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Reports

Jamal Khashoggi: The Intellectual and his 'Incomplete' Chapter...!

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Saudi intellectual and journalist Jamal Khashoggi was among a diverse group of panelists at a joint international conference, hosted by Aljazeera Centre for Studies (AJCS) and Johns Hopkins University (JHU) in Washington June 12, 2018, to discuss the topic “Shaping a New Balance of Power in the Middle East: Regional Actors, Global Powers, and Middle East Strategy”. In the morning, participants in the first panel “Dynamics of Political Geography in the Middle East” and the second panel “Non-State Actors and Shadow Politics” gave rather deconstructive perspectives on several recent trends in the politics of the region. They probed into several modalities of what seems to be competitive strategies of various global and regional actors and non-state actors in the Gulf, the Middle East, and North Africa.

The afternoon session was more on the reflective and projective side of analysis. Jamal Khashoggi was the first speaker in the third panel “New Balance of Power”, and, from the onset, cautioned against a blind spot in the analysis of any emerging balance of power in the region; “We overlook the people; the people of the Middle East are the most important balance of power.” Another provocative point Jamal addressed was Saudi Arabia’s “sensitivity to democracy and the idea of people choosing their leaders,” he argued.

Mr. Khashoggi had also plans to write a chapter as his contribution to an upcoming edited book “Shaping a New Balance of Power in the Middle East: Global Powers, Regional Actors, and Small States’ Strategy”. Over July and August, he and I had a few phone conversations about the scope of his chapter “Saudi Arabia’s Cost and Benefit in the Emerging Balance of Power in the Middle East”. His chapter would have been the only study in the book to address the strategic position of his

country, Saudi Arabia. In an opinion essay he published at the Washington Post November 13, 2017, he wrote, “Saudi Arabia alone is the most politically stable and economically secure country in the region. Neither the kingdom nor our conflict-ridden region can afford to see my country lose its footing. [Current crown prince] Mohamed Bin Salman’s rash actions are deepening tensions and undermining the security of the Gulf States and the region as a whole.” However, Jamal’s mysterious disappearance inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul at 1:14 pm (local time) October 2, 2018 raises more questions about a man who resisted the perception of “being an opponent in exile.”

The following paper is a dedication to Jamal, the man, the vision, and the legacy. I have tried to construct what Jamal would have written about his understanding of the emerging balance of power based on his talk at the conference. This is a special paper in memory of a Saudi, an Arab, and a global citizen with an enlightened intellect. Sadly, he did not live long enough to express his ideas for a better Saudi Arabia and a democratic Middle East.

Memory Lane

Before introducing the speakers at the third panel at the conference, I highlighted three Ironies of the current balance of power in the region: 1) global and regional powers have claimed they pursue a stable and promising Middle East. However, there are nearly fifty foreign military installations in the region. In 2018, the Middle East has had the highest concentration of these bases in the world, established by the Americans, the British, the French, the Russians, the Turks, the Iranians, and even the Chinese in the Horn of Africa. 2) These global and regional powers have opted for various formulas of power. The Middle East has become a magnet of hard power, soft power, smart power, and harsh power. 3) The exercise of power in the Middle East is no longer a linear process as was the case during the Cold War: one global power with several proxies or allies. Now, power in the region is hybrid relational alliances. Three years ago, no one of us could visualize a Russian-Iranian-Turkish pact. Trump’s America has invested in Mohamed Bin Salman’s Saudi Arabia, Mohamed Bin Zayed’s UAE, and Sisi’s Egypt. The question remains whether these coalitions are sustainable as a foundation of an alternative balance of power.

Jamal started his presentation by commenting on my reference to the 30-plus US bases deployed in the Middle East. He said, “even though with all these American bases in the Middle East, America does not have much leverage on what is going on there. It has not been powerful to contain the decaying Middle East. Our part of the world only constitutes 5% of

the world population but it produces 50% of the world refugees. That is something that the Americans should be concerned about and the Europeans too. The question now: why are the Americans unable to control the situation? Because they are overlooking the most important balance of power. We are here, and all of us repeatedly ignore the most important balance of power.”

People: A Driving Force

Any discussion of a balance of power in the Middle East would focus on key players: super powers, regional players and their strategy of making gains vis-à-vis their rivals. However, Jamal decided to start with an unexpected argument: the human dimension versus the will of states. He rejected a top-down analysis by highlighting the counter bottom-up driver of change in the region. He applied his sociological imagination to help capture the nuances of both structure and individual agency. As American sociologist, C. Wright Mills, wrote in 1959, “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.”

Jamal cautioned against the dominant structural interpretation of the transformative balance of power in the region. He said, “When we talk about the balance of power, we talk about Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Europe, and Russia who is there in the Middle East. We overlook the people; the people of the Middle East are the most important balance of power. If I had a visual presentation I will have the famous picture of Sisi on the stage of the military intelligence of Egypt that was taken in 2012, where General Sisi was standing surrounded by Egyptian activists like Wael Ghuneim, Ahmed Maher and others. He was too humble being surrounded by those revolutionary Egyptian activists who were making history by then. Of course, that picture cannot be imagined again or repeated again.”

Jamal implied his sense of conflict analysis more than the lens of realpolitik. He echoed one of the main arguments of a leading conflict theorist, John W. Burton, whose vision helped identify the lines of demarcation between international relations and conflict resolution since the 1970s. In his paper “*Conflict Resolution: The Human Dimension*” published in 1998, Burton argues, “Survival-of-the-fittest is a misleading concept unless it includes specifically a human needs dimension in addition to physical goals. It is the struggle to satisfy non-material human needs that is the prime source of conflict. It is only in this sense that it can be said that 'man is aggressive.' The exclusion of a human dimension distorts concepts and language. Take, for

example, 'leadership.' Strong leadership is admired: U.S. Presidents go to war to prove their leadership qualities. But in a different context leadership qualities would be assessed on abilities to stimulate thinking and to bring together different points of view.”

Jamal witnessed various dynamics of the Arab Uprisings, or the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011. He sensed the revolutionary energy of young activists and protestors at various public places across North Africa and the Middle East. He felt he was living the promise of an Arab modernity. He remembered back in 2012, after the revolution and up to the coup in Egypt in the summer of 2013, “it was the peak of Arab people power, and everybody was listening to them. If we had our conference at that time, there would more listening to the people of Egypt, the people of Syria, and the people of Yemen more than listening to Putin, Erdogan, Rouhani or Mohamed bin Salman or Mohamed bin Zayed, but are not. This power is so important and it has not gone away. Its remains is still there. It has no friends, it lacks friends and the Americans are not supportive of the people of the Middle East and the Europeans too. There is a huge counter-revolution that is really fighting the power of the people in the Middle East physically. We see that in the form of the coup in Egypt that is eliminating the voices of all the Egyptians, even the supporters of Sisi are being eliminated today, not to mention the Islamists, labor unions etc.”

Triumphalist People Will

As Jamal emphasized the importance of people politics in analyzing state politics and international relations, he reminded his audience of the continuous effect of ordinary citizens’ demands in pushing for corrective action. He stated, “Last week [June 5, 2018], Jordan made us aware of the people’s power. We saw what happened in Jordan, the government listened, the king made the prime minister resign, the Saudi leadership became aware of the people’s power, they invited the king of Jordan, and they brought in the king of Bahrain, they invited the deputy president of the UAE and they had an important meeting that produced a package aid to Jordan. So, Saudi Arabia, the king of Jordan, and the world listen to people’s power in Jordan. That is a good sign.

Regimes succeeded in trenching or damaging the reputation of the people’s power of the Middle East by advancing ISIS and al Qaeda. When the Syrian revolution was attracting attention and was represented by young Syrians, Bashar al Assad came with this great idea along with the Iranians and Hezbollah: let us make it a radical revolution. He then let radicals

out of prison; somehow, those radicals were encouraged to lead the revolution and turn it from a peaceful to a military revolution. So it became not the people's but ISIS power, it became the radicals' power. Even many of us abroad began to distance themselves from this revolution. We began to say no, they are not calling for democracy, they are not calling for change, they are calling for Islamic state and sharia law. Of course, ISIS became the ugly face of the revolution and it destroyed and damaged the revolution. The Iranians and Hezbollah were, of course, so happy with that, they exploited those ugly pictures of ISIS beheading people. Those pictures became the image of the Syrian revolution, not those of young Syrians standing with flowers and a bottle of water giving them to soldiers as we have seen in Daraa in 2011."

Syria: An Epicenter of World Politics

Jamal believed Syria remains to be the most important battle between regional powers, more important than what is happening in Yemen. He pointed out "the people's power has not died in Syria, and Turkey is supporting a small segment of that power in the northern part of Syria. It is allowing it to grow and to practice some form of democracy. It is a good part of Syria in terms of size; it is maybe half the size of Lebanon controlled by Turkey, but if we include Idlib it will be as big as Lebanon. The Turks should be appreciated for their push for local governance in those areas, when time comes for all Syrian parties to negotiate. Those liberated areas that are practicing some form of true democracy and power sharing could be an example for future Syria. In the South of Syria, there is Daraa, which is until now liberated. But, although it is a free area, it is very much controlled by Jordan and other regional powers. So, whether they are in the north or in the south of Syria, those areas are under the mercy of regional powers, they allow you to practice your freedom."

New World Politics: The Local-Global Connection

Former speaker of the House of Representatives Tip O'Neill once said, "all politics is local". The Arab states' negligence of popular demands of reform and development tends to perpetuate the turbulent times of violence and abuses of human rights. Jamal argued the power of the people could no longer be ignored and marginalized because of its effect in a wider radius. He said, "After I highlighted to importance of the power of the people, I want to take this people's power and apply it to the regional powers that we always discuss. I begin with the most important proxy conflict that we all refer to, the Saudi Iranian conflict, to see how these countries relate to the people's power. We all know that the Saudis and the

Iranians are in confrontation in the Middle East. The Saudis are aiming to push the Iranians out of Syria and out of Yemen if they could, out of Lebanon that would be great, out of Iraq that is difficult. On the other hand, Iran is keen on rooting itself more and more into Iraq, Syria and in Yemen.

But, what is ironic here is that neither of the two countries is looking at the people in Syria or Yemen, and that is making Saudi's job more difficult. The Saudis need to reach out to the people of Syria, because the people of Syria is the only guarantor that will refuse the presence of the Iranians. Maybe, in the long term, after series of struggles, the Saudis can drive the Iranians out. But, rather than reaching out to the people of Syria, Saudi Arabia is sensitive to two things that characterize the people's powers in the Middle East: Islamism or political Islam, because a good segment of the population in the Middle East, when they choose freely, they will choose political Islam. Whether we agree or disagree with it, this is a fact that we have to live with it. Whenever people in the Middle East, in any given Arab country has the right to vote, thirty percent, twenty five percent will vote to political Islam. Saudi Arabia has a problem with political Islam."

Saudi Arabia and Democracy: The Missing Link

Jamal was not a hard-line opponent to the regime of his country. His colleagues at the Washington Post remember how often he said he did not want to be perceived "as an opponent living in exile." In his "Saudi Arabia's crown prince wants to 'crush extremists.' But he's punishing the wrong people" essay [October 31, 2017], he expressed his dream of a true Saudi modernity. He wrote, "Their [Council of Senior Scholars] reactionary opinions about democracy, pluralism or even women driving, are protected by royal decree from counter argument or criticism. How can we become more moderate when such extremist views are tolerated? How can we progress as a nation when those offering constructive feedback and (often humorous) dissent are banished?"

At the conference in Washington, Jamal had time to give a more reflective and timely assessment of what Saudi Arabia became by mid-2018. "Saudi Arabia has also sensitivity to democracy and the idea of people choosing their leaders. Simply, the current thinking today in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries like Egypt and elsewhere, they think that people are not equipped yet for democracy and they have to take the lead on behalf of them. The reservation that Saudi vision has vis-à-vis the people of Syria or Yemen allowed Iran to

advance, not its narrative, but its power. The Iranians are not pushing their way through into Syria and Yemen by persuasion but by guns through proxy parties and agents in all of those countries. While Saudi Arabia and Iran are competing in the region and appear as enemies, they both agree on eliminating the voice of the people. They are not listening to the people in all of those countries. So, when the Saudis looked for an exit solution, they reached out to the Americans. There are rumors, not yet confirmed by any Saudi official, that they reached out to the Israelis so they can act on their behalf to push Iran out of Syria. But, Mr. Trump is not interested, he repeatedly said that he wanted to leave Syria.

The Israelis are interested, but they are not interested in fulfilling the Saudis wish of fighting Iran out of Syria. They are more interested in drawing the border and the rules of engagement with the new neighbor. The Iranians are a new neighbor to Israelis and they do not trust that neighbor. So, basically, what the Israelis are doing by the routine bombing that we hear every day of military targets in Syria, they are telling the Iranians what kind of equipment to have in Syria and what you cannot have there, and maybe even what kind of research you can have or cannot have in Syria. How far you should be from the border etc.

So, they are defining the rules of engagement between them and their new neighbor. But, the Israelis will not go to downtown Damascus or downtown Aleppo and fight the Iranians to drive them out of Syria. The Iranians on the other hand are very much assimilated there. They are very much willing to change clothes rather than to come out openly with an Iranian military uniform. So they switch to a Syrian Arab army clothes and stay in Syria. Anyone who can imagine that Basher al Assad can free himself from Iran or choose to live without the Iranians is very much mistaken. His destiny is very much linked to the Iranians.

For Iran, what is so important is to maintain power; its grand prize is in Syria. They will overlook the confrontation with the Israelis; they will overlook even maybe their nuclear disagreement with the Americans as long as they maintain the grand prize and maintain some form of staying in Syria. Turkey is in an interesting situation. It is a supporter of change in the Arab world, and of the revolution in Syria, but at the same time, it is more concerned with its internal issue that is the Kurdish issue. How much the Turkish appetite will grow, it all depends on its ability. Also, what limits the Turkish involvement in the region and the people of region is its cold war with Saudi Arabia.”

Jamal's Call for Deep Listening!

Jamal Khashoggi chose to end his presentation at the conference by underscoring the centrality of Arab peoples in shaping the future. He said, "We should look at the people and the interest of the people in the Middle East in order to understand or find a solution, because what the Middle East is suffering from is chaos and the failed states. It is not the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, or the cold war between the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. We need more time listening to the people of the Middle East so we can create a better solution for the future of that region. Basically, the world does not need more refugees. It already has tens of millions of refugees coming from the Middle East."

With deep sorrow, I can accept the fact that Jamal will no longer be with us. He will be missed from our lives; but not from my hearts and prayers. He will be remembered for his honesty, intellectual vigor, and his pursuit of a new age of enlightenment and democracy in the Middle East.

Rest in peace, dear Jamal!



About the Author



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