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Control of Political Communication and State Security: Jamal Khashoggi Case

Summary. The paper focuses on the issue of the alignment of the state's right to, on one hand, control information flows for security purposes and, on the other hand, internationally recognized human rights based on the example of the incident involving the killing of a Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi. It takes into account the respective coverage in the media, dynamics of the change in the tone of the post-incident reports on the KSA's government and the impact of the associated reputational risks on the political as well as financial and economic situation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the publications for three months of 2018 indirectly attests to the immense reputational losses of the Kingdom, which eventually resulted in financial and economic losses. The paper retraces the intellectual origins of certain frames that may affect the authorities' decisions to control information flows and kill dissidents.

Keywords: media control, political communication, state security

1. Introduction

Any state tries to control information flows for reasons associated with its own security. The right to such control – as exerted through legislative and political mechanisms or public relations tools – seems to be self-evident in most countries. The only question is which of them are more effective, how they can be combined, and whether some of them might have the opposite effect, that is, harm

the interests of the state. For example, Noam Chomsky considers “two models of democracy – one in which the public actively participates, and one in which the public is manipulated and controlled” [Chomsky 2002: 9]. At times, attempts by the state to control information flows are in conflict with widely regarded human rights, including freedom of speech. All the more so as these rights are governed and protected by international law and enshrined in the international legal system, that is, they are essentially extraterritorial and supranational rather than subject to the local legal system of a certain country, such as Sharia law. Therefore, this kind of conflict can be an issue involving both practical and academic dimensions. In fact, the problem lies in striking the right balance between the state control over information flows and the fundamental human rights. From this point of view, the incident that occurred on October 2, 2018, in the Istanbul Consulate of Saudi Arabia resulting in the killing of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi is rather revealing because the incident was widely reported in the world’s leading media.

The study involves quantitative and qualitative analysis of the situation associated with the murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, in particular its impact on the political reputation as well financial and economic situation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

For analysis, we selected publications that mention the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) in the Wall Street Journal (WSJ), one of the largest and most influential American daily newspapers. This choice is also due to the fact that the WSJ primarily focuses on global business and financial news. Besides, Saudi Arabia, given the characteristics of its economy, is especially sensitive to this kind of news. As a reminder, the country’s economy is dependent on oil and gas and ranks 12th in the world in terms of GDP and 12th in terms of GDP per capita, making it a member of the G20. On the other hand, it is a relatively small country in terms of population (around 30,000,000 citizens), with its political system based on absolute monarchy and undividedly dominated by Wahhabism – a Muslim religious movement that is usually qualified as belonging to the radical religious spectrum. It was in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, that Osama bin Laden, the founder of the terrorist organization al-Qaeda, was born, even though he was deprived of citizenship in 1994.

That is, there is a clear inconsistency between the status of an absolute theocratic monarchy, on the one hand, and the position of a major Middle Eastern ally of the USA as the stronghold of democracy in the world, on the other hand. This controversy makes the KSA’s reputation particularly vulnerable to international media’s coverage of scandalous events such as government-endorsed assassination of a renowned journalist.

2. Incident

In this context, it might be a good idea to refresh in the memory of the events in the Consulate of Saudi Arabia in Istanbul (Turkey). New media had a role to play in this gruesome story, as they were used, so to speak, to broadcast live the reporter's execution. At the time of writing, the version with Apple Watch was not refuted, although it was based only on the report published by the Turkish newspaper "Sabah". No confirmation was found in any other sources.

On October 2, 2018, Jamal Khashoggi, a 59-year-old Saudi journalist, entered Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul and nobody has ever seen him since, including his fiancée Hatice Cengiz, who he was going to marry the following Saturday. Jamal, as if suspecting something bad might happen, left his iPhone in her possession. According to the Turkish newspaper "Sabah", Jamal entered the Consulate only with his Apple Watch on his wrist [Kaydetti 2018].

In fact, he only needed to sign and receive papers validating his divorce from his former wife, who remained in Saudi Arabia when the journalist was forced to leave for the United States.

He began his journalism career as a young man in the 1980s, reporting for a number of different periodicals. In the 1990s, he worked as a foreign correspondent for Saudi newspapers in Afghanistan, Algeria, Sudan, Kuwait and other Middle Eastern countries. At one time, he was close to the royal family as a political advisor, manager and editor-in-chief of the Al-Arab News Channel, a Bahrain-based Arabic-language TV channel committed to the practice of objective and unbiased journalism. The channel was launched in February 2015 and shut down in a few weeks, after an interview with a Bahraini opposition politician. Prior to that, in 2009-2010, he edited "Al Watan", a newspaper that can be described as liberal on a Saudi scale. It consistently criticized the repressive aspects of Islam, especially in relation to women, and once the newspaper published a column that mentioned a Muslim theologian and logician of the XIV century without due respect. As a result, Khashoggi had to resign. In 2017, he self-exiled to the United States, claiming that the authorities had banned him from using Twitter.

This triggers the typical pattern. A person is deprived of a (mostly Arabic language) channel for expressing his views. Instead, he becomes famous as a dissident and an exile and obtains another, much wider platform: Jamal becomes a columnist of "The Washington Post". Hence, his criticism of the Saudi authorities becomes even more sensitive.

This has happened many times before. *Contra se ipsum*. This Latin phrase – meaning "against oneself" – has become proverbial over millennia. Attempts to

restrict freedom of expression almost always tend to eventuate in the opposite effect; at times, unfortunately, following the death of the person accused of “heresy”.

However, let us get back to the tragedy in Istanbul. The fiancée, faithfully waiting outside the Consulate of Saudi Arabia for 11 consecutive hours, finally had to go to the police. According to the above-mentioned newspaper, the police received the audio files with interrogation, beating and assassination records from this phone, as well as from iCloud, where they were uploaded from the doomed journalist’s Apple Watch. Khashoggi simply turned on the recording function on his watch before the trouble began:

Unnamed Turkish officials have previously told media outlets that they had audio and visual evidence to prove their accounts of the writer’s death”, where one can hear **his voice** and **the voices** of men speaking Arabic as well as allegedly his interrogation, beating, and murder. The BBC quotes a Turkish source claiming that “Jamal Khashoggi was choked to death immediately after entering the Consulate General of Saudi Arabia. His body was then dismembered and destroyed in line with advance plans [Khashoggi murder... 2018].

Fifteen agents, who arrived from Riyadh to Istanbul on the day of the reporter’s death, promptly left the Saudi Consulate. Moreover, according to Turkish secret service officials, each of them had a plastic bag in his hands containing a piece of Khashoggi’s dismembered body. A few days later, Turkish investigators were allowed into the consulate. Everything seemed extraordinarily clean. Hence, the investigators found no evidence of a macabre killing and body dismemberment. There was no footage from CCTV cameras for the alleged execution period. That is, at the time of writing, the only pieces of evidence were videos from Turkish CCTV cameras monitoring the area around the Saudi embassy, which prove that Khashoggi entered the premises and never left, the above-mentioned audio files, and the testimony of the fiancée, who was getting ready for the wedding scheduled for the following Saturday.

On October 5, “The Washington Post” published an issue with Khashoggi’s “column” with a black space instead of the text. The “column” ran under the headline *A Missing Voice* [Missing Voice 2018].

3. Media Coverage

Therefore, the corpus for the study was gathered with a view to comparing the number and nature of the WSJ’s articles published prior to the murder of the Saudi journalist, i.e., from September 1 to October 1, 2018, and one month after

it – from October 2 to November 2, 2018. It was assumed that the murder triggered an upsurge in the number of reports about Saudi Arabia and, in particular, an increase in negative mentions of the government of the Kingdom. In case the hypothesis was confirmed/not confirmed, we decided to count and analyze the Wall Street Journal's reports for a third month (November 3 to December 3, 2018), in order to monitor whether the trend detected in October persists. We have analyzed a total of 557 articles, which were provided by the WSJ archival service for the specified three-month period.

The **first thing that catches the eye** is the increase in the number of references to Saudi Arabia in October and November.

In September, a month before the murder, there are 105 mentions.

After the murder, from October 2 to November 2, there are 263 mentions, which is 2.5 times more than in September. The tone of coverage changed too.

The September highlights tend to portray Saudi Arabia in a neutral light, even if they discuss the war in Yemen. For example, they report that US senators demand to cut off support for the Saudi regime, while President Trump insists on maintaining this support.

The study classifies the newspaper materials into four broad categories. The first category includes mostly neutral references in reports that mention Saudi Arabia in passing, such as articles focusing on the OPEC (the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), oil price fluctuations, etc. The other three categories include WSJ reports devoted to Saudi Arabia. These three categories are of particular interest for the study. In terms of quantity, they are split by months as follows:

- September 1 to October 1 – 18 reports,
- October 2 to November 2 – 91 reports,
- November 3 to December 3 – 49 reports.

Thus, we can conclude that the tragedy of October 2 led to a 5-fold increase in the number of reports focusing on the KSA. In the hold-out period (November 3 to December 3), the trend of increased attention persisted, however manifestations were more moderate: only 2.7 times more than during regular periods (it is assumed that September was a regular month with the average number of articles focusing on the KSA).

The September highlights tend to portray Saudi Arabia in a neutral light, even if they discuss the war in Yemen. For example, they report that US senators demand to cut off support for the Saudi regime, while President Trump insists on maintaining this support. The same is true for the article by Dion Nissenbaum *Top U.S. Diplomat Backed Continuing Support for Saudi War in Yemen Over Objections of Staff*. This, in fact, refers to the stance of the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who backed U.S. military support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen.

As you can see, even a controversial topic, such as the KSA's involvement in the war in Yemen, included mostly positive overtones of 'support' for the ally on the part of a high-ranking official [Nissenbaum 2018].

A typical September-period article is *Aramco Weighs \$1 Billion Venture Capital Fund For Tech* by Rory Jones and Summer Said, elaborating on the fact that "Saudi Arabia's national oil company is considering a \$1 billion fund to invest in international technology firms, as the kingdom deepens efforts to diversify its economy" [Jones, Said 2018]. A similar positive tone pervades the article under the heading *The U.S. May Become a Partner in Saudi Quest for Nuclear Plant* [Salvaterra 2018]. In other words, the KSA is described in a rather favorable light as a country attractive for investors. All in all, 12 of the 18 September highlights present the KSA in a positive manner; even the *Photos of the Day* section of September 11 illustrates Saudi Arabia with a fun picture of a man (presumably a beekeeper) engulfed by a swarm of bees. The other reports are either neutral (analysis of the oil price jump – three articles) or contain controversial information (the KSA's involvement in the war in Yemen), while the positive tone prevails.

In October, however, the tone becomes markedly, even radically different. The first article about the ill-fated journalist was rather cautious in passing judgment ("a prominent Saudi journalist who criticized the government") was published in the newspaper on October 3, that is, the day after the tragic incident in Istanbul. The article by Margherita Stancati was entitled *Saudi Critic Entered a Saudi Consulate in Turkey and Hasn't Been Seen Since*. According to the author, it "seems to be the latest effort by the kingdom to stifle dissent" [Stancati 2018b]. The following reports on this subject just add more dramatic effect: *Missing Saudi Journalist Puts Kingdom on Collision Course With Turkey*; *Missing Saudi Journalist Was Killed in Consulate* [Gauthier-Villars 2018]. As we can see, this article published on October 7 (five weeks after the incident) already leaves no doubt about the criminal nature of what happened. The next day, on October 8, the media quoted a scandalous comment by the President of the United States concerning the tragic event: *President Trump on Missing Saudi Journalist: 'I Do Not Like It'*. This event was also highlighted in the *Photos of the Day* section on October 10: a security member stands in front of Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul.

The US President tries to preserve good relations with allies even after the scandal: *Trump Rejects Lawmakers' Calls to Halt Saudi Arms Sales* [Salama 2018]. However, the reputation of the KSA among investors is steadily deteriorating: *Saudi Journalist's Disappearance Sends Chill Through Foreign Investors, Firms reports* an article of October 11. Ultimately, it was bound to translate into a more hardline stance on the part of the ally country: *Trump Vows 'Severe Punishment' if Saudi Arabia Implicated in Khashoggi Disappearance*. The next natural move within the framework of this response is information about the

cancellation of various initiatives, conferences or investments that were supposed to be held on the territory of the KSA. An illustrative example is the report *Hollywood Talent Agency Endeavors Seeks to Cancel Investment from Saudi Arabia* [Schwartzel 2018]. In this context, perhaps the only relatively positive or at least neutral or exonerative publication is the article of October 15 *Saudis Weigh Saying Journalist Was Killed by Mistake*. No wonder that many high-profile Western companies pulled out of the investment conference, colloquially known as “Davos in the Desert”. Moreover, Switzerland, the organizers of the World Economic Forum in Davos, asked the users of the Davos “brand” to stop doing so. That is, the “true” Davos objected to the use of the name “Davos in the Desert”, anxious that the tarnished reputation of the Saudi authorities might affect the impeccable reputation of the Alpine forum.

Despite the fact that “the Trump administration is seeking ways to maintain the two countries’ strategic alliance”, there is still an attempt to “to sanction Saudi Arabia over the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi” (*U.S. Tries to Uphold Saudi Alliance*). It is clear that in such circumstances the Saudi authorities were looking for ways to save the remnants of their good reputation and did not manage to come up with anything better than trying to distance themselves from the murder of the journalist and promising an honest investigation: *Stancati Prince Says Khashoggi’s Killing Was ‘Unjustifiable*, states one of the reports that can be described as positive or at least neutral in tone [Stancati 2018]. Attempts to maintain this tone are apparent in articles devoted to the “everlasting” rivalry between Turkey and the KSA to play the first fiddle in the Islamic world. The WSJ alludes to the fact that Turkey, which contributed to the allegations and investigation of the murder of the Saudi journalist, has some serious issues with human rights too and “hundreds of journalists remain in jail” there. However, in general, such neutral or even exonerating publications do not save the tarnished reputation of the Saudi authorities, therefore, the following materials of the newspaper state that *Khashoggi Killing Rocks Saudi Role as West’s Arab Ally*, and *USA Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said Khashoggi killing ‘could destabilize the Persian Gulf region and beyond* [Lubold 2108]. At the end of the period under study (late October), there was another crackdown on the KSA’s economic prospects: *Khashoggi’s Killing Should Be a Nuclear Red Flag*. The article argues that “the Saudis cannot be trusted to enrich uranium and reprocess spent fuel” [Fly 2018].

Consequently, the WSJ’s October publications focusing on the KSA appear to be extremely hostile to the Saudi authorities and quite often highlight the outrage of politicians and business representatives over the actions of this government. The USA is dissatisfied with its Arab ally. Frankly speaking, this alliance of a great world democracy with a despotic theocracy has always seemed somewhat strange. There has always been a lot of criticism concerning this rather unnatural

but strategically indispensable alliance among American policy-makers. However, the top officials of the country have always made effort to uphold their strategic allies. President Trump was not an exception – even after the tragic incident, he tried to hold a brief for the Saudi authorities, referring to insufficient verification of information. The following response of the President of the United States was “I don’t like it”. Further, under pressure of facts and the widespread outcry over the incident in various countries, including in the United States, he issued some harsher statements. The ratio of negative and positive mentions of the KSA’s government seems inversely proportional to the above-described overwhelmingly favorable representation of the KSA in September, a month before the journalist’s murder. In October, 72 of the 91 publications (79%) focusing on the KSA describe the Saudi authorities in a negative vein. This makes an absolute majority. Seven reports had a neutral tone and only two articles were positive.

Analysis of the WSJ’s publications for the hold-out period from November 3 to December 3, 2018, attests to the persistence of the trend to criticize the Saudi government. During this period, there were 49 articles that focused on the KSA – almost half as many as in October but still three times more than in relatively conflict-free, “peaceful” months. Negative tone reports prevail, accounting for 32 publications, which is 65% of the total number. As we see, in relative terms the number of negative publications decreased (from 79 to 65%), respectively, while the number of neutral and positive reports increased – 6 and 11 respectively.

A typical negative publication of this period is, for instance, *Senators Conclude the Saudi Crown Prince Ordered Journalist’s Killing*, which states that “several senators emerged from a meeting with CIA Director Gina Haspel saying they had no doubt Saudi Arabia’s crown prince was responsible for the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi” [Peterson 2018]. Another illustrative example is the material in the *Commentary* section with its headline speaking for itself: *Unsavory Allies, From Stalin to the Saudis*. In this article the Crown Prince is referred to as “one of history’s most murderous dictators” [Groom 2108].

Among the neutral publications for this period, special attention should be given to three articles that describe the ties between Saudi Arabia and Russia, in particular, *Saudi-Russia Ties Raising Concerns Among OPEC Members*. The article does not mention the murder of the journalist because its focus is different. However, in our opinion, the words “Saudi-Russia Ties Raise Concerns” make this article seem negative rather than neutral. Moreover, shortly before that, *Saudi Prince Gets High-Five From Putin at the G-20 Summit*, as aptly put in the WSJ headline. That was quite an eloquent gesture in view of the fact that *The Russians and Saudis Look Guilty By Design*, to use the headline of another report on the topic. According to the author, what Russian and Saudi authorities have in common is their merciless and brutal attitude towards dissidents [Schmitt 2018].

As a result, the kingdom has suffered enormous reputational (moral and political) as well as economic losses, which by far exceed the potential benefits of the brutal treatment of opponents of the Saudi regime. This brings up the question: Could it be true that the Saudi authorities were unable to see it coming?

4. Frames of information control

There is no doubt that the KSA has enough experienced experts, advisers, and government officials who could have predicted such an outcome. What was the matter then?

We have to assume that it is not only about the psychological characteristics of a specific top official, who might have ordered the killing of the journalist. Apart from psychological assumptions, we will have to take into account certain intellectual frames. The most obvious of these frames is the concept of information control.

It would be a mistake to attribute the emergence of this concept to Middle Eastern despotic regimes. In fact, it is rooted in Western intellectual tenets, dating back to ancient times. One of the most eloquent pieces in this regard is the dialogue from Plato's *The Republic* (Greek: *Politeia*). And perhaps it is a mere coincidence that we can find numerous intellectual ties between Arab political and philosophical theories and Platonism in general and the above-mentioned work in particular.

It might be useful to have a look, for example, at the article from a well-known Islamic website under the telltale headline *Why Platonic Philosophy Can Help us Understand Islam* [Obadah 2017]. There are a number of Islamic thinkers who are classified as Platonists or Neo-Platonists: Jabir Ibn Hayyan, Al-Kindi, Abu Zayd al-Balkhi, Abu Bakr al-Razi, etc. [Islamic... 2018]. In this respect, a very revealing work is *How Al-Farabi Drew on Plato to Argue for Censorship in Islam published in the journal Aeon* [Lall 2018]. At the same time, it should be noted that this great scholar and philosopher of the 10th century had a tremendous influence on Arab and Persian thinkers of the following centuries, including Ibn Sina (Avicenna).

Censorship is known to have different levels of prohibition. The most brutal one implies elimination of the biological information carrier, i.e. the human being. Think of Socrates, for instance. We are not trying to compare the Arab journalist with the ancient Greek philosopher, though. This is but a brief retrospective journey into history. Socrates was executed on charges that went down in history as a classic example of censorship: cultivation and dissemination of knowledge

that sow skepticism in society, especially among young people. With some modifications, these allegations have lasted for two and a half thousand years and are still applicable today.

In the case of Socrates, who never wrote anything on principle, we actually deal with the biological carrier of certain knowledge that he expressed in oral conversations. We should ask ourselves if the execution of Socrates in 399 BC might have given impetus to recording the information that was still retained in the memory of his contemporaries and interlocutors? First of all, this refers to his disciple Plato. Apparently, this is exactly what happened.

On the other hand, the execution of Socrates, from our point of view, highlighted and undoubtedly magnified the significance of this thinker, turning him into an icon of philosophy and the world history of ideas. Perhaps, intuitively understanding this, Socrates rejected the proposal of his students and followers to evade the execution somehow and escape.

Analyzing this practice, one inevitably wonders: might ban serve as a kind of advertising of the forbidden? Experience has shown that texts that are undesirable for the ruling elite anyway sooner or later become accessible to the general public, but the “forbidden” status, even if it was a long time ago, makes both the text and its biological carrier especially attractive.

It may seem curious that Plato, one of the closest pupils of Socrates, held the opposite views on censorship. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the aforementioned Islamic thinkers hailed Plato’s ideas with so much enthusiasm. Despite the fact that this ancient Greek philosopher is consistently associated with Athenian democracy, it might be useful to remind of the main ideas of his *The Republic*. He describes Homer as “the greatest of poets and first of tragedy writers”, but he also adds that “we must remain firm in our conviction that hymns to the gods and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our State”. He takes a similar approach to the regulation of music, giving preference to the rhythms that “are the expressions of a courageous and harmonious life [...] is he who cannot conform to this rule of ours to be prevented from practising his art in our State” [Plato].

5. Conclusion

Coming back to the grim fate of the Saudi journalist, we can reiterate that his tragic problem was that he had to live and act simultaneously in two fundamentally incompatible societies. But there is more to it than just the Arab or Muslim specificity of Saudi Arabia. As we have seen, the democratic and liberal Europe

is also rooted in the traditions of authoritarianism. With regard to the above quoted Plato's work, his description of an ideal state actually contains features of totalitarianism.

On the other hand, the worldwide statistics of the killing of journalists do not support the assumption that more journalists are murdered in authoritarian countries than in the democratic ones. According to the annual report of the human rights organization Reporters Without Borders, "a total of 80 journalists were killed in 11 months of 2018, which is more than in the entire 2017. 348 are currently in prison, and 60 are being held hostage, which shows an unprecedented level of hostility towards media personnel" [Reporters]. Hundreds of journalists who wrote about corruption scandals in the upper echelons of power or even criticized any actions of the authorities have died since the collapse of the USSR in Russia. Vladislav Listiev, Yuriy Shchekochikhin, Anna Politkovskaya – to name just the most well-known.

It may seem rather odd that the most brutal form of communication control, i.e. elimination of the biological carrier of information, has persisted throughout the entire human history, despite its apparent inefficiency and tendency to trigger results that are reverse of what was expected.

To sum up, it seems reasonable to conclude that there exists a fundamental inconsistency between, on the one hand, attempts to achieve a higher level of security by controlling information flows (i.e. censorship in the broad sense of the term), and, on the other hand, reputational and security losses often stemming from such control, especially if it involves infringement of the basic human rights to freedom of opinion, freedom of speech, and even the right to life. The irony of such situations is that sometimes the more you control communication for the sake of your own security, the more dangerous this control might turn out to be for yourself.

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Kontrola komunikowania politycznego a bezpieczeństwo państwa: przypadek Dżamala Chaszukdżiego

Streszczenie. W artykule podjęto problem analizy relacji pomiędzy, z jednej strony, prawem państwa do kontroli przepływu informacji w celu zapewnienia bezpieczeństwa a międzynarodowo

uznawanymi prawami człowieka, w tym prawa człowieka do publicznego wyrażania poglądów, z drugiej. Przypadkiem, który poddano analizie, jest zamordowanie saudyjskiego dziennikarza Dżamala Chaszukdzi. W artykule wykorzystano metody jakościowej i ilościowej analizy zawartości mediów pod kątem wpływu relacji medialnych dotyczących morderstwa na reputację polityczną Królestwa Arabii Saudyjskiej w wymiarze politycznym i ekonomicznym.

Słowa kluczowe: kontrola mediów, komunikowanie polityczne, bezpieczeństwo państwa