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My Journey into a Saudi Embassy: How a Bizarre Experience Shaped my View of Saudi Arabia

BY [JOE CASCINO](#) on [OCTOBER 25, 2018](#) •  (0)

Last week, Saudi Arabia infuriated the world after veteran dissident journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, entered the Saudi consulate in Turkey to get a document proving he was divorced in order to marry his Turkish fiancée, and [never came out](#). After a particularly bad [falling out](#) with Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (or M.B.S.) in 2017, the ambitious young leader who many believe to be the *de facto* ruler of the country, Khashoggi, a Saudi national, entered self-imposed exile to the United States where he has since written columns for [The Washington Post](#).

After several days of silence from the Saudi government, M.B.S. has vociferously [denied any responsibility](#) for Mr. Khashoggi’s disappearance. Though senators such as [Chris Murphy](#) (D-CT) and [Bob Corker](#) (R-TN) have advocated a hardline approach, President Trump has [avoided directly implicating Saudi Arabia](#), even going so far as to suggest “[rogue actors](#)” were responsible, or saying “[Here we go again, with you’re guilty until proven innocent.](#)”

President Trump’s response, needless to say, is trivial at best, largely due to the fact that Saudi Arabia is a [partner](#) of the United States because it is the world’s [number one exporter of oil](#), on which the U.S. is heavily reliant. Trump feels pressured by M.B.S. not to take action against Saudi Arabia. An [op-ed](#) in the state-run newspaper warned that if Trump did anything, the Saudis would increase the price of their oil to upwards of \$200 a barrel, greatly increasing American gas prices. If gas prices take a sudden jump, the only group that would likely suffer worse than regular Americans would be the House Republicans, as they already have a disadvantage going into the midterms and would lose even more seats than projected when blame for the hike shifts to Trump.

As this intense state of affairs began to unfold, I tried to answer several questions. What defines Saudi Arabia? How does a country with one of the worst human rights records on the planet get away with murder? Why are we such staunch supporters of the Saudi regime to the point that even human rights-touting presidents like Barack Obama sell [\\$110 billion](#) in arms to Saudi Arabia ([many of which were used by the Saudis on civilians in Yemen](#))?

When pondering these questions, I found all of my answers by hearkening back to my own trek into a Saudi foreign ministry in October 2016, when I spent an hour inside their embassy in Washington with a large group from a [national security education program](#). Unlike Mr. Khashoggi, I did not leave the embassy with my [body cut into pieces](#) and can tell the tale of my journey into, to borrow from *Stranger Things*, the “Upside Down.”

Upon entering the Embassy, some sizable Saudi security guards vigilantly checked our identification. That’s all I needed to hand over, because they required us to keep our phones on the bus. I had lost my driver’s



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license a week before and was using my passport, and as I handed it over to one of them he practically ripped it out of my hand, staring down and squinting at my mid-pubescent, pre-Accutane photo then glancing at my much changed but still depressed 16-year-old face before letting me through.

Beyond security was an oversized entrance room with golden walls, ornate Islamic art, and a mustard-yellow carpet. It reeked of cigarettes, worse than any room I've ever been in and that's pretty bad considering I'm Italian. From what I remember, not many items were actually situated in the room; it was kind of a large vacuum. "What a terrible usage of the space," I thought, channeling my inner interior designer.

However, I didn't expect any less of a display of grotesque wealth from the representatives of the House of Saud. The House of Saud, the ruling family who not-so-subtly named the country after themselves, are estimated to have a combined net worth of [over a trillion dollars](#). M.B.S. himself owns a [\\$300 million French chateau](#) built by Louis XIV. The embassy's decorations reflected a powerful image of the absurd wealth of the ruling class.

While I took in the scenery with several other foreign policy aficionados, the judgy security guard herded us into a large room reminiscent of the conference room at a Holiday Inn Express, of course, short of the over-the-top but admittedly aesthetic, gilded calligraphy piece covering the entire length of the wall. In front of it was a small stage; several emissaries walked in.

A group of men and their blatantly token woman walked onstage, and among them a guy with a Brooklyn accent who looked exactly like a bald Harvey Keitel stepped up. I thought he was some kind of American representative at first, but he mentioned that he was born and raised in Saudi Arabia, providing no other explanation about his life. Though he probably just came from an American family that worked in oil, it caught me off guard.

Harvey introduced a government-produced video introducing the nation and promoting the "[Saudi Vision 2030](#)," the government's ambitious plan to modernize by the titular year. It discussed oil and how the government would continue to rely on it as its lifeblood moving forward. Oil is Saudi Arabia's key to the rest of the world; it's how they have formed an informal alliance with the West and how they can access foreign markets. It's what they used to push the United States in line the last time it made a foreign policy move against the wishes of the Saudis. By supporting Israel in the [Yom Kippur War of 1973](#), the U.S. saw the Saudis [embargo oil](#) to the United States, causing gas prices to skyrocket to unprecedented levels.

At this point, Saudi Arabia is basically America's drug dealer and America's drug is oil. The Saudis do horrible things but Americans will always overlook them because they need their oil. The Saudis can always depend on the Americans to do so because no politician wants a repeat of the embargo. The amount of time the video spent on this part of the presentation, let alone the mere mention of a natural resource in a video about national identity, proves how key oil is to Saudi Arabia's legitimacy on the world stage.

We had to bite our lips to keep from laughing out loud when the video peddled the progress Saudi Arabia has made in human rights and especially in "gender equality." Just four months ago, the nation [allowed women to drive cars](#) for the first time and still [requires them to wear an abaya with hijab](#) (the abaya being a cloak covering the body and the hijab, a headscarf). We all knew we were being sold ridiculous propaganda, but it took me time to realize that this was part of their greater media strategy. M.B.S. wants Saudi Arabia to at least become "progressive" enough for the modern world to tolerate it. While he has made some improvements, he quietly continues to [jail feminist activists](#).

After the video, the Harvey Keitel look-alike opened up the floor for questions. I had so many, some dealing with foreign policy. One of us stood up and pointed to the girl next to him, who was wearing normal clothing for an American teenage girl. Asking the obvious question after the women's rights section, he said, "You talk about how great Saudi Arabia is at promoting women's rights. Could she wear this and walk around on the street in Riyadh?" Harvey and the other men were silent then, simultaneously, turned back to look at Token Woman, who said, "Yes. She could wear whatever she wants. All women in Saudi Arabia can wear whatever they want. I wear blue jeans and shorts all the time. We just have to wear the abaya and hijab over it!"

No words can better sum up the women's rights situation in Saudi Arabia better than that answer.

I got a chance to ask about Saudi ties to 9/11 and took it; for context, Congress had [overridden President Obama's veto](#) on a bill allowing 9/11 victims to sue Saudi Arabia the week before. Harvey gave me a non-answer about how Saudi Arabia was just as committed to fighting terrorism as the United States was. Then, another kid asked about what the Saudis were actually doing to help in the fight against ISIS. Harvey gave him virtually the same answer.

Harvey showcases the Saudi silence on the issue of terrorism. They claim to be our partners in the War on Terror but espouse an ideology similar to those they are supposedly fighting. [Wahhabism](#), the doctrine the Saudis follow, is a hyper-conservative view of Sunni Islam that emphasizes a strict following of Sharia law. In 2013, the European Union Parliament identified Wahhabist ideology as [the source of Islamic terrorism](#). With government leaders supporting the same ideology followed by al-Qaeda and ISIS, ties to these groups inherently follow.

Moreover, [recently declassified documents connect the Saudi royals to the 9/11 hijackers](#) and suspicious activity shows that the Saudi Embassy I visited likely paid for two Saudis to fly from Phoenix to Washington in a 9/11 "[dry run](#)." Though much is unknown about the true extent of their role in 9/11 and other terror attacks across the globe, the Saudis are complicit but put on a show for the public.

They closed with a final video about the American partnership. It discussed American relations with Saudi Arabia, going back to the 1940s with clips of people I consider my heroes, like Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson meeting with odious characters like Abdul Aziz, Saud, and Faisal. It was deeply troubling to see representatives of a dictatorship flaunt images of these great promoters of liberty selling out core human values to a nation so unlike itself for the sake of natural resources.

My sanity barely survived the trip into the embassy.

I saw enough of Saudi Arabia in my quick visit. It's a police state, where security makes you keep your phone on the bus and rips your passport out of your hand. It puts on grand facades with its gilded, spacey rooms and enormous mantle pieces. It flouts its oil in promotional videos because they use it to hide, or rather, drown their skeletons. The government presents an image of a modernizing nation though even when attempting to package it as such, they fail miserably. They lie to your face in the same building where parts of the most catastrophic attack in your nation's history were financed. And the whole time, you know that no amount of Jamal Khashoggi will change Saudi Arabia. The Saudi apologist movement will continue in this White House and the next three after it.

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