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Column: Let's talk about Saudi Arabia

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It's been an interesting few months for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Back in August, the Twitter account @Infographic_KSA tweeted an image that seemed to be threatening Canada with a 9/11-style attack. The graphic featured an Air Canada jet flying towards the CN Tower in the Toronto Skyline.

"Sticking one's nose where it doesn't belong!" read the image and "As the Arabic saying goes: 'He who interferes with what doesn't concern him finds what doesn't please him.'"

That tweet likely stemmed from an earlier incident in which Global Affairs Canada tweeted about its concern over arrests in the Kingdom that targeted women's rights activists and urged for their release. In response, the Canadian ambassador was expelled from Saudi Arabia, and all new trade and investment with the Canadian government was frozen. Though that hasn't stopped the Canadian government from selling arms to KSA, though the amount has decreased this year.

The image was later deleted and the account apologized. The account described it self as "a voluntary nonprofit project. It is managed by a group of Saudi youth who are interested in technology and social media." But many view the account as a propaganda arm of the Kingdom.

It was a wild moment, particularly given Saudi Arabia's affiliations with the Sept. 11 attacks — 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals. The mastermind of the attacks, Osama bin Laden, was born in Saudi Arabia and has family there to this day. And of course, there are the allegations of SA funding groups like al-Qaeda, the Taliban and Islamic State.

Saudi Arabia has once again monopolized the discourse in recent weeks with the disappearance of Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist who was critical of the Saudi government and who was a legal resident of the U.S. He has not been seen since he entered the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on Oct. 2. Khashoggi was at the embassy to get official documents prior to his wedding. Turkish officials said that they have proof Khashoggi was tortured, murdered and dismembered.

The Saudis' story, meanwhile, has changed multiple times. At first, they denied the allegations, saying that Khashoggi had left the consulate. Then the story became that Khashoggi had died during a botched interrogation, which was approved by the crown prince. That was due to the mistake of a

intelligence official, according to the KSA, and he tried to cover it up. MBS denied having any knowledge of what happened to Khashoggi.

Finally on Oct. 20, they admitted that he was killed in the consulate, claiming that a fight had broken out and he had been killed. There was no mention of where the body was. On Oct. 21, a Saudi official told Reuters that Khashoggi had been killed by one of the members of a 15-person Saudi team using a chokehold. A member of the team put on Khashoggi's clothes and left the embassy to make it seem like he had left. The Kingdom continues to insist that the Turkish account is inaccurate.

Some hope that the incident will finally lead the U.S. and other governments to cut ties with Saudi Arabia. That seems unlikely, and President Trump has intimated that it wouldn't impact the sale of arms to the Kingdom. The practice of selling arms to Saudi Arabia is not new and it's bipartisan. President Barack Obama, President George W. Bush and President Bill Clinton all sold military equipment to the Saudis.

As far as the media landscape goes, the apparent murder of Khashoggi might make them change their tune about Saudi Arabia. Pundits seem more apt to care about one of their own getting killed than the thousands of civilians that have been killed in the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen. That conflict, per an Oct. 16 Guardian story, is a driving factor in the Yemeni famine.

"The famine is being driven by economic factors caused by conflict, rather than a lack of food, experts say. The depreciation of the Yemeni currency has caused food prices to increase, while the soaring cost of fuel has made transport more expensive.

"In addition, importers of basics such as cooking oil, rice, sugar and butter have been prevented from entering the country due to restrictions imposed by Yemen's central bank based in Aden, territory controlled by its exiled government."

These incidents and actions all run counter to the image currently being projected of Mohammad bin Salman, the Saudi Crown Prince, as a reformer. Thomas Friedman gushed about bin Salman last fall in his New York Times column. That was later contradicted months later by reporting done by his colleagues at The Grey Lady. The article by the four reporters — Ben Hubbard, David D. Kirkpatrick, Kate Kelly and Mark Mazzetti — revealed what the businessmen who had been locked up by the Saudi government last November as part of the supposed anti-corruption campaign underwent.

"During months of captivity, many were subject to coercion and physical abuse, witnesses said. In the early days of the crackdown, at least 17 detainees were hospitalized for physical abuse and one later died in custody with a neck that appeared twisted, a badly swollen body and other signs of abuse, according to a person who saw the body."

During the summer of 2018, reports came out of the arrest of women activists who had agitated for overturning the ban on driving.

Friedman wrote another column on the Crown Prince in which he wrung his hands and hemmed his hands. He naively believes that investors will balk at being involved with Saudi Arabia. I beg to differ and believe that the opportunity to make money will overcome any moral qualms a company might have.

Given all this, there's really no good reason for the governments of the world to be involved with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Many governments talk a big game about not legitimizing repressive regimes, but that's undercut by the continued involvement and partnership with the Kingdom.

The beauty of this era of history is that many governments and world leaders are removing the masks, allowing their hypocrisies to be laid bare. There will be stern lectures, empty rhetoric and emptier gestures, but in time, this will all be forgotten and things will go back to normal. Business as usual. After all, there's money to be made.

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