

# Over the Net



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The eighth issue of *Over the Net* deals at length with the affair that has taken the Arab world and the international arena by storm since October 2018, the murder and disappearance of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The man himself, the reasons behind his murder, and the details of the murder have combined to create a fascinating story that caused passionate discussions, first and foremost about Saudi Arabia and its (acting) leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and also about Turkey, the United States, and freedom of the press and freedom of expression for those in the Arab world who do not see eye to eye with their rulers and criticize them in public. This also includes an analysis of the conversation around the events of November in the Gaza Strip – the transfer of Qatari money to Hamas, the failed IDF operation that was exposed and the resulting escalation, and the resignation of Minister of Defense Avigdor Liberman.

## **The Murder of Saudi Journalist Jamal Khashoggi: John le Carré – Middle East Version**

On October 3, 2018, Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, one of the most senior media figures in the Kingdom, accompanied by his Turkish fiancée Hatice Cengiz, arrived at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul to obtain papers necessary for his marriage. Khashoggi left his fiancée outside the consulate with his mobile phone, and entered alone. Twenty-four hours later Cengiz tweeted that her fiancé had entered the consulate and never left, and that she was afraid for his life. This was the start of an international saga that is still ongoing. More details gradually emerged, but (as of December 2018) there are no hard facts about the fate of Jamal Khashoggi that have been presented to the public – apart from the announcement that he was murdered within the consulate by an 18-member [hit squad](#) from Saudi Arabia.

The steady drip of information and revelations about the crime were leaked or released by Turkish and Qatari media outlets, whose accusations are based on recordings (obtained illegally, in other words, by means of Turkish spying within the Saudi consulate) that were not published. They deal mainly with technical details of the murder: a saw that was found at the scene, graphic descriptions of dismembering the body, and even details of where it is buried. Because of the numerous distortions, lies, bias, and disinformation on the part of all involved, it was impossible to know what is real, and therefore we cannot know – at this point in time, and perhaps ever – what actually [happened](#) to Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

### The Ongoing Discussion on Social Media: Why People are Still Talking about Khashoggi

Neither the ongoing crises in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq, nor the mass demonstrations in Jordan against tax hikes, the protests in Iraq against corruption, and the elections in Tunisia, Lebanon, and Iraq have managed to overtake the Khashoggi saga at the “top of Arab social media trends,” where it has remained for over two months as the number one trend. The question is, why? What is it about this murder that has united leaders of public opinion, activists, journalists, and human rights advocates on social media seeking the “truth”?

The simple answer is: the individual fear of being the next target. Many people feel that unless the truth is exposed, accountability is demanded, and real deterrence created, they are in immediate danger. Geopolitical, economic, and social matters, however important they may be, remain at a professional, theoretical, ideological, and intellectual level – but the Khashoggi case invades personal space. As soon as there is an understanding that nobody will do the work for them – that the world will continue to be silent in the face of tyrants who will carry on killing without facing justice – all that remains is to take matters into their own hands and try to [shape](#) the public debate. In this case, the primary goal is to darken the image of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), in order to keep this topic on the agenda until leaders of the Western world are finally convinced they should see him as a liability and pressure him until he is out. Some will say that this hope is naïve and the chances of success are zero, but meanwhile some of the activists and members of the Saudi opposition living in exile have not given up.

### Who was Jamal Khashoggi and Why Was He Murdered?

For many years Khashoggi was one of the most senior journalists in the Kingdom (and was often referred to as “the Saudi Tom Friedman”). He was a long time contributor to the *al-Hayat* newspaper, and his articles were published and quoted in the most popular Arabic papers; he was also regularly interviewed on many Arab news channels, including *al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya*. He was a close advisor to many members of the Saudi royal family, and particularly close to King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz (until his death in 2015), Prince Khaled bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz (the former Saudi Minister of Defense), and current Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubair. In early 2000 he went to Tora Bora in Afghanistan, and was the only journalist who managed to get an interview with bin Laden in his hiding place. Khashoggi loved Saudi Arabia; he saw himself as part of it and sometimes as its spokesman. He also had connections with a few Israelis, which gave him the image of someone with pragmatic views regarding the need for security and political cooperation against strategic threats to the Kingdom, alongside

his consistent support for the Palestinians and his approach against normalization of relations with Israel without progress on the Palestinian issue.

He was never a “revolutionary” or an “opposition member,” but a conservative journalist. For example, he opposed the chaos caused by the Arab Spring: he believed that while there was indeed a need for change and political and social reforms in the Arab world, these should come from the rulers, top down and gradually, rather than through violence and street uprisings. In addition, he supported democratization, but wanted the process to result through the rule of political Islam (the Muslim Brotherhood) in the Middle East under the leadership of Saudi Arabia. It is therefore clear why he was a strong supporter of Erdogan’s Turkish model, and wrote many articles urging Saudi Arabia to adopt this model.

His troubles began with the “silent coup” in 2015, when Salman bin Abdulaziz was named as King and his son Mohammed bin Salman became the Crown Prince and de facto ruler of the Kingdom. At first, Khashoggi expressed strong support for the young heir to the throne, and even endorsed his policy against Iran and his “Vision 2030.” He also expressed complete faith in bin Salman’s intentions to introduce social reforms, and welcomed his initiative to give women the right to drive and participate in political life as well as in sports and cultural events in the Kingdom.

At the same time, Khashoggi began to write articles critical of the Crown Prince’s foreign policy: the ongoing war in Yemen, the blockade and rift with Qatar, and his policy against political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood. When in 2017 news came of the wave of arrests of several princes, journalists, human rights activists, and clerics, Khashoggi’s critical tone toward bin Salman’s policies became louder and turned into a personal attack. The “kidnapping” of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri was in fact the last straw, and after that he tweeted: “Who’s next in line? And what price will we (journalists) have to pay if the prince (referring to Walid bin Talal) paid a billion dollars ransom for his release?”

Despite receiving a number of threats from the regime, he chose to persist, and the Saudi royal family then barred Khashoggi from writing and making public appearances. The threats on his life intensified, and in October 2017 Khashoggi went into self-imposed exile. He became a US resident and a columnist for the *Washington Post*, continuing to criticize Saudi policies. He saw himself as a Saudi patriot who believed that the path chosen by bin Salman was not only incorrect, but also a danger to the country’s stability.

According to some estimates on social media, Khashoggi was not assassinated because of his criticism of bin Salman’s policies, or for his public support for political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood. The reason lies in his personal attacks on bin Salman and his lobbying against

him in Washington. In other words, bin Salman was settling a personal account, and sending others a message.

#### The Change in bin Salman's Image: From Reformist to a Serial Killer

One prominent feature of the Arab debate on social media is the joy over the shattered bubble of the Saudi Crown Prince's image. In the three years since he was named Saudi Crown Prince and until the Khashoggi saga, there was a great deal of hope around MBS, and this was expressed by commentators, journalists, and experts in the West who were charmed by his actions and policies. His war on political Islam and Iran in the regional arena, and his granting women the right to drive while allowing them to enter politics and participate in sports and cultural events led to optimism and a sense of change. His youth and connection to technological and business trends heightened this feeling.

In the Arab world, however, people were highly suspicious of the Crown Prince from the start and didn't "buy" this narrative. After his controversial moves at home and abroad in 2017, people were already saying: he's not a young reformist, rather an updated version of the familiar tyrants. From that point, they were eager to expose his impulsive tendencies and cruel character. Against this background, it is clear why Arab activists were angry over the warm words and blunt endorsement he received in Europe and the United States. "If there were no consequences for his policies after the war in Yemen, the blockade of Qatar, the arrest of the princes and female activists, and the kidnapping of the Lebanese Prime Minister, why do you think he will stop?" In this context, the murder of Khashoggi aroused malicious glee toward the West, a kind of "we told you so." Finally his true color had been revealed to Western eyes as well.

#### The Debate in Saudi Arabia: Denial, Anger, and Defensiveness

Saudi Arabia has the highest percentage of social media usage among Arab countries. Until the Khashoggi murder it was easy to find public debate within the Kingdom on domestic and external issues, but afterwards there was silence – whether as a result of shock or fear (or both). Even two months after the event it is difficult to find a hint of criticism or opposition to what happened in the consulate in Istanbul, not to mention personal criticism of the Crown Prince or the royal family. "With one bullet the Crown Prince managed to silence 20 million Saudis," tweeted one of the activists in Egypt. Even the voices of Saudi opposition members and journalists living in exile were hardly heard. The fear of being the next in line kept them quiet.

The little that was posted on the social media emerged gradually. The first signs were of utter denial and difficulty in believing that Jamal Khashoggi had been killed. The Saudis were

totally convinced that this was a Turkish conspiracy, and in a day or two he would be back on television (as happened with al-Hariri) and everything would return to normal. As time passed, the picture became clearer, and Twitter users were careful to distance the shocking event from the palace. One way was to accuse Turkey and Qatar of an attempt to tarnish the reputation of Saudi Arabia, and they called for vengeance and a boycott in response. At the same time, “trolls and bots armies” were set up in the Kingdom, whose job was to praise and promote the Crown Prince’s good image and send out a message of business as usual. Next the internal Saudi discourse stressed that there are 20 million Saudi citizens and no collective punishment should be imposed on them. The fear of sanctions and academic and tourism boycotts deters the Saudis who discuss the incident openly on the net.

### The Turkish Angle

Turkey, where the murder occurred, is playing a central role on the social media in an effort to achieve three objectives. The first objective is expressed in broad delegitimization of Saudi Arabia, which has tense relations with Turkey, and in particular bin Salman. In Ankara the assassination is interpreted as a double attack: first, the fact of the murder of a journalist by the Kingdom, and second, the decision to act on Turkish soil, making it a legitimate target for settling accounts and political assassinations, which harms the country’s image and could affect tourism and the safety of visiting journalists, diplomats, and businessmen.

The second objective focuses on public opinion in the Arab world in order to improve Turkey’s image. The fact that Turkey is one of two countries in the Middle East (joined by Qatar) that spoke out publicly against Saudi Arabia and for Khashoggi aroused great sympathy among the Arab public. The ongoing leaks from the murder scene and the campaign to “reveal the naked truth” were perceived as a brave, defiant step against all those – countries and individuals – who wanted a whitewash. At the same time, some, in Turkey and elsewhere, took care to point out that Turkey imprisoned over [180 journalists](#) last year, and is known for its lack of journalistic and media credibility. In the broader picture, the great majority chose to believe the Turkish narrative over the Saudi one. This is notable, since in recent years Turkey has been the target of anger and hate in the Arab world, directed toward Erdogan, and sometimes exceeding the hatred directed toward Iran and Israel.

The third effort is linked to political gains and blackmailing. As time passed and Turkey continued to leak material from within the consulate, but chose not to publish the video tapes it claimed to have, voices gradually emerged claiming that the incident was actually a bargaining chip intended to extract benefit and compensation from Saudi Arabia, or alternatively from United States, which would cover for Riyadh. This issue has grown

increasingly prominent, and the debate indicates a watershed, after which Turkey has been fingered as having “sold” Khashoggi for its own interests.

#### Disappointment with the United States and the Future of bin Salman

Major disappointment is expressed on social media toward the United States and President Donald Trump. Much of the Arab public lost hope in its own leaders long ago, and many of them still look to the West, led by the US, as the standard bearer for the values of freedom, rule of law, and human rights. Consequently, there is [growing frustration](#) and anger toward those who have the ability to respond and change a situation, but choose to close their eyes and continue to support the same leaders who oppress, imprison, threaten, and even kill their opponents – and all for “[a fistful of dollars](#).”

The social media discourse reflected the sense of disgust that the United States (as President Trump stated in a speech) considers [the price of a barrel of oil](#) to be more important than the brutal murder of a Saudi journalist who wrote for the *Washington Post*. In this view, since there were no serious consequences for the murder of Russian opposition members in London, there will be no real consequences for the murder of a Saudi journalist in Istanbul. The Crown Prince’s [blood-soaked](#) hands will be cleansed by the Americans, who will “close deals” with Turkey and Saudi Arabia. This is another incentive for young activists in the Middle East to leave, before they become the next victim that nobody cares about.

Alongside the almost obsessive interest on the net in exposing the truth behind the Khashoggi murder and punishing the guilty, there is a heated debate around the future of the Crown Prince. Even today, as the response dies down, there is a public tendency to believe that the mounting incidents will sooner or later convince the United States that its gamble on MBS – as the person to lead changes and the struggle against Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood – will do more harm than good.

The internal Saudi debate does not reveal such feelings, but it is hard to get a true indication of the prevalent mood, given the dangers facing anyone who dares to express personal criticism of MBS in public. Conversations with leaders of public opinion in Saudi show that the Crown Prince’s position is completely stable. The army and security forces still support him and his father, and while the King lives there is no chance of undermining his status. In their opinion, absent any extreme incidents or changes, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman will succeed his father as the next King.

As for the question of what price the United States will exact from Saudi Arabia, the following reply is given: apart from maintaining the price of oil, they estimated that Washington would want help in financing its presence in eastern Syria and reconstructing the

areas under its protection (this before the announcement of the US withdrawal from Syria); it will also strive for a settlement in Yemen and an end to the war that has been raging there for over four years. As for removing the blockade on Qatar and reaching a compromise, the majority do not believe there will be any real improvement in relations as long as Qatar's current emir remains in place.

### **Gaza: The “Gold Rush,” Loss of Deterrence, and Political Shock in Israel**

This section deals with the trends in discussions in one week in November 2018 that included three important events concerning Gaza: the transfer of Qatari money to Gaza (November 9) for salaries and fuel and the start of the first phase of an arrangement (*hudna*) between Israel and Hamas, together with the suspension of the Marches of Return, ongoing since March 30; the failed IDF operation in Khan Yunis that was exposed (November 11), and led to the massive rocket fire (over 450 rockets) from Gaza into Israel during a 24 hour period, which then prompted Israel to demolish buildings in the center of Gaza; and the resignation of Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman (November 14).

#### Qatari Money and the “Gold Rush”

When news came of the arrival of [Qatari](#) suitcases (containing \$15 million for salaries for civil servants and \$10 million for fuel), responses in the Palestinian discourse ranged from gratitude, sadness, and depression, to anger and humiliation.

Gratitude was prominent immediately. Hamas decided to give 50,000 poor families \$100 each (the equivalent of the average monthly wage) from the Qatari aid money. Although it reached only a few hands, the aid managed to bring a smile to faces of some Gazans, who put their cynicism aside briefly. Thanks to the Qatari money, there were 16-20 [hours of electricity](#) a day, something rare over the past decade (where there are usually only 4-8 hours of electricity a day). Photos of classrooms with lights for the first time and of Gazans cooking on gas in brightly lit homes had their effect.

However, after the initial enthusiasm, the most prominent reaction was sadness and deep depression. Discussions on social media exposed the situation of many who [received nothing](#). The Qatari aid was given to working families and not to the unemployed, and expressions of despair were heard from young people who had stood in line for an entire day to check if they met the criteria for needy families, only to find that they were [not on the list](#). Other sad tweets followed the announcement from the Ministry of Labor in Gaza, which announced a tender for 5000 temporary jobs (thanks to the Qatari aid). In this case as well, many young people [waited](#) a whole day to see if they were eligible for the jobs, and when they received a negative response, their pain resonated throughout the social media.

Two days after the arrival of the salaries and the stipends, the sounds of gratitude and sadness were replaced by anger and a sense of humiliation. Some claimed that the attempt to put out the flames in Gaza by pouring Qatari dollars would ultimately fail. The Gazan martyrs, they claimed, could not be bought, and Gazan resistance could not be bribed. Until the siege is removed, neither dollars nor oil will buy quiet. Some even claimed that Qatar was being [manipulative](#) in the service of its own political interests: when it suited it, it encouraged Hamas to continue with the Marches of Return, but as soon as it had an interest in being a broker and gaining political capital, it asked Hamas to keep the peace in the Strip and suspend the marches. The humiliation motif was very pronounced. The “gold rush” was seen as shaming the Palestinian people, and many wondered why they had to see the people who had bravely fought the occupation for years now standing for hours in the rain for a \$100 bill, and begging for aid and jobs.

### Loss of Deterrence

One of the most striking motifs during the 24 hours in which rockets were fired at Israel and various Hamas targets in the Strip were attacked by the Israel Air Force was what looked like the loss of the ability to deter the Gazan population. One of the recurring sentiments in the Gaza discourse was that you can’t deter people who have nothing to lose. This was best expressed by Ayad al-Baghdadi, a Palestinian human rights activist living in exile, who [tweeted](#): “The Palestinians have lived under the occupation of these people for what, 70 years? So seventy years have passed and they still can’t read us. They think that they can somehow deter someone who has lost everything. Do what you want, but know this: you can’t buy us, you can’t break us.”

The second striking aspect relates to the targets of the Israeli attack. Unlike Operation Protective Edge, where Israel ultimately decided to attack the “luxury towers” in the heart of Gaza, leading to public hysteria and pressure on Hamas to stop the fighting, this time there was no hysteria and no pressure. Discourse and images on social media revealed that young people were walking around the streets of Gaza during the shelling and not even trying to find shelter. When some were asked why they did not remain at home as the planes attacked, they replied: “What’s the worst that can happen to us? They’ll kill us? So let them kill us. Now, the next time ... so we’ll die.” This uncharacteristic apathy echoed round Gaza loudly.

### Shaping the Equation of Hamas and the Cognitive Victory

Another issue that was discussed concerns Hamas policy and the reasons behind it. Many social media activists explained that Hamas did indeed want a *hudna* with Israel, in order to bring some relief/removal of the blockade. However, it was clear that Hamas could not allow



the suspension of the Marches of Return and long term quiet with Israel (which harms the legitimacy of the violent struggle against occupation), if Israel exploits the quiet to kill Hamas fighters (as in the failed operation). This paradox led Hamas to a very severe response in the form of volleys of rockets, but this was not planned to last more than 24 hours, and from the first moment Hamas asked Egyptian mediators to help it contain the situation as quickly as possible. As Hamas saw it, this step would create deterrence against Israel, which in the future would think twice before breaching the terms of the arrangement. In other words, in order to maintain the arrangement, Hamas had to raise the price of any breach.

The current round brought Hamas three perceived victories. The first was the exposure of the IDF troops and failure of their mission, accompanied by pictures of Israeli troops abandoning a vehicle and weapons as they [fled](#) Gaza. The second victory came with the photos of Israelis sitting in shelters hiding from the Hamas rockets. And finally, the [resignation](#) of Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, who before taking office in May 2016 promised: “If I am the Minister of Defense – I will give Mister (Ismail) Haniyeh 48 hours. Either you return the bodies of the citizens or you are dead.” As of now, Haniyeh remains and Liberman is out. This was the icing on the cake for Hamas, as expressed by Sami Abu-Zohari, the movement’s official spokesman: “It’s a political victory for Gaza, whose steadfastness has created a political shock for the occupation. It’s an admission of defeat and helplessness in the conflict with the Palestinian opposition.” Conversation on social media reflected this attitude, and the fact that Gaza policy had not only led to the Defense Minister’s resignation but almost brought about early elections in Israel was seen as a major success for Hamas.