ARGUMENT

The New Front in Yemen's Civil War Is Jamal Khashoggi

Yemenis can't stop talking about the journalist's murder.

BY ADAM BARON | NOVEMBER 2, 2018, 11:46 AM

ISTANBUL—There have always been neighborhoods in the Middle East like the diverse and labyrinthine Aksaray, where in a five-minute jaunt one can quite literally traverse the Arab world, buying up soap from Aleppo, eating Iraqi kabobs, and drinking Adeni milk tea. Tucked away in the heart of this Turkish metropolis, Aksaray is a testament to the heritage of a region in conflict—and, for scores of exiles and refugees, a place for a taste, albeit imperfect, of home.

Among those exiles is a Yemeni journalist friend with whom I met in the neighborhood for a lunch of aseed—a massive dumpling served with broth and eaten with the hands that's difficult to find in Turkey. Discussion quickly turned, as many discussions in the region have in recent weeks, to the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

For Yemen, however, Khashoggi's death represents an especially interesting predicament. His death has been subsumed into the fault lines of the country's ongoing civil war, going as far as to divide opponents of the Houthis against each other.

Khashoggi was generally as respected in Yemen as he was elsewhere in the region. I've seen and heard Yemeni journalists and political analysts from across political lines express warm personal memories of Khashoggi from his frequent presence at the workshops, conferences, and summits that regularly bring representatives of the region's chattering class together. His writing, historically in prominent Saudi outlets such as *al-Hayat* and *al-Watan*, was widely read and debated in Yemen, most recently his initial commentary vociferously backing the launch of the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015 and his increasing criticisms of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's policies. That's not to say, however, that he was remotely seen as a neutral figure—opponents of Yemen's Islah party have, particularly, been frequent critics of his Islamist leanings.

In that sense, it's not necessarily shocking that the murder has exposed political tensions within this coalition that had largely been papered over during the civil war, but which trace back at least to the Arab Spring. Yemen's Sunni Islamists, most notably the Islah party, were largely on the side of a 2011 uprising against President Ali Abdullah Saleh; while this uprising had the support of the Qatari government, the Saudis threw their weight into brokering a power transfer agreement,

were far more resistant to change. This spurred tensions between Saudi Arabia and some elements of Islah, many of whose leaders traditionally benefited from significant support from the kingdom. The rise of the Houthis saw a renewal of ties between Islah, allied figures, and the Saudis. But, in at least some quarters, distrust never dissipated, and a number—albeit a minority—of Yemenis who initially aligned with the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis broke with the kingdom following the start of the crisis with Qatar in 2017.

Much of the messaging has blown past Western observers—even when it has often been remarkably blatant. Consider the differing interpretations of one of the most ubiquitous photos related to the affair. In the immediate aftermath of Khashoggi's disappearance, a photo of Yemeni Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Tawakkol Karman at a protest calling for answers from Saudi Arabia circulated widely in both Arab and Western media, even gracing the front pages of some print newspapers. In the Western press, it was as an unsurprising, if not moving, show of solidarity. In much of the Yemeni and regional media, however, it was seen as something far more complicated.

"For most people in the West, Tawakkol is a pro-democracy activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner, but for many Yemenis she is seen first and foremost as a member of Islah, which is Yemen's main Sunni Islamist political party and is often described—not very accurately—as the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood," noted Peter Salisbury, a senior consulting fellow at Chatham House. "So her being part of protests in Istanbul fits in to this narrative of the Khashoggi killing being part of the regional tussle for influence between political Islamists and their backers in Qatar and Turkey on the one hand, and the Saudis, Emiratis, and Egyptians on the other—even if the reality is a bit different."

While some—most notably and vocally Karman—have shifted to opposing Saudi Arabia since the start of the blockade of Qatar, the vast majority of the Islah leadership has continued to work to remain on Riyadh's good side, even if that means forsaking former allies such as Qatar. If anything, in the wake of the Khashoggi killing, some Yemeni Sunni Islamists have calculated that their interests lie in deepening their commitment to Saudi Arabia, particularly in light of the rising possibility of increasing international pressure to end the conflict in Yemen.

In one characteristic meeting, a Yemeni contact—an analyst broadly sympathetic with the Islah party and vocally opposed to the Houthis—went on at length criticizing current Saudi policies domestically, in Yemen, and in the region, assigning blame, if not responsibility, to the kingdom for Khashoggi's killing. But he followed this by voicing hope that the international community will allow the coalition to continue the war in Yemen. "Our big fear," he said, "is that this will spur pressure to make the Saudis pull out, which will mean the Houthis will take over the country."

It's such calculations that now lie at the heart of Yemeni politics, with Yemenis each arriving at different answers. Many sides even appeared to see the present moment as an opportunity to demonstrate loyalty to Riyadh. The internationally backed Yemeni government issued a statement of solidarity with the Saudis as the controversy heated up, while even the backers of the

late Saleh, a frequent target of Khashoggi's criticism, loudly echoed Saudi narratives on the affair, a marked shift from when they frequently criticized the kingdom on human rights grounds earlier in the conflict before breaking with the Houthis. Meanwhile, the Houthis, opposed both to the Saudi government and the U.S. government now pressuring the Saudis over Khashoggi, have also been carefully calibrating their messages: They issued a statement declaring they would "defend the land of the Two Holy Mosques" in the event of a form of reckless action from U.S. President Donald Trump, while continuing to criticize their Saudi adversaries.

While Khashoggi's death may have been a potential diplomatic game-changer everywhere in the world, for Yemenis—on all sides of the conflict—it represents the possibility of a reshuffled deck in what had felt to most participants like a never-ending war.

Still, lofty questions about the role of human rights in Western foreign policy aren't foremost in most Yemeni minds—particularly as many have grown jaded after years of perceived inaction as the conflict in Yemen has worsened. "It's hard to care," mused one Yemeni friend of mine, who hasn't seen the bulk of his family since fleeing the country four years ago. "We're starving to death, and now suddenly the world cries about this?"

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