vilifying is rather easy, especially when one makes
things up, as seems to be the case here.

Much of her prose is fiction and is discernable in this sentence: according to Ockrent, a
barber accompanied the prince during his nearly two-month-long 2018 trips to the United
States, Paris, and Madrid, to trim the heir’s beard “twice-a-day” (p. 37). She reports that his
wife, Sarah bint Mashur bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, was 22 years in 2018 and that the couple had four
children, two boys, Salman and Massur, and two girls, Fahdah and Nurah (p. 39). She further
informs her reader that to celebrate his thirtieth birthday, Muhammad bin Salman and his party
filled the Velaa and Cheval Blanc Randhali islands in the Maldives at a cost of $8 million, with
a stellar group of entertainers, including the rapper Pitbull and the singers Jennifer Lopez and
Shakira (p. 39). Ockrent quotes an anonymous Lebanese guest who claimed that the prince
was intelligent, enjoyed an excellent memory, but lacked culture and displayed an explosive
temperament. “A wild bear roaming in nature” (p. 41), she reports, delving into psychoanalysis
of the best kind. Quoting an unknown Lebanese source is her pitiful tool to certify her fiction.
Yet and to minimize the impact of these irrelevant items in her best-seller, Ockrent falls back on Jacques Attali, to add a little gravitas to her text. Attali, a respected economist who served as a counselor to President François Mitterrand from 1981 to 1991 and was the first head of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in 1991–93, offers a positive reading of the young Saudi heir apparent. According to Ockrent, the French statesman admired Muhammad bin Salman, because the Saudi displayed curiosity, exceptional kindness, and a strong desire to see improvements in his country. Moreover, Ockrent tells her readers that Attali respected the young Saudi leader’s desire to learn and that, in short, he was a prince who was a modernizer in search of stability for his country and the entire region (pp. 42–3).

None of this mattered, of course, as the Belgian author hones on her “victim” who, she asserts “cannot reform Islam” (p. 147), which is not the heir apparent’s objective even if he wished that clerics would be far more tolerant and curtail the draconian measures introduced after 1979. In fact, one of the most important developments of the past five years in the Kingdom was the overall relaxation of the clerical establishment, which is no longer as visible as it once was. Still, Ockrent seldom gives up and makes fun of clerics and their decrees (fatwahs), allegedly because they were backward. She states that the Grand Mufti banned chess because he concluded “it was a waste of time and money” (p. 158). She further reveals that the Pokémon game was forbidden because its characters illustrated “Darwin’s theory of evolution” (p. 158), a claim that, to put it mildly, was hilarious. Another learned man [‘alim] apparently outlawed “snowmen because these were anti-Muslim” (p. 159). Her sarcasm, which lacks vivacious cleverness [*esprit*], shows when she adds that snow is rare in his land (p. 159). Indeed, it does not snow often in the Kingdom but the mountainous regions in the north-west see snow in the winter months, albeit for short periods of time.

There are many mistakes in the Ockrent volume and listing all of them would require dozens of pages. What follows are some of the more blatant ones.

1. The Grand Mosque in Makkah, claims the author, was liberated by American and French forces after Juhayman al-‘Utaybi and his followers attacked the facility in November 1979 (p. 163). There were no Americans present at the venue, though French GIGN
[Groupe d’intervention de la Gendarmerie nationale], an anti-terrorist group, sent three commandoes to train Saudi forces how to use the gas canister. They were stationed in nearby Ta’if, did not enter Makkah, and left as soon as the training was finished, which few Western writers reported.

2. Relying on Stéphane Lacroix, now an associate professor at the Paris School of International Affairs (PSIA), Ockrent writes that Saudis failed to accept Islam’s radicalization, blaming the Muslim Brotherhood for most ills. She affirms, again based on an interview with Lacroix, that the Saudi influence was the engine that moved Islamic radicalization (p. 173). This was a false assertion as both Lacroix and Ockrent were oblivious to the fact that Saudis were not in the proselytization business and did not plan to Wahhabize the Muslim world, and certainly did not wish to export Islamic revolution to any country. There were other countries that specialized in that business, especially Iran and, to a lesser extent, the Muslim Brotherhood and similar extremist groups, even if not a word appears here about their efforts.

3. The Wahhabi monarchy is based on a religious doctrine whose anti-Semitic features were a historical fact [she uses the word “constant,” which in French can also mean continuous] (p. 216). There is no such thing as a Wahhabi monarchy and Islam cannot possibly be anti-Semitic since Arab Muslims are Semites. Even worse is her insistence that this is a historical fact—only in her vivid imagination.

4. She quotes Pierre Conesa, a former Ministry of Defense official, as saying that Riyadh financed Islamic institutions throughout the world. She follows this up by writing that Saudi authorities led merciless assaults on extremists in the aftermath of the 2003 bombings that shook the monarchy (p. 174). What is missing here is the distinction between legitimate assistance extended to various parties seeking financial support for charitable work and the backing of extremism or, at the very least, extremist ideas.

5. Ockrent identifies Nimr Baqr al-Nimr, “the most famous Shi’ah cleric” [she uses the word “prédicateur,” or preacher, in other words someone who speaks publicly about God to unbelievers and teaches believers (it is said to preach)], who “demanded legal equality and evoked the need for the Eastern Province to secede from the country” without informing her
readers what that entailed (p. 175). Which country was ready to accept secession when a
citizen demanded it? She does not ask herself whether France would accept a preacher asking
for Corsica to secede and either join Italy or become an independent country. Moreover, what
did legal equality mean when one called for the fall of the Al Sa‘ud ruling family? Was any
call to achieve such a goal through violent means something that a nation-state accepted?
Ockrent can certainly be excused for misidentifying Shaykh al-Nimr as an Ayatollah—he
was not one (p. 180)—but her ignorance of international affairs is too blatant to exonerate.

6. Women at the Majlis al-Shurah are separated from their male colleagues by a curtain (p.
119), she tells us. This is not true, and while the 30 female members serving along their 120
male colleagues sit together in one section, the hall is not divided by any curtains. Some
female members cover their faces but others do not and most are active participants in the
chamber’s deliberations.

7. Finally, and while there is no evidence to back this claim, Ockrent advances the bizarre notion
that Muslim Brotherhood elements—mostly Palestinians she insists—working in Cairo before
the Nasir era for the BBC Arabic, created Al Jazeera in Doha . . . in 1996 (p. 202). This paragraph
contains several errors that highlight the author’s ignorance of the Muslim Brotherhood, the
Nasir era, the BBC Arabic, and Al Jazeera. The only correct information was the date, 1996—
when Al Jazeera was formally established—and its location, Doha, in Qatar.

Relying once again on Stéphane Lacroix, Ockrent affirms that duped Saudis—including in their
“irrational anti-Iranian perspectives”—believed that the war in Yemen would strengthen their
hand: Lacroix continues and Ockrent accepts that Saudis were always scorned [“méprisés”]
by all Arabs who did not consider them as men, unable to take a step forward without the
Americans, and who now appeared to be courageous, stepping up to the plate, assembling a
coalition to confront Iranians (p. 211).\(^\text{41}\) Three years later, and having failed to consolidate
his power at home, Lacroix opines and Ockrent once again concurs that the heir apparent got
sucked into a dilemma [le pied dans un engrenage]. This is fiction at best and an error at worst

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\(^{41}\) The sentence in French, “Les considèrent comme pas tout a fait des hommes, incapables de faire un pas sans les Américains,” is quite disturbing.
since the War for Yemen was supported by a broad international coalition, including the United States and the United Kingdom, both of which extended vital assistance and deployed military personnel in the command and control centers responsible for air strikes. Moreover, it is critical to note that the UN Security Council passed resolution 2216 on April 14, 2015, which supported the Saudi coalition to help restore the legitimate government of Yemen.

Ockrent is free to believe that the Saudi system is “fragile and its young hero too imperfect,” though she is, to put it mildly, mistaken (p. 269). The Saudi system is strong as it endured and was likely to continue its evolution, albeit at a pace that might not satisfy Western journalists. She is also free to dislike Muhammad bin Salman, who is a resilient and compelling leader, and while perfection is in the eye of the beholder, few will deny that the heir apparent is fulfilling a key role in contemporary affairs.

For Ockrent, Muhammad bin Salman was a new nemesis, someone who could not possibly be trusted, as she discusses the Ritz-Carlton arrests, mostly quoting American and British newspapers, belittles the anti-corruption drive, and lists just about every imaginable negative story that the prince was associated with by Western journalists. She insists that Western businessman listen to Muhammad bin Salman but that, in private, they mistrust him, disbelieving much of the reforms underway because they do not deem such deeds to be possible. Everything that Prince Muhammad bin Salman touches, she opines, turns bad, and she falls back on the Khashoggi assassination to make her point. She relies on Karim Emile Bitar, an international relations professor at the Université St. Joseph in Beirut to discuss Sa’ad Hariri, as she insinuates that the former prime minister was promised a chunk of the $3 billion pledged by the Kingdom to purchase French weapons for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in late December 2013. While the commitment was cancelled in 2016 because Beirut failed to condemn attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran, Bitar revealed that Hizballah in Lebanon gained expertise thanks to Iran, something that was highly doubtful. It was Tehran, she relates, that thought members of the Lebanese militia should handle top-of-the-line military technologies instead of the LAF; that was certainly the Iranian view, but one wondered why Bitar, a Lebanese national, did not support the Lebanese Armed Forces instead of admiring a militia that spread havoc and literally destroyed the Levantine state. Amazingly, Bitar offered his admiration for Tehran’s professionalism. He
compared its prowess to “Riyadh’s amateurism,” which was allegedly aggravated by Muhammad bin Salman’s recklessness when Hariri was “kidnapped” and forced to resign only to be “rescued” by French President Emmanuel Macron. In short, the highly-respected Lebanese geopolitician concluded, and Ockrent acquiesced, that the Saudis shot themselves in the foot (p. 197). Sadly, the advice was to simply accept in a fatalistic way the Iranian diktat, as Ockrent concludes that Muhammad bin Salman’s Lebanon interferences resulted in a fiasco (p. 199). Her gloating is remarkable, but she finds little to say about the many ways that Hizballah took Lebanon hostage and denigrated the State of Lebanon, but that’s another subject.

It is worth repeating that the Ockrent book is a gossipy tome with useless bavardages [small-talk] typical of sensational journalism that pretends to have insights when it lacks them. Although the book, which contains data that could only come from someone relatively well versed in Saudi affairs, aspires to present a new image of the Kingdom, it regrettably repeats stale commentaries recapped ad nauseum in most Western journalistic sources. Ockrent is obsessed with Muhammad bin Salman and disparages the heir apparent for his alleged temperament, which is further described in a remarkable paragraph that is problematic at best and insulting at worst, though we should not be surprised by its attention. According to Ockrent, visitors claimed that Muhammad bin Salman was an angry man, whose “outbursts of brutality towards his closest collaborators, incessant waltz of advisers subjected to his mood swings [that could only be] linked to a bulimic work rhythm, as well as an excessive consumption of drugs,” disturbed many.\(^{(42)}\) In other words, Muhammad bin Salman was no more than an obsessive man on drugs, which highlights her insolence, breaches decorum, and redefines rudeness. She could have listened to Jacques Attali but opted to ignore such counsel. That decision strengthened sales of the book and probably pleased critics of Saudi Arabia.

Jonathan Rugman and The Killing in the Consulate

If the Ockrent volume shed little light on Muhammad bin Salman or Saudi Arabia, Jonathan Rugman’s study aimed for the jugular. The then Foreign Affairs Correspondent at Channel

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\(^{(42)}\) The sentence in French reads as follows: “colères, accès de brutalité envers ses collaborateurs les plus proches, valse incessante des conseillers soumis a ses sautés d’humeur liées d’un rythme de travail boulimique et une consummation excessive d’adjuvants médicamenteux, insinuent certains visiteurs nocturnes” (p. 267).
4 News in London, Rugman penned a highly charged volume on the life and death of Jamal Khashoggi, which promised to uncover what actually occurred in Istanbul.\(^{(43)}\) Rugman was no mere reporter but a highly skilled journalist who covered revolutions and uprisings in Syria, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Bahrain, Somalia’s famine, the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, corruption in world football, and the Haiti earthquake. In 2016 he won a BAFTA for his reporting on the terrorist attacks in Paris (among at least 10 other media awards) and served as Channel 4 News Washington Correspondent. Earlier, he authored *Ataturk’s Children: Turkey and the Kurds*, and actually reported from Turkey for BBC Radio 4, all of which established his qualifications to embark on his latest effort ostensibly because he was well connected in the country where the crime occurred.\(^{(44)}\) Regrettably, while Rugman produced a factually correct book, he opted to skirt analysis. Hardly any hard-hitting questions are raised in nearly 350 pages, Rugman preferring to accept explanations from those with unabashed agendas to besmirch Saudi Arabia. *The Killing in the Consulate* received solid reviews, one calling it “a dark fable of unaccountable power,” while another praised it as “a meticulous account.”\(^{(45)}\) Hardly.

**A Detailed Account**

For Rugman, the key question was the following: “why did the Saudis think they could get away with the crime undetected?” (p. 161), which no one did because nothing was premeditated. Of course, Rugman was persuaded otherwise, basing his views on how often Riyadh switched stories before acknowledging that Khashoggi was executed and his death covered up. He does not accept the rogue operation explanation, as he sets out to expose what he believes was the dark heart of the Saudi regime, even as he acknowledges that the “Turks leaked astonishing [even] if unverifiable details” (p. 3). In the event, it is now well known that the journalist was murdered within minutes of his arrival at the Saudi Consulate.


in Istanbul by a 15-man squad, and while Saudi authorities claimed that Khashoggi had left the building through a back door, his fiancée, Hatice Cengiz, alerted Turkish authorities. An enraged president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who reviled Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman as a *parvenu*, authorized a steady drip of leaks from audiotapes that well-placed spies had collected (since they bugged the consulate), intercepted smartphones carried by the Saudis, and relied on security videotapes that showed the travelers arriving and leaving the airport. What emerged from the audio-tapes, in particular, was apparently substantive. In time, these were shared with the CIA and other Western spy agencies, all to prove that a premeditated murder was planned and executed.

In the Rugman narrative, Khashoggi was a protester by circumstance who was not opposed to the monarchy, even though he was dismissed from several media posts. Khashoggi was a mystery in more ways than one, though he managed to balance his criticisms of the Al Sa’ud with his loyalty toward his country. His checkered background, including three previous marriages, of which he presumably kept two secret from the putative fiancée (p. 10), and his being of “Ottoman descent” (p. 15), raised few questions. To his credit, Rugman digs and reveals various discrepancies. For example, the author reports that his fiancée believed Khashoggi’s birthday was October 13, though he celebrated it on March 23, 2018 in a Washington, DC restaurant (p. 19). Equally perplexing was his association with the Muslim Brotherhood. He apparently told Turan Kışlakçı, a friend for fifteen years, that he never became a member though he read all of their books. To the American writer Lawrence Wright, Khashoggi avowed that: “We were hoping to establish an Islamic state anywhere . . . we believed the first one would lead to another, and that would have a domino effect which would reverse the history of mankind” (p. 22), though who the “we” were remained ambiguous.\(^{(46)}\)

Instead, the focus is on the *Washington Post* columnist’s selected writings, even if he penned 20 essays over the course of a full year for the modest financial reward of US$10,000.\(^{(47)}\) In reality, Khashoggi was a “freelance columnist in the paper’s ‘global opinions section’,” (p. 39) who received editorial assistance from Maggie Mitchell Salem, a former US diplomat who returned

\(^{(46)}\) Wright, *The Looming Tower*, p. 78.
\(^{(47)}\) For a full discussion of the relationship with the *Washington Post*, see Kéchichian, *Saudi Arabia in 2030*. 
to Washington DC to work for the Qatar Foundation International (p. 80). Remarkably, the Salem relationship was much closer than Rugman implies, an important pillar of the story as discussed in the section that deals with Ben Hubbard’s book (below).

As standard operating procedure, Rugman focuses on Muhammad bin Salman, recalling just about every imaginable story that preoccupied successive news cycles, ranging the gamut from the “Abu Rasasa” story to the alleged kidnapping of Prime Minister Sa‘ad Hariri of Lebanon. The more interesting developments were those associated with Omar Abdulaziz, a young Saudi dissident living in Montreal, Canada, with whom Khashoggi intended to “invest” in telephone SIM cards to be distributed to their putative electronic army, “an army they called ‘cyber bees,’ designed to debunk Saudi state propaganda” (p. 102). To his credit, Rugman reveals that Khashoggi gave Abdulaziz US$5,000 and pledged a further $30,000 that he intended to raise from rich donors, without specifying their nationalities.

According to Rugman, on June 2, 2018, Khashoggi wed Hanan el-Atr, an Egyptian national who knew about his troubles with Sa‘ud al-Qahtani, an aide to the heir apparent who had ordered the journalist not to talk with foreigners or write his critical opinion essays (p. 111). Remarkably, Khashoggi never told his Turkish fiancée about this marriage. What he told Hatice Cengiz was that “he had applied for US citizenship” (p. 114), yet this was never confirmed in public. Moreover, what the journalist was keen on was to land a well-paying, permanent position, even though Turan Kişlakçı offered him a job in Turkey (p. 115), which was not pursued. Beyond this offer, Rugman—along with other authors who covered this subject—failed to discuss Jamal Khashoggi’s contacts with highly placed Turkish nationals. In addition to Turan Kişlakçı, Khashoggi was also on excellent terms with Yasin Aktay, an advisor to President Erdoğan whom he had met several times [and who acknowledged that he had known the Saudi journalist “for a long time” (p. 155)], as well as İbrahim Kalın, Erdoğan’s national security advisor, who at first denied having any information about the tragedy (p. 149). What were Khashoggi’s relationships with these Turkish personalities, and why was the Saudi journalist so secretive about them? To several friends, Khashoggi admitted that he “had many friends” in Turkey, and even knew Erdoğan (p. 128), though it was unclear how well-established these ties were. By all accounts, Erdoğan was a reputable Islamist, and supported the Muslim Brotherhood as the organization
expanded its activities throughout the Muslim world. Of course, the brotherhood was banned in Saudi Arabia after 2014 and classified as a terrorist organization by several members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) alliance, though Khashoggi may have been under the impression that his “personal friendship with the Turkish leader may well have contributed to his misplaced belief that he would be safe there” (p. 222).

Equally perplexing, and something that Rugman also does not discuss, were the origins of the audiotapes that Turkish authorities collected. What were their origins and who authorized their production? Was this normal operating procedure for Ankara and did Turkey spy on all foreign legations? Or was this revelation the result of sheer coincidence that allowed authorities to stumble on highly incriminating audio- and security videotapes? None of these questions are analyzed in any depth here or under the pen of other intrepid investigators.

In the event, Rugman relies on the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions, Agnès Callamard, for “most of the conversations [that allegedly occurred] in the consulate,” along with “notes which were taken as the recordings were being played inside MIT headquarters” [Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı, or the National Intelligence Organization] (p. 163). The English writer reveals that Turkish intelligence officials allowed Callamard to “hear forty-five minutes of tape but was told . . . that they [had] access to at least seven hours.” He further writes that “Callamard was not given an English transcript and Turkey’s spy chiefs asked her not to take notes” (p. 164), although this was not a handicap since she understood Turkish, having lived and studied in Turkey. What was interesting, nevertheless, was that Rugman did not


(49) Agnès Callamard received her undergraduate degree from the Grenoble Institute of Political Studies (Institut d’études politiques de Grenoble, also known as Sciences Po Grenoble), a master’s degree from Başkent University in Ankara (which was established in 1994), Turkey, and a PhD in Political Science from the New York New School for Social Research in 1995. She was appointed United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, by a Human Rights Council resolution on June 22, 2017 with a three-year mandate, and produced a major report on the Khashoggi assassination. See, Kathryn Hampton, “Agnès Callamard,” Atlas, September 3, 2019, https://www.atlaswomen.org/profiles/2019/9/3/agns-callamard. More recently, she concluded that the US drone strike that killed Iranian General Qasem Soleimani on January 3, 2020 near Baghdad Airport was unlawful. Callamard wrote on Twitter: “The targeted killings of Qasem Soleimani and Abu mahdi al muhandi most likely violate
bother to inform his readers on this critical point and whether Callamard was working with or for the MİT.

What Turkey and presumably the United States were interested to know was the identity of the individual who ordered the killing and whether “the chain of command stretch[ed] all the way up to the crown prince himself?” (p. 180). A classified CIA assessment, conveniently leaked to the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*, “stated that the crown prince sent at least eleven messages to his media adviser, Saud al-Qahtani, on WhatsApp in the hours before and after the killing,” which presumably led American intelligence officials to conclude that Muhammad bin Salman knew about the operation, even if US experts “hadn’t read the actual contents of the messages” (p. 181). A separate Saudi investigation entrusted to the private research team Kroll, examined al-Qahtani’s smartphone and concluded that the aide sent the heir apparent “fifteen messages on 2 October,” 2018, none of which “contained clear or identifiable references to Jamal Khashoggi” (p. 181). According to Rugman, the CIA had intercepted an earlier call from Muhammad bin Salman to Turki al-Dakhil, in which the heir apparent “talked of having Khashoggi returned to Saudi Arabia by force. If that failed, then ‘with a bullet,’ the crown prince allegedly said” in September 2017 (p. 182). Notwithstanding such assertions, the CIA “concluded that Crown Prince Mohammed had most likely ordered the killing” (p. 252), as the “medium to high confidence” report was something of an anomaly because Muhammad bin Salman, it claimed, “probably ordered [Khashoggi’s] death” though it added: “to be clear, we lack direct reporting of the crown prince issuing a kill order” (p. 253). It clarified: “The accepted position is that there is no way this happened without him being aware or involved,” ostensibly because the heir apparent “goes from zero to 60, [and] doesn’t seem to understand that there are some things you can’t do” (p. 253).

**From Ankara to Washington**

It was interesting to note Jamal Khashoggi’s overall defense of the monarchy in the Kingdom as Rugman reports how the Saudi journalist spoke in support of the execution of Shaykh al-

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International law incl human rights law. Lawful justifications for such killings are very narrowly defined and it is hard to imagine how any of these can apply to these killings. #Iraq.” See Jessie Yeung, Fernando Alfonso III, Tara John, Julia Hollingsworth, Rob Picheta, and Mike Hayes, “Iran’s Top General Soleimani Killed in US Strike,” CNN, January 4, 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/baghdad-airport-strike-live-intl-hnk/h_f4d89b41e9e19a716edc8047bf923df. Her earlier tweets were extremely critical of Saudi Arabia, especially the development of Saudi women’s rights, as she cavalierly dismissed epochal transformations in political, work, and social standings (see also section on Ben Hubbard’s book, ‘Ben Hubbard and Saudi Arabia’).
Nimr, describing him as someone who had committed treason (p. 45), adding: “We target only terrorists or dissidents that call for violence . . . we do not execute political criminals” (p. 45). Rugman adds that Khashoggi fell from grace, and was killed “not because he posed a particular threat, but because he wouldn’t kiss the ring.” “Perhaps the best way of explaining a motive for the journalist’s murder,” he writes, “is to put it down to the paranoia of one man [Bin Salman], who could not tolerate direct criticism from a fellow Saudi he regarded as a traitor residing far too close to the heart of American power” (p. 299). The implication—that Muhammad bin Salman was a paranoid individual—is too sophisticated to merit a response.

As if this was not bad enough, Rugman next turns to deciphering what presumably motivated President Trump, who quickly distanced himself from the tragedy, though Senator Lindsey Graham, a close ally of Trump, embarked on extraordinary attacks against Muhammad bin Salman. On *Fox & Friends*, a program that specialized in trivia on the Fox News television network, Graham called “upon the kingdom to choose a new leader,” concluding that “this guy is a wrecking ball,” someone who was “toxic,” a “man who ‘has got to go’ and ‘who can never be a leader on the world stage’” (p. 201). Graham continued his rant: “He had this guy murdered in a consulate in Turkey, and to expect me to ignore it? I feel used and abused,” he stated, adding: “I’m not going back to Saudi Arabia as long as this guy’s in charge” (p. 202). For his part, Senator Rand Paul declared: “I’m pretty sure [the Trump] statement [that distanced Washington from the events] is Saudi Arabia First, not America First,” (p. 260), even if he could not match Graham’s colorful comments. In early December 2018, the Senator from South Carolina told reports: “I think he’s complicit in the murder of Mr. Khashoggi to the highest level possible . . . I think he’s crazy, I think he’s dangerous” (p. 265).

Rugman’s most interesting commentaries pertain to Turkey and its Islamist leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who championed the Muslim Brotherhood (p. 219), though Rugman reports that Muhammad bin Salman described “Turkey as part of a ‘triangle of evil,’ with Iran and hard-line Islamist groups forming the other sides of that triangle. It was an extraordinary indication of the hatred he appeared to harbour for the Turkish leader—the most powerful, charismatic and overtly Islamist Turkish leader since Ataturk created the country from the
ashes of the Ottoman Empire” (p. 221), which was some declaration. Praising Ankara’s strongman is not necessarily a sign of objectivity, though the sentence certainly adds color and shows one’s hand. To his credit, Rugman reports that Turkey’s defense of the Saudi journalist was hypocritical, given the country’s extremely poor record on that score. Several leading Turkish journalists, including Can Dundar (Cumhuriyet daily) and others, were imprisoned after publishing critical articles. Dundar alleged that Turkish intelligence troops delivered weapons to Islamists in Syria, for which he was condemned and actually fled to Germany, adding: “Whenever I hear Erdogan vow to follow the case of Khashoggi’s murder to the very end, I can only laugh . . . accusing the Turkish leader of no genuine concern for freedom of the press. By the end of 2019, Turkey had earned the shameful reputation of being the world’s biggest jailer of journalists” (p. 232). Notwithstanding this avowal, Rugman’s chapter on “The Lonely Turk” is merely six pages long, and skips over much of Ankara’s horrible record, something that deserves much closer scrutiny.

In the end, Rugman falls back on the tainted United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Agnès Callamard, who “accused Saudi Arabia of a ‘deliberate premeditated execution’ and claimed that there was ‘credible evidence’ that MbS himself should be investigated for Jamal Khashoggi’s murder” (p. 286). She did not accept that the trials in Saudi Arabia were impartial, declaring that they were “clouded in secrecy and lack[ed] . . . due process.” Callamard unhesitatingly recommended that they be suspended, oblivious to the fact that she was not an expert on Saudi Shari‘ah Law, and could not possible know whether the trials were held with full respect of all existing regulations. Comically, she “recommended additional sanctions on the crown prince’s ‘personal assets abroad’ until sufficient evidence cleared him of responsibility—although she didn’t name his château in France or the $450 billion Leonardo de Vinci painting which was reported to be on board his yacht” (p. 291), Rugman recalled. The Callamard debacle, which merits utmost attention, is further discussed in the next section too, if only to highlight how toxic were her dubious conclusions. In the event, it was hugely important to mention that the Saudi court proceedings were attended by representatives of the five permanent members of the Security Council, as well as a delegate of the Republic of Turkey. Rugman passes over this crucial fact.
Ben Hubbard and Saudi Arabia

Ben Hubbard opens his book with a rare gem: “Mohammed bin Salman declined to be interviewed for this book” (p. xi), he states, without asking himself why the heir apparent would submit to such a ritual knowing that the result might well be a hatchet job, at least based on the journalist’s numerous articles published in the New York Times. (50)

To his credit, Hubbard’s MBS is not just about the Khashoggi assassination, although that tragic death fills dozens of pages in the tome. Rather, he raises various concerns that affect and will continue to shape Saudi Arabia for decades to come. His introduction touches on every imaginable negative concern, including that the Unitarian [Wahhabi] creed practiced in the country is “the ultraconservative and intolerant interpretation that was woven into the kingdom’s history” (p. xiv); that Muhammad bin Salman “was chubby, due to his fondness for fast food” (p. xv); as well as his display of a leg that “never stopped bouncing during [a] meeting [with a foreign official who] wondere[d] if the prince was nervous or on some kind of stimulant” (p. xv). The insinuations here are what passes for journalism in 2020. The list continues, as the daughter of an anonymous businessman held at the Ritz-Carlton told Hubbard that the heir apparent was “a psycho.” In her own words: “He has spite. He wants to break people. He doesn’t want anyone to have an honorable name but him,” concluding, “He is a devil, and the devil is learning from him” (p. xvii). Putting aside the understandable hurt that this woman may well have felt at the alleged mistreatment of her father, what does it mean to include such a diatribe in a book that aspires to seriousness? Of course, Hubbard is free to believe her, even to accept that Muhammad bin Salman is a “devil,” but what does she, or he, know about the “devil” to make such a comparison?

Equally perplexing are Hubbard’s opinions about Muhammad bin Salman, whom he labels “a hugely divisive character, praised by supporters as a long-awaited game-changer in a region aching for it and dismissed by foes as a brutal dictator in the making” (p. xix). The author opens his salvos with classic character assassination, pinning the start of the prince’s misbehavior to his teen years when he allegedly “seemed frustrated and angry, erupting at times in fits of

rage” (p. 12). This is genealogical psychoanalysis par excellence that continues with the young prince’s university stint, when one of his classmates at King Saud University avowed that he “wanted to be a leader . . . and once telling a group that he wanted to be the next Alexander the Great” (p. 13). The American reporter repeats the widespread stories of “Abu Rasasa” [the father of the bullet] and accuses the heir apparent of being a parvenu who

never ran a company that made a mark. [And adds his own idiosyncratic interpretations when he states:] He never acquired military experience. He never studied at a foreign university. He never mastered, or even [became] functional in, a foreign language. He never spent significant time in the United States, Europe, or elsewhere in the West. (p. 16)

King Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz apparently preferred that his favorite son hone his country’s traditions and Hubbard quotes an anonymous associate of the monarch surmising: “To deal with a Bedouin, I need a Bedouin” (p. 17), which Hubbard found fascinating.

Financial Troves

Hubbard devotes substantial attention to Vision 2030 and Muhammad bin Salman’s alleged obsession with development projects that apparently necessitated “spending more than $1 billion per year on foreign expertise” (p. 65), a figure that is difficult to fathom. As if this was not bad enough, the author informs us that “there was often a culture gap between the consultants, who valued punctuality, transparency, democracy, and open markets, and the Saudis, whose work ethic and schedules were unreliable and who lived in a highly secretive absolute monarchy” (p. 65). In other words, those who presumably lived in a secretive absolute monarchy could not possibly value punctuality, transparency, democracy, and open markets. This nonsense has been repeated so often by so many writers that it has gained the aura of absolute veracity even if plenty of Saudis, and other Arabs for that matter, were punctual, transparent, and supported democratization as well as open markets. Few Westerners seem to remember that capitalism was invented and enthusiastically practiced on the banks of the Euphrates and the Nile long before it traveled along the Thames, the Seine, or the Potomac. Even fewer remember that, over the centuries, caravans trading incense brought goods and materials across Arabia to the markets of the Levant and from there to Europe.
Hubbard follows his Saudis-have-no-work-ethic sentence with a humdinger: “After the Arab Spring, there had been discussions inside McKinsey about the ethics of working with dictators, a former consultant told” him, which revealed glorious selectivity (p. 65). If Muhammad bin Salman was spending US$1 billion on consultants per year—that meant that he may have spent US$4 billion between 2015 and 2019—which ethical consulting firm turned him down? Since Hubbard acknowledges that McKinsey leaders ignored the risks and continued their relationship(s) with Riyadh, it seems that it was the Western entity that lacked transparency and ethical norms, not the heir apparent.

Vision 2030 receives bad coverage, as do all of the Kingdom’s future plans in this tome. In fact, the massive NEOM project, a $500 billion business and technology hub near the Red Sea, is “an Arabian Xanadu, where the weather was pleasant, everyone rich and smart, and residents lived an idealized life of luxury and leisure—like the Jetsons, but better—a far cry from the reality of other cities” (p. 169). Hubbard is free to mock but what is the point? That such a grandiose scheme was too good to be true or that backward Arabs were incapable of realizing their dreams? That an Arab leader ought not propose grandiose schemes? And why not? Hubbard believes that “Wahhabis” could not possibly rise to the occasion and that “MBS’s argument [that the new direction flowed from the Saudi heritage] was at best an oversimplification and at worst revisionist history that allowed him to blame the kingdom’s problems on someone else” (p. 172). Moreover, Hubbard concentrates on how Saudi rulers “made use of extremism since the founding of the first Saudi state in the mid-1700s” (p. 172), as if this was a unique phenomenon! How does he think that Britain was created? With roses? How about the fate that befell American Indians as European conquerors massacred their way West and left millions of cadavers along the way? The fact that Muhammad bin Salman is aware of the negative aspects of some Saudi extremists, largely influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, and that the time was long overdue to check their power, is an excellent development. There are specialized writers who denigrate the Al Sa’ud and label them infidels or Western lackeys, but those are little more than entertainment in an age of technological developments, where vision, skills, and will-to-power are required to ensure security and stability.

(51) See, for example, the masterful Howard Zinn, A People’s History of the United States, New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005.
(52) For two recent studies in the genre, see Feizel Chothia, Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism: Understanding the Great Conspiracy, compiled by the ‘Ulama’ of Dar Al-Ahna, Perth, Australia?: n.p.: n.d., 2020, and Varagur, The Call.
Be that as it may, and in a chapter titled “MBS’s War,” Hubbard opens a new front against the heir apparent, peppering his pages with the eclectic discussions that, more often than not, raise the journalistic ante. For example, we first have: “Samir Geagea, a Christian politician in Lebanon, begged for cash to pay his bodyguards, noting that he had stood up for Saudi Arabia in the media and proven ‘his preparedness to do whatever the kingdom asks of him’” (p. 86). The source for this quotation is a Wikileaks cable. Mercifully, this is followed by a more modest request, as Guinea “asked for $2000 [yes, only US$2,000 dollars], pocket change for many Saudi royals [underscores Hubbard], ‘to solve many of the problems’ the West African country’s news agency apparently faced” [another Wikileaks cable] (p. 86). Other actors were not just looking for pocket change as Hubbard informs us that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, a terrorist organization for most Arab Gulf States, “told the Saudis that it could prevent [President Husni] Mubarak’s incarceration for $10 billion” (p. 87). The endnote for this interesting tidbit is another Wikileaks cable, but Hubbard does not raise any qualms about this potential “pocket-change” expenditure that, mercifully, was rejected. What the Muslim Brotherhood engaged in was classic Mafioso behavior, and while Riyadh opted not to pay, Hubbard does not call the “Brothers” terrorists for their less than ethical take-down proposal.

Obsession with how much Saudis spend on sundry items preoccupies the author, who noted that “[a]n annual report in 2009 said the kingdom had given $22.4 million in aid to 150 entities in fifty-five countries and built twenty-two mosques and sixteen Islamic centers” (p. 87). Thus, each of these entities received an average of $149,333, which was slightly more than what Jamal Khashoggi received for a single interview with the Malaysian Prime Minister [see section on Khashoggi]. In reality, Saudi Arabia disbursed hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid every year, including to war-torn Yemen, even though this is seldom reported by intrepid journalists anxious to denigrate. Instead, we have cheap shots, oblivious to the fact that many countries allocate vast sums for assistance programs throughout the world. Hubbard insists that Saudi funding is meant to promote the right kind of Islam, which meant undermining the wrong kind of Islam. That mostly meant Shiism, the official creed of Iran. Hundreds of thousands of dollars

at a time were doled out for programs to stop Shiite expansion in China, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan. The kingdom gave more than $1 million to an Islamic association in India, and Saudi ambassadors across Africa were tasked with filing reports on Iranian activities in their countries. (p. 88)

Though this sentence alleges that hundreds of thousands were doled out, we only have the single example of $1 million for an Indian group. Far more serious, why should Saudi Arabia not respond against Iranian incursions throughout the Muslim world? Why allow Iran to dictate terms that may well determine the fate of the world’s majority Sunni Muslims? Should 90% of the globe’s Muslims (Sunnis) submit to the 10% (Shi’ah) because the mullahs in Iran say so?

It takes several pages in the narrative to reach the War for Yemen discussion, presumably the chapter’s focus, with Yemeni minders at Sana’a Airport welcoming Hubbard and a photographer rather enthusiastically. “We moved around the country’s northwest,” he writes, “seeing what the air campaign by the Arab world’s richest country was doing to its poorest” (p. 89). For Hubbard, Saudis were merciless in prosecuting a war they could not possibly win, using weapons they did not know how to use. “For decades,” he opines, “American administrations had pushed the deals through based on the presumption that the Saudis would not use the weapons” (p. 92), which was illogical to say the least. Save for weapons of mass destruction, there was a clear global understanding among all nation-states that weapons could be used to defend one’s national security interests and Saudi Arabia was not denied that right through presumptions or understandings. To assume otherwise is to espouse wishful thinking. Hubbard does not write about Saudi Arabia’s financial assistance to Yemen over the years though that information is vital to our understanding too.

Much like his assessments of Vision 2030 and other financial schemes, Hubbard discusses Muhammad bin Salman’s anti-corruption drive, and offers extensive quotes on both the plans, the arrests that led to leading princes being incarcerated at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh, as well as his alleged hypocrisy because he owned luxury homes, yachts, and precious artworks (pp. 192–202). The author is apoplectic that so many prominent individuals were mistreated for pittances (less than $100 billion collected by what seemed to Hubbard to be extortion).
Irrespective of what happened at the Ritz-Carlton in late 2017, and acknowledging that some of the methods used were heavy-handed, the anti-corruption drive was successful as a higher level of transparency saw light, something that encouraged Foreign Direct Investments. Ironically, Lebanese social media lit up after these arrests, with many asking Muhammad bin Salman to travel to Beirut and have Levantine merchants arrested for similar crimes that impoverished that hapless country.

**The Saʿad Hariri “Kidnapping”**

Among several discussion items that aim to vilify Muhammad bin Salman is the fate that befell the former Lebanese Prime Minister, Saʿad Hariri, to whom Hubbard devotes several pages. On November 4, 2017, Hariri was “forced” to resign his Lebanese premiership . . . from Riyadh rather than Beirut. Hubbard writes that “Al-Akhbar, a Lebanese daily that often-attacked Hariri, ran a picture of him on its front page under a banner headline reading: ‘The Hostage’,” without informing his readers that Al-Akhbar is the Hizballah mouthpiece and is always pro-Iran (p. 179). But where Hubbard relies on his vivid imagination is when he opines that “[b]y forcing Hariri to resign, the Saudis had hoped to spark civil strife between Lebanese Sunnis and Hezbollah that would force Hezbollah to withdraw its fighters from Yemen, where the Saudis believed they were helping the Houthis” (p. 180). (54) There is no background on what actually occurred two weeks before Hariri received a phone call from King Salman asking him to return to Riyadh. In fact, the Lebanese Prime Minister was duly requested to distance himself from Hizballah during that earlier trip, and while this may be interpreted as a form of interference in internal Lebanese affairs, Beirut was transformed into a regional political/military arena long before this latest request. One is reluctant to admit it, but the Lebanese engaged in their own favorite activities—seeking outside sponsors by taking sides, or switching sides, for the right financial package—which allowed corrupt political establishment zuʿamah [clannish strongmen] to harvest the fruits of their desired “Ali Baba and his 40-thieves” schemes. Every community leader, both Christian and Muslim, engaged in this type of bargaining that certainly

(54) It is not necessary to remind readers that various authors spell Arabic names differently, although it is important to highlight that the commonly rendered Hezbollah is the Persian language spelling. A more accurate spelling that follows Library of Congress and International Journal of Middle East Studies protocols will render it as Hizballah, the “Party of God,” with journalists seldom asking themselves what does ʿollah mean when God is universally transliterated as Allah [allah].
enriched them but ruined Lebanese institutions and, ultimately, the country’s nation-state status. For *Al-Akhbar* and others to claim sovereignty in 2017 was rich, to say the least.

It was critical to further note that Hariri was a dual citizen and enjoyed the benefits of Saudi citizenship that, as *Al-Akhbar* and others failed to note, carried duties toward one’s sovereign too. Presumably one of those obligations was not to harm the interests of one’s country, though Hubbard skips over these nuances even if he underscores “that *l’affair* [sic] Hariri made clear . . . the system belonged to Lebanon, and some kinds of foreign meddling were too much for anyone to stand for” (p. 180). In reality, regional powers poured hundreds of millions of dollars, perhaps billions over the decades, precisely because Lebanese officials let them and because Beirut was too important to leave to Levantine merchants. Hariri was repeatedly warned that his *Mustaqbal* [Future] Party would no longer benefit from Saudi largesse if he submitted to Hizballah diktats, which explained its sharp losses in the 2018 parliamentary elections (going from 33 to 21 deputies for a loss of 12 representatives in the 128-seat body). It was Hariri who made a deal—actually several—with Hizballah, essentially to co-govern an increasingly ungovernable country, as the October 17, 2019 events amply demonstrated and that forced his resignation on October 29, 2019. How could Hariri side with Hizballah, which was accused of plotting and carrying out his father’s February 14, 2005 assassination, was mind-boggling. How could he side with an organization that was labeled a terrorist body by leading global powers—even if it was a legal party in Lebanon? How he could side with Hizballah against Sunni interests was a mystery the answer to which was known only to him and his Creator. (55)

**The Khashoggi Murder**

As stated above, Hubbard devotes special attention to Jamal Khashoggi and his tragic death, repeating much of what appeared in Rugman and other authors. “While serving the monarchy,” he writes, Khashoggi “kept in touch with Islamists around the Arab world and pushed for another private passion: democracy” (p. 74). He acknowledges that the “i’lami [which only means a

journalist in Arabic, not a “media figure”) accepted substantive payments for his work, including
a $100,000 honorarium from Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak in 2009, for a “sympathetic
interview” (p. 76). Khashoggi wrote frequently in Al-Hayat, long before he penned a total of 20
opinion essays in the Washington Post, and while Hubbard relies on a series the Saudi titled “The
Saudi Citizen’s Vision 2030,” he quotes from a single column . . . 13 times in a row (pp. 131–2). (56)

In another Al-Hayat essay, “I am Saudi but Different,” Khashoggi argued for the right to
disagree, something that “was necessary for society to progress” according to Hubbard (p. 149).
Relying on news of a CIA report, Hubbard claims that “MBS had already identified Khashoggi
as a problem” and that if he “could not be lured back to Saudi Arabia, perhaps the Kingdom’s
agents could coax him to a third country and ‘make arrangements’” (p. 149). This second-
hand reportage, which Hubbard references to a December 1, 2018 Wall Street Journal article,
prompts the question: had Hubbard seen this CIA report and verified its contents? Sensing the
weakness of this discussion, the author moves to a putative exchange between Muhammad bin
Salman and Turki Al-Dakhil, then the general manager of Al Arabiya television, who reportedly
told him that the prince would go after Khashoggi ‘with a bullet’” (p. 150). Al Dakhil denied
this but Hubbard chose not to believe him (p. 313).

Hubbard then focuses on Sa’ud al-Qahtani, the aide who allegedly masterminded the Istanbul
operation, who apparently gets drunk (p. 139) but whose skills are deemed to be valuable.
“MBS recognized the power of these technologies [social media] and deputized al-Qahtani
to deploy them” (p. 141), and even has al-Qahtani brag that he acts under guidance. “Do you
think I act as I wish with no direction?” [al-Qahtani presumably wrote]. “I am an employee
and faithful implementer of the orders of my lord the king and his highness the faithful crown
prince” (p. 142). All of this is to show that al-Qahtani acted on orders, though concrete evidence
remains absent in this and other discussions.

(56) The notes for page 132, reproduced on pages 308–9, refer to the same October 29, 2016 Al-Hayat essay titled “2030 Ru’iyat
al-muwaaTin: 500 mal’ab qurat al-qadam.” Why muwaaTin has an upper-case T is a Hubbard mystery as the phenomenon is
repeated in most of the Arabic language transliterations. For example, two October 13, 2017 Twitter sources are rendered as “that
qibbat kongres hathihi yujad muSalli” and “zurtu al-yawm SaHeefat al-waashinTon bost” (p. 313). Even if this is journalistic
fare, there are well established transliteration protocols as stated above and worth repeating, like the US Library of Congress
and the International Journal of Middle East Studies, which can be of tremendous use to writers. Arabic language transliteration
is complicated enough as it is without inventing new hieroglyphics that confuse readers and, in subtle ways, further increase
antipathies on account of difficult-to-pronounce words or sentences.
**Khashoggi and Maggie Mitchell Salem**

One of the mysteries of the Khashoggi case was the relationship the late journalist maintained with Maggie Mitchell Salem, a former US diplomat who joined the Qatar Foundation International as its Executive Director. Hubbard uses extensive e-mail contacts between Khashoggi and Salem to illustrate their ties, with the Saudi refusing to be goaded into decisions he did not want to make. At one point Salem tells Khashoggi to remember Saudis jailed and or silenced (p. 154). He kept her informed every time he visited his consulate in Washington, with Salem commenting “God be with you!!” (p. 155), to further highlight the perception of danger he encountered. Khashoggi and Salem met frequently and

“texted constantly, sharing thoughts, feelings, and articles as she helped him relaunch his career from Washington. She connected him with powerful people, booked him hotels, and paid airline change fees so he could make important meetings. She offered to get him a researcher, arranged translators so his articles could be simultaneously published in Arabic, and helped with his writings for the *Washington Post* and other publications. The pair brainstormed ideas and Mitchell Salem edited drafts or wrote sections to get Khashoggi going (p. 204).

Naturally, there was nothing wrong in someone who felt close to Jamal Khashoggi extending assistance, but to actually write his columns was perplexing to say the least. Moreover, there was nothing wrong in extending financial assistance too—after all Khashoggi accepted a $100,000 honorarium to interview Prime Minister Najib Razak of Malaysia (p. 76)—though booking hotels and making travel arrangements seems bizarre. It was unclear who would pay for the proposed researcher and/or translator, even if Hubbard does not ask why.

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(57) Her short biography reads as follows: “Maggie is Executive Director of QFI (Qatar Foundation Intl) where she and a talented team lead student-centered K-12 education programs in three areas: Arabic Language, Arab Societies & Culture, and Connected Communities. QFI-supported activities are essential components of 21stC skills and the global competence necessary for children to succeed in our interconnected, interdependent world. Previously, Maggie was Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region at the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), a leading democracy and governance NGO. She was Director of Communications and External Relations at the Middle East Institute and started her career as a Foreign Service Officer at the US State Department. There she served as a Special Assistant to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and as a Special Assistant to Ambassador Martin S. Indyk at the US Embassy in Tel Aviv, Israel. Maggie completed coursework for a master’s degree in contemporary Arab studies at Georgetown University and was a Fulbright scholar in Syria. She holds bachelor’s degrees from The Johns Hopkins University in political science and psychology.” See “Maggie Mitchell Salem, Executive Director, Qatar Foundation International,” WISE, https://www.wise-qatar.org/biography/maggie-mitchell-salem/.
Khashoggi could not write in his native tongue and why he needed his English-language essays transliterated into Arabic. Indeed, there was nothing wrong in Khashoggi having Salem as “his de facto agent, adviser, and editor,” though it was dubious that Salem’s ties with Qatar were kept from his readers.

The Khashoggi-Salem exchanges revealed that the late Saudi journalist visited Istanbul frequently (p. 238) and “resisted the dissident label . . . arguing that he supported Muhammad Bin Salman but wanted the freedom of expression that existed in monarchies such as Jordan and Kuwait.” He told Salem that he was “not an extremist . . . [and] disagree[d] with Saudis who are calling for regime change and stuff like that. It’s just ridiculous. We don’t need that in Saudi Arabia. I believe in the system—I just want a reformed system” (p. 239). Salem, and perhaps others, had other ideas.

**Family Life**

Since there is so much controversy around Khashoggi’s family life, and as explored by Rugman in his opus, Hubbard devotes significant attention to the Saudi’s complicated relationships too. To his credit, Hubbard reports on Khashoggi’s marriages, notwithstanding confusion over chronologies. According to Hubbard, Khashoggi shared his loneliness with Salem after his marital problems with a woman he truly loved but left behind in the Kingdom after he decided to move to the United States, to which the sympathetic American responded: “get a dog” (p. 248). In search of companionship, Khashoggi traveled to Boston, then to Italy, to meet potential spouses, before eventually marrying an Egyptian national, who worked as an Emirates Airlines flight attendant in Dubai. Hanan al-Atr was just shy of 50, single, and had met Khashoggi—58 in 2017 (born in 1958)—at a function. The two stayed in contact and married in Virginia on June 2, 2018. Interestingly, she returned to Dubai, but met with her husband in New York City . . . in early September 2018. According to Hubbard, the married couple “spent the night together, but he seemed different.” What follows in the text is an unsourced conversation between Hanan and Jamal:

> “Hanan, don’t hate me,” he told her.
>
> Is there another woman? She asked.
He said no.
He left the next morning.
It was the last time she saw him.
A few weeks later, he called. When he learned she was in Miami, he told her to go to Disney World.
She said no. They would go together, someday.

On September 30, he called again, but missed her because she was on a flight. When she landed, she found two messages from him, wishing her a happy birthday. (p. 250)

This is a disturbing conversation on several grounds. In September 2018, Khashoggi acknowledged that there was no one else in his life, and he presumably cared enough for al-Atr to wish her a happy birthday even if the two apparently maintained a long-distance relationship. Moreover, and this sounds strange, the husband only found out that his wife was in the United States . . . after he called her. To be sure, these were mature individuals at 58 and 50, but is this how newlyweds, even when they maintain long-distance ties, behave? As Hubbard then discusses, Khashoggi—who told his wife that there was no other woman in his life—apparently never told al-Atr that a month before they married, “he had met a 36-year-old Turkish researcher at a conference in Istanbul (p. 250). In the fall of 2018, Khashoggi was in Turkey to attend “an event” and “suffered a bronchitis attack” that required hospitalization. It was Cengiz who took him to a hospital, where a “nurse gave him an IV and Cengiz sat next to him as he rested, feeling close. A nurse asked how she was related. ‘Next of kin,’ she said. She covered him with a blanket and watched over him as he slept” (p. 253). This uncanny reportage raised numerous questions, including how close the two protagonists were, though one wonders why Hubbard did not report on Hanan al-Atr’s feelings with the same fervor. Be that as it may, save to note that this section of the text is apparently based on a Turkish-language book without independent verification that could confirm the veracity of the tale. What was remarkable, nevertheless, was Cengiz’s state of mind after this hospital visit.

(58) Hatice Cengiz was born in 1980, so she would have been 38 in 2018. Khashoggi was born in 1958, thus 22 years her senior.
According to Hubbard,

She didn’t know his family, so in the taxi after he was discharged, she asked him whom to call if anything happened to him. He told her to call his friend Yasin Aktay, a ranking member of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party and an adviser to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

He’ll know what to do, Khashoggi told her.

She saved Aktay’s number in her phone. (p. 253)

Why would Jamal Khashoggi entrust his life to a Turkish friend, albeit a high-ranking member of the establishment, instead of asking his “next of kin” to contact his wife (or wives) or adult offspring? To be fair, Cengiz was not aware that Khashoggi was married (as recently as June 2, 2018), and had adult children from his first spouse. None of these disturbing questions are discussed in this book, and while one may claim that such prying was beyond the writ of the author, Hubbard dutifully reported the Salem advice to get a dog for companionship.

**Obama and Saudi Arabia**

Two other major items in the Hubbard study deserve special consideration, namely the Kingdom’s (and, presumably, Muhammad bin Salman’s) ties with presidents Barack H. Obama and Donald J. Trump.

Hubbard maintains that Barack Obama did not care for Saudi Arabia. “Before becoming president,” he writes, the 44th American head-of-state “had dismissed Saudi Arabia as a ‘so-called’ ally and criticized its exportation of Wahhabism for fueling intolerance in the Muslim world” (p. xviii), which raised several questions. Was Obama set on a nuclear deal with Iran even before he won the presidency and, in the affirmative, was he determined to weaken the Sunni world. “The Saudi leadership did not like or trust President Barack Obama, and had little reason to believe that he likes them much either” (p. 29), declares the author and underscores that Saudis “had grown angry” after Washington demanded that Husni Mubarak leave power, reneged on his red line in Syria after Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons against civilians in 2013 and, far more important, kept them in the dark as it “engaged in intensive negotiations with Iran about its nuclear program.” Hubbard affirms that “[t]he talks had been kept secret
from the Saudis, solidifying the feeling that they had been betrayed by their most important ally” (p. 29), not because they could not stomach the secrecy part—after all each country was free to conduct its business in private as it deemed appropriate—but because their warnings about how dangerous Iran was fell on deaf ears.

Hubbard reports how Obama administration officials assessed Muhammad bin Salman when they first met him in May 2015—when “he appeared uncomfortable and out of place . . . spoke little” and “responded nervously through an Arabic translator” when Obama asked him a question (p. 33). Interestingly, the author analyzes the April 2016 Obama interview in *The Atlantic* that explained the so-called Obama Doctrine [“don’t do stupid shit,” though he dropped way too many bombs from drones], which he does not mention in the 44th’s eloquent words. Beyond the criticisms of Saudi Arabia’s alleged treatment of women, what troubled Saudi ears (and eyes when they saw the printed pages), was the president’s suggestion that the Kingdom “share” the Middle East with Iran in order to calm the proxy wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen” (p. 100). Obama’s naïve beliefs highlighted his wasted presidency, which contemplated a kumbaya vision that Persians would accept to “share” the Middle East that, presumably includes Israelis, with the Arabs. Hubbard elaborated on Obama’s words, emphasizing that “[t]he United States should not endorse the Saudi view that Iran was the source of all the region’s problems, which would only perpetuate conflicts and invite American military intervention (p. 100), he avowed.

What was truly amazing in this perspective is the incredulity associated with Iran’s political and military machinations throughout the Arab world (and not just in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen) as merely the Saudi view. Of course, Obama was free to believe that Iranians were angels with nothing more than good intentions, and were inspired by divine intervention to enlighten Sunni Arabs, but he was not expected to re-write history, thinking that Persians emulated Sesame Street’s Big Bird and his “cooperation” message, or be like the Cookie Monster, who was always ready to share cookies. Nor is Hubbard credible when he laments that Muhammad bin

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Salman compared Ayatollah Khamane’i to Hitler or felt bad when Obama placed the Saudis and Iranians in the “same basket” (p. 100).

Still, Hubbard correctly refers to Ben Rhodes, Obama’s deputy national security adviser, as the author of Washington’s colorful perspectives, especially after Rhodes equated Riyadh with extremism because the Saudis allegedly supported al-Qaeda and similar groups. “Rhodes had said that before September 11, it had not been official Saudi Policy to fund terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, but that wealthy Saudis had bankrolled them anyway” (p. 101). For the New York Times author: “That was far from an unconventional view among American officials, but MBS was insulted” (p. 101), implying that he should not have been, even if the 2001 tragedy occurred when Muhammad bin Salman was a teenager. Rhodes told Hubbard: “It did not show a degree of self-assurance and self-awareness . . . It showed a guy who was, on top of everything else, thin-skinned” (p. 101). Rhodes’s largely laudatory memoirs of Obama and the administration in which he served include many anti-Saudi and anti-Arab paragraphs but few ought to forget that Obama perceived himself as an exceptional individual, someone who made history because he was the first black American to be elected to the country’s highest office. As such, Obama assumed that his views ought to prevail, not just in the developing world where such a view was far too common, but also among allies. Few will forget that the Obama administration did not shy away from spying on one of its closest allies, the Chancellor of Germany, though “there was no foreign leader he [Obama] admired more” than Angela Merkel.61) Saudis were fair game when compared to Germany, and Rhodes stated that

 Obama believed the Saudis started building madrassas and encouraged extremism. In one remarkable episode, Obama remembered his mother riding in an elevator when she was working in Pakistan, and as her hair was uncovered and her ankles were showing, a guy riding with her in the elevator could not stand it. Said Obama: “By the time the door opened he was sweating.” He paused for effect. “When men are that repressed, they do some crazy shit.”62)

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(61) Rhodes, The World as It Is, p. 230.
(62) Rhodes, The World as It Is, p. 54.
It was important to further report that Obama was “irritated” by King ‘Abdallah bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, as Rhodes concluded that “Saudi Arabia and the UAE—two US allies that had actively subverted democracy and worked against US policy” were, in effect untrustworthy. Of course the September 11, 2001 attacks were never “official Saudi policy,” nor did Riyadh opt “to fund terrorist groups like al-Qaeda,” even if private citizens funded extremist elements inside and outside the Kingdom for what they believed were religious obligations. To believe otherwise is to have a very narrow view of Saudi policies and it is regrettable that senior Saudi officials have not written their memoirs to debunk such nonsense. What is worse is that journalists, officials, and some scholars continue to repeat these tales, which gain veracity on account of the exponential power of sheer repetition, even if the realities are quite different. As stated in the introduction, at least one prominent business leader, Khalid bin Mahfouz, sued several authors and publishing houses and won his cases in courts of law that, to say the least, was par for the course.

In one of the most colorful sections of the book, Hubbard reports on Obama’s April 2016 trip to Riyadh, which was “probably the most honest meeting [Ben Rhodes avowed, the United States] had with the Saudis. When King Salman took umbrage at Obama’s soliloquy, “MBS stood and raised his voice,” a meeting that “grew more acrimonious” (p. 102). Hubbard’s sources for these details are anonymous Obama administration officials and Ben Rhodes, which can be accepted of course, though Saudi officials, including Muhammad bin Salman, seldom speak in the presence of the King. Still, the reason for inclusion of this exchange, if it occurred, was crystal clear: Muhammad bin Salman flouted protocol. He disrespected the American head-of-state. Even worse, he insulted his sovereign, which further added to the long list of negative characteristics that some journalists and authors affixed on the heir apparent. Whether the acrimonious relationship with Obama influenced Muhammad bin Salman was difficult to determine but the prince fared better with the 45th President of the United States.

**Trump and Saudi Arabia**

The Kingdom’s dramatically altered ties with the United States after Donald J. Trump was elected president receive particular attention in Hubbard’s discussions, starting with the real-
estate mogul’s anti-Muslim harangues and continuing with the Khashoggi debacle. “I think Islam hates us,” declared Trump in March 2016, frequently using the “radical Islamic terrorism” term (p. 106), which prompted him to issue a travel ban soon after he entered the White House. What was asinine was Trump’s juvenile conclusion that the Saudis would not survive without the United States, adding: “The question is, at what point do we get involved and how much will Saudi Arabia pay us to save them?” (p. 107). Since Trump defines everything with money, it was natural for him to go for the financial jugular, goaded by his New York friends, who introduced him and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to officials in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Whether Trump welcomed Muhammad bin Zayid, the Abu Dhabi heir apparent, to his world headquarters at Trump Tower in New York City, was less important than the Emirati’s recommendations for Washington to establish solid ties with Muhammad bin Salman.

For Hubbard, “[t]he two princelings—an Arab from central Arabia and a Jew from New Jersey—had more in common than was immediately apparent” (p. 113). Whether Kushner prevailed over the then Saudi Minister of Defense or whether it was the other way around will long be debated, though Trump saw an opportunity regarding his contemplated anti-Obama policies toward Iran. Trump sought to overturn the Iran deal and shared [the Saudi] view of Iran as the root of the region’s problems. He hated political Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood, and was sympathetic to the wealthy, especially if he thought he could bring their money to the United States. He liked selling arms, regardless of how they were used. And he was not concerned about human rights, making it clear that America’s Arab allies could rule as they saw fit .(p. 113)

Whether any of this was little more than classic Trump bravura will be analyzed by historians over the coming years. What stood out was the difference in the perception of Iran between the Obama and Trump administrations, the first accepting dealing with Tehran on more or less equal terms, and the second rejecting such a parity.

(64) Hubbard mixes ethnicity with religion when he writes an Arab and a Jew, though this error is oft-repeated by many journalists instead of writing “a Muslim and a Jew,” or “an Arab and an American” or even “an Arab and an Israeli,” etc.
Notwithstanding the poorly thought-out travel ban, Trump went to Riyadh in May 2017 on what was his first foreign trip as head-of-state, where he called Islam one of the world’s great faiths, focused on Iran and terrorism, and met nearly fifty Arab/Muslim leaders who were invited for the first-ever “Arab-Islamic American Summit.” The trip was productive although the Khashoggi death constrained flourishing ties. According to John Bolton, however, Trump quickly decided that he would not “cut off arms sales to the Kingdom,” and while “most analysts” were not satisfied with the Saudi “version of the events [that led to Khashoggi’s murder], the American president “supported the emerging Saudi version and never wavered from either the US-Saudi alliance generally or the massive arms sales already negotiated with the kingdom.”(65) Still, Trump’s national security council adviser for 17 months did not approve of the White House position, as the president recognized that Washington was doing Muhammad bin Salman “a hell of a favor.” “Whether he did it or not,” meaning whether Muhammad bin Salman gave the order to carry out the assassination, stressed Trump, “we’re standing with Saudi Arabia”, which Bolton did not approve either.(66)

Of course, Trump perceived the Kingdom in far more positive terms than his predecessor had, even if members of the American intelligence community remained wary of the Al Sa‘uds in general and their rising star in particular. Remarkably, Hubbard is taken aback by Muhammad bin Salman’s response to a question Norah O’Donnell asked during a nationally broadcast 60 Minutes interview, in which the prince spoke of his eventual accession to the throne. “O’Donnell . . . asked if [MBS] planned to become king and rule for the next five decades,” writes Hubbard and, “[f]or the first time in public, [the Saudi] said yes. ‘Only God knows how long one will live, if one would live fifty years or not,’ he said. ‘But if things go their normal ways, then that is to be expected.’ Only ‘death’ could stop him,” opined Hubbard, and one is tempted to wonder why the heir apparent should not plan to accede the throne and assume rulership (p. 219)!

This is not the only astonishing revelation in the American journalist’s study, as Hubbard covered an extremely sensitive subject, namely custodianship over the holy mosques of Makkah

and Madinah, and whether other countries ought to join in their administrations. According to Hubbard, the Turkish president did not feel that Riyadh should be the sole custodian, clarifying that “Erdogan did not feel that Saudi control of the holy sites gave the kingdom a monopoly on Islam, and he considered MBS a dangerous upstart” (p. 258). When did the Saudis claim a “monopoly on Islam” and what does this mean in reality? Is custodianship over the holy cities “a monopoly on Islam”? What is this nonsense? Moreover, and while Erdoğan may well have perceived Muhammad bin Salman to be a dangerous upstart, where was the hard evidence that the Khashoggi murder “was ordered from the top of the Royal Court” (p. 259)? It goes without saying that Hubbard does not believe that the heir apparent neither ordered nor was unaware of the operation, accepting the conclusions reached by the UN investigator that raised more questions than provided answers. Importantly, Hubbard does not write the name of the UN official, Agnès Callamard, though he reports that she found “credible evidence that the crime scene had been ‘thoroughly, even forensically cleaned.’ She concluded that the Saudi investigation had not been ‘conducted in good faith’ and could qualify as obstruction of justice” (p. 271). This is the extent of the Callamard story and Hubbard, the New York Times bureau chief in Beirut, has nothing to say about Callamard, her background, and her reliance on Turkish intelligence sources in conducting her investigation. Is it not important to inform readers that Callamard studied in Turkey, maintained close ties with Turkish intelligence, visited Iran on several occasions and, a day after Qasem Soleimani was killed, ascertained that the death was illegal, all of which highlighted her state of mind and, perhaps, her impartiality? Moreover, is it not important to reveal earlier Callamard tweets that demonstrated her hatred of the Kingdom, long before the Khashoggi affair, including the following gems:


3. June 24, 2017. “@nytimes condemns Saudis misguided attacks on @AJEnglish: Opinion | Misguided Attacks on Al Jazeera. nytimes.com”
4. November 7, 2015. “Wonderful Ai Wei Wei lego art work on #Bahrain #UAE #Saudi #Qatar #Iran prisoners of conscience.”

5. November 28, 2015. “#SaudiArabia is suing anyone comparing their justice system with that of ISIS.”(67)

Even worse, in June 2020, that is after Iran issued an arrest warrant for President Trump and 35 other people allegedly involved in the January 3, 2020 drone strike near the Baghdad airport that killed Soleimani, Callamard asked for international assistance—including from Interpol—to detain them. She boldly wondered if the killing was not a war crime or an extrajudicial execution, which are crimes under international law, but when was the last time that the head-of-state of a UN Security Council Permanent Member was indicted because of an operation against a terrorist? Comically, Callamard argued that the deadly strike “constituted most probably a violation of US obligations” under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, amounting to a violation of international human rights law that showed her hand, oblivious to Soleimani’s and his Quds force’s track record in terrorizing half a dozen countries and executing thousands.(68)

A Note on Sources

The Callamard gaffe is one of several similar items, as Hubbard bases his book on problematic sources that deserve a brief comment as well. In addition to the transliteration problems already noted above, this study is primarily based on several hundred anonymous interviews [and it is extremely difficult if not impossible to know whether some of these were duplicates or original ones], about 30 Twitter and Facebook items, nearly 30 Wikileaks cables, and scores of

(67) All of these tweets, and many more, are accessible on Callamard’s Twitter page, @AgnesCallamard.

(68) Of course, Callamard said nothing about the July 7, 2020 assassination of Hisham al-Hashemi, 47, who was killed in Baghdad. Al-Hashemi was an authoritative voice on Sunni extremist factions including ISIS and was frequently consulted by media and foreign governments on domestic Iraqi politics and Iran-backed militias in the country (see my conclusion, below). It is worth repeating that Callamard said nothing about this scholar, and, of course, she said nothing about the numerous assassinations in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, to mention just three Arab countries. No, she saved her opprobrium for the Istanbul murder, in what seems to be a single obsession that was far less innocent that she and her supporters pretended. Remarkably, and this is very important to repeat, Hubbard referred to her UN report without naming her, perhaps not wishing to burden his readers with a character who required explanation. Since he did not mention her name, Hubbard could conveniently overlook the necessity to uncover Callamard’s checkered and highly suspicious background and record. See Megan Specia, “Iran Issues Arrest Warrants for Trump and 35 Others in Soleimani Killing,” The New York Times, June 29, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/world/middleeast/iran-trump-arrest-warrant-interpol.html.
newspaper articles. At the beginning of the endnotes section for each chapter, the author writes that he benefitted from various published works, though these tend to be selective, more or less exclusively tomes that are critical—some very critical—of the Kingdom. Neutral studies are not used even if these may have been of assistance to the author to tame his wrath against Saudi Arabia. To Hubbard’s credit, there are about 75 interviews with identified individuals, many of which are duplicated in the notes. In the absence of a proper list, it is difficult to know exactly how many original interviews were conducted even if most were held in the United States or, at least, outside of the Kingdom. Importantly, Hubbard does not quote Rugman though *The Killing in the Consulate* appeared a year earlier and covered large portions of the events that the *New York Times* correspondent discusses in his book. Naturally, he uses the same newspaper articles, which is to be expected when the two books cover more or less the same items.

*Trove of Trivia and Strange Details*

Before turning to Hubbard’s conclusion, it is critical to list a hoard of trivia and strange details that are reported in the book that, truth be told, are nearly impossible to verify. A few are listed here in order to allow readers to assess for themselves whether they add value to a book that aspires to enlighten them about the rise of a future leader in one of the key global states.

1. Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, long before he became King, “was the disciplinarian of the royal family. If a fight between royal cousins over a piece of real estate got out of hand, if a prince bailed on an astronomical hotel bill in Paris, if a prince got drunk and caused a scandal, it was Salman who would bring down the hammer, locking up egregious offenders in his own private jail” (p. 5). King Salman apparently bragged about this feat to the British writer Robert Lacey though few ever visited or saw this private “prison.”

2. Muhammad bin Salman “married a cousin, a petite princess named Sarah bint Mashour” (p. 13). What is a petite princess? Is Hubbard speaking about her height or another feature?

3. Not as wealthy as other royals, “money managers in Riyadh suspected [the heir apparent] of manipulating the stock market, buying shares in worthless companies, pumping up their
price, and selling them for a profit before their value went crashing back down” (p. 14). This “pump and dump” mechanism, attributed to anonymous finance workers and diplomats, was of course illegal. Hubbard subscribes to the theory and implies that Muhammad bin Salman is a cheat without, of course, providing any evidence save for hearsay.

4. King ‘Abdallah “succumbed to a long bout with lung cancer” (p. 27). There is no evidence that lung cancer was the cause of the late monarch’s death.

5. “MBS had locked his own mother in a palace with two of his sisters. Even more perplexing was that he was hiding his mother’s whereabouts from his own father, the king” (p. 33). This is an unverifiable tabloid journalism tale.

6. Hubbard’s attacks against Muhammad bin Salman take on color as when he attributes to American intelligence reports that the heir apparent went on vacation to the Maldives in June 2015 where there apparently was “an abundance of prostitutes and cocaine” (p. 40). What is this *National Enquirer* type tale?

7. Muhammad bin Nayif, the former heir apparent, is not spared the drug accusations, and apparently nodded off at least once [so, this probably happened more than once?] during a meeting with President Obama in Washington, DC, which prompted intrepid “American spies” to conclude that the prince “appeared to be addicted to the medication [prescribed pain killers after an assassination attempt afflicted corporal damage] and could have also been using illicit drugs to pep himself up” (p. 81). This sentence on page 81 is followed by an additional gratuitous opinion that MBN has “another vulnerability: a predilection for cross-dressing and homosexuality.” Hubbard affirms that he interviewed four, of course anonymous, US officials in 2018–19, apparently with access to intelligence reports, and asks his readers to swallow this hook, line, and sinker, without providing hard evidence.

8. In discussing the row between Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates with Qatar, Hubbard writes that the Kingdom “shut its border, Qatar’s only land crossing, and evicted twelve thousand camels, five thousand sheep, and the Qatari herders who had
long pastured their beasts in the kingdom’s eastern desert” (p. 124). The source for this sentence is a June 21, 2017 Al Jazeera article [also a video], though it was unclear whether the original article’s author, Tony Birtley, actually counted the camels and sheep or merely offered an estimate. Tossing such numbers around is acceptable for yellow journalists but can those who aspire for accuracy and authority repeat unverifiable figures and be taken seriously?

9. Hubbard laments that there “will probably never be a monument commemorating the first women who defied the [driving] ban” (p. 164). How does he know this? Was the first monument that commemorated the suffragette movement in the United States, where women were granted the right to vote in 1920, built that year or several years later? Incidentally, Canada inaugurated a major monument in 2000 as did the US (in St. Paul, Minnesota, though the headquarters of the National Women’s Party was finally commemorated in Washington, DC in 2016). The United Kingdom’s first major monument was inaugurated in 1970. It may thus be useful to wait a few years before making such absolutist declarations about what Saudi Arabia might do.

10. In the aftermath of the 1979 Makkah Mosque takeover, “[s]hops sold musical instruments, but schools did not teach music, theater, and other arts” (p. 209). This is simply incorrect. For a thorough discussion of the kinds of liberal arts subjects taught in Saudi schools before and after the 1979 tragedy, the author can refer to Joseph A. Kéchichian, 'Iffat Al Thunayan: An Arabian Queen, Brighton, Chicago and Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2015, pp. 118–60.

11. “MBS touched down in Washington in a 747 with the phrase ‘God Bless You’ written on the nose” (p. 218). Given that every single plane that carries the Saudia livery carries this phrase near the front of the fuselage, what is the insinuation here? Should we read something sinister in this phrase or is Hubbard under the impression that this is unique to Muhammad bin Salman’s plane?

12. “MBS headed to New York, where the Saudi delegation spent millions of dollars to rent out the Plaza Hotel near Central Park and hang a massive flag over the entrance” (p. 220).
As a courtesy to distinguished guests, the Plaza—and just about every major hotel around the world—will hang the flags of the countries from where dignitaries hail, so this was not a unique event even if it remains to be determined what were the actual dimensions of the “massive” flag. What are we talking about here? Ten meters long, or 20, or 100? What is massive by New York City standards?

13. Hubbard similarly reports that “[i]n Los Angeles, his entourage took over yet another Four Seasons while MBS slept at a mansion nearby” (p. 221). Should they have stayed at a Motel 6 instead?

14. According to the author, guests who met Muhammad bin Salman were “baffled by the topics the prince had raised. He told some visitors of his interest in neuro-linguistic programming, a pseudoscientific technique aimed at mobilizing the subconscious to increase human potential. He spoke to others about the hopes for biotech, suggesting that in a few decades science would create a pill that would use artificial intelligence to find and fix whatever was wrong with the human body from the inside. His guests left wondering whether the prince was pondering eternal life” (p. 243). This gem is attributed to anonymous interviews held with “foreign businessmen who met with MBS” (p. 327) though one wonders whether the “imaginative futurist” was on a quest for the elixir of life or was simply projecting how humanity could change in the near future. For Hubbard this was yet another illustration of how Muhammad bin Salman stood out, and was not a normal leader.

There are several equally disturbing pieces of reportage, including the author’s affirmation that he “had grown used to hearing Arabs blame Saudi Arabia for all manner of ills, from the rise of particular political parties or trends, to funding or inspiring terrorist groups like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, to the spread of social conservatism” (p. 19), which is rich. No doubt some Arabs tended to be anti-Saudi, but what is the percentage we are talking about and, once we determine that figure, what measures had these valiant Arabs taken or are they taking or might they take at a future date to end ills, deny terrorist groups funding and, far more important, offer alternatives to social conservatism? Were these Arabs Jeffersonian democrats who knew best?
As if this was not bad enough, Hubbard claims that “there was a driving protest [a few days after he arrived in Riyadh], although the organizers insisted that it was not a protest, because the government hated protests” (p. 23). How do we know this? What if authorities, like their counterparts in just about every country, placed conditions on demonstrations? Likewise, we have: “Saudi Arabia’s own intolerant interpretation of Islam” (p. 28). Is this really a valid opinion? Are Saudis forcing any Muslim to become a follower of the Unitarian [Wahhabi] interpretations? Although several authors continue to spew the venom that Saudi Arabia has a “Call” and is embarked on a global quest to “Wahhabize” the Muslim world, this is really the product of rabid anti-Saudi analyses that demean an entire people. At one point, Hubbard refers to a member of the clergy “as the Brad Pitt of Saudi clerics because of his luscious lips” (p. 70), which reveals far more about the author than about the putative cleric.

**Conclusion**

Hubbard concludes his book with classic derision. “Since he has appeared on the world stage in 2015,” he writes,

MBS had been selling a dream—not what Saudi Arabia was, but what he hoped it would become—and he had spread enthusiasm for that dream among many who would not otherwise have paid the kingdom much mind. Of course, embracing that dream meant overlooking MBS’s more reckless moves. But the dream’s allure—of a diversified, egalitarian, moderate Saudi Arabia—was so strong that many had been happy to share the dream with the charismatic young prince.

Khashoggi’s killing was a wake-up call.

Unwilling to accept that the evolution of nation-states as socio-political entities are always painful, even more problematic when dramatic changes occur over a very short period of time. For Hubbard, as for Menoret, Ockrent, Rugman, and so many others, Muhammad bin Salman is a dictator, and while the heir apparent means well when he telegraphs that the time is long overdue to free Saudi Arabia from extremism, he has “la folie des grandeurs” [delusions of grandeur] that only comes from a fraud.
All of these authors mistakenly conclude that the Kingdom cannot be reformed because of its Unitarian [Wahhabi] creed, which bothers observers and journalists beyond description, something that can only be the consequence of misunderstandings and carefully woven propaganda that carries weight. Beyond such shortcomings, many authors recommend that leading Western powers, led by the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, to mention just three global entities, should know what it is they are dealing with. Washington, London, and Paris, they write and pontificate ad nauseum in newspaper interviews and television programs, must not accept conditions placed by a dictatorship, which critics remind us is led by a swindler, lest they be tarnished. The list of complaints is long, now motivated by the Khashoggi tragedy, which colors every imaginable option. Regrettably, critics refuse to acknowledge that Saudi Arabia and its leaders may be doing some things right, but the intelligentsia consensus is to deny Riyadh credit for anything, and deny Muhammad bin Salman the recognition that he might be responsible for some of the epochal transformations initiated since 2015.

Interestingly, none of our intrepid writers raise critical questions to the likes of Agnès Callamard who, it is worth repeating, wants to have the President of the United States arrested for the killing of an Iranian general who devoted his life to wars and assassinations. None of them wondered why Callamard found nothing to say about the murder of Hisham al-Hashimi in Baghdad on July 6, 2020, most probably at the hands of Soleimani’s Quds force. Al-Hashimi was seriously wounded outside his home in Zayouna by two unidentified gunmen on a motorcycle [an Iranian speciality], and died in the nearby Ibn Al-Nafis hospital shortly after arrival. This leading security expert, who focused on both Sunni and Shi’ah extremists, surely deserved a word or two from the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions. Of course, Callamard had little to say about three Kurdish women activists murdered by bullets to the head during the night of January 9, 2013 in her native country, or the many journalists killed in Turkey, which has the highest assassination rate of journalists in the world.

There are no excuses for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, even if many more questions can be raised about his associations with terrorists, but the vilification of the Kingdom of

Saudi Arabia is not conducive to better relations with a leading regional power. Regrettably, one has to brace oneself for this onslaught, which is not over, since additional attacks on the Kingdom will continue to fill our bookshelves, newspapers, and magazines, as well as inundating television and social media sources. The condemnations will continue and the damaging narratives will gain strength until such time when Arabs in general, and Saudis in particular, respond in kind.
King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS)

The KFCRIS is an independent non-governmental institution based in Riyadh, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Center was founded in 1403/1983 by the King Faisal Foundation (KFF) to preserve the legacy of the late King Faisal and to continue his mission of transmitting knowledge between the Kingdom and the world. The Center serves as a platform for research and Islamic Studies, bringing together researchers and research institutions from the Kingdom and across the world through conferences, workshops, and lectures, and through the production and publication of scholarly works, as well as the preservation of Islamic manuscripts.

The Center’s Research Department is home to a group of established and promising researchers who endeavor to produce in-depth analyses in various fields, ranging from Security Studies, Political Economy, African Studies and Asian Studies. The Center also hosts the Library which preserves invaluable Islamic manuscripts, the Al-Faisal Museum for Arab Islamic Art, the Al-Faisal Institute for Human Resources Development, the Darat Al-Faisal, and the Al-Faisal Cultural Press, which issues the Al-Faisal magazine and other key intellectual periodicals. For more information, please visit the Center’s website: www.kfcris.com/en