

Profs at Saudi-Sponsored Academic Center Advocate Iranian Hegemony, Downgrade Saudi-US Ties

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Speakers at a September 12 panel at a conference on democracy in the Muslim world reflected Middle East Studies' prevailing pro-Iran, anti-Saudi bias. That it occurred at the most infamous Saudi-sponsored academic center in America represents an ironic break with past practices that generally ignored Saudi human rights violations.

All participants in the panel "Jamal Khashoggi, Human Rights, and the US-Saudi Alliance" were critical of America's alliance with Saudi Arabia. The panel's chair, University of Denver Professor Nader Hashemi, set the tone with his introductory statement that "this panel is especially devoted to the memory, the legacy of Jamal Khashoggi." During his presentation, Hashemi, a Board member of the conference sponsor, the Center for the Study of Islam & Democracy (CSID), lionized Khashoggi, the dissident Saudi writer murdered last year.

The panel was part of a conference titled Democracy and Good Governance in Muslim-Majority Countries: Lessons from the Last 20 Years, hosted by Georgetown University's Saudi-sponsored Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (ACMCU) the Copley Formal Lounge. The University of Denver's Center for Middle East Studies and the Center for Global Policy were cosponsors.

Conference participants and audience members included past and present ACMCU faculty Jonathan Brown, John Esposito, and Tamara Sonn, as well as Georgetown's Muslim chaplain Yahya Hendi. Also attending were George Washington University Professor William Lawrence, International Institute for Islamic Thought (IIIT) associate Ermin Sinanovic, CATO Institute sharia apologist Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, and his former CATO colleague, foreign relations analyst Stanley Kober.

Hashemi opened the panel by calling for a moment of silence to remember Khashoggi, a "friend of many people in this room," whom Western media have frequently portrayed as a martyr for Saudi political reform. Saudi agents brutally murdered Khashoggi when he entered Turkey's Saudi consulate reportedly to receive divorce papers for his first wife. Hashemi recalled that Khashoggi had received CSID's "Muslim Democrat of the Year" award at last year's conference. Hashemi's University of Denver Center for Middle East Studies has reverently transcribed Khashoggi's speech.

He advocated a tougher line against Saudi Arabia than against Iran. He expressed regret that Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MBS), the presumed author of Khashoggi's

assassination, “has gotten away and will get away with murder.” In contrast to Hashemi’s demand for sanctioning Saudi Arabia, he advocated for better relations with Iran using the myth of the “reformist” Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javed Zarif: “If you get him in the privacy of a room he will probably say things that are very progressive and liberal,” Hashemi speculated about this “very articulate spokesperson.”

Such sentiments are nothing new for the Iranian-American Hashemi. Even though Saudi Arabia remains a critical American ally in confronting threats from Iran, which in turn remains a state sponsor of terrorism, he favors the latter. At past CSID events, Hashemi has hosted Trita Parsi, the founder and former president of the National Iranian American Council (NIAC), a lobby for the Islamic Republic of Iran according to credible accusations. Analogously, Hashemi signed in 2018 and 2019 NIAC open letters promoting Iranian sanctions relief and has blamed American policy for Iranian belligerence in the Strait of Hormuz.

Panelist William D. Hartung, an Iran nuclear deal supporter and arms trade analyst at the Center for International Policy, similarly appealed for a “more balanced approach” between the Islamic Republic and Saudi Arabia. “Iran doesn’t have to be our best friend, but nor should it be we demonize Iran and give Saudi Arabia a free pass” as if it were a “privileged ally.” Although American sanctions have demonstrably restrained Iranian military spending, he argued against American policies of using Saudi Arabia “as part of a campaign of regime change or maximum pressure or demonization, kind of targeting of Iran.”

Hartung and his fellow panelist, Human Rights Watch (HRW) Middle East and North Africa Division Director Sarah Leah Whitson, advocated ending American arms sales to the Saudis. The panelists offered as justification their indiscriminate bombing in Yemen, where an Iranian proxy war has threatened Saudi Arabia. Sober observers have argued that engagement with Saudi Arabia’s deeply problematic theocracy is wiser than sanctions, particularly since the Saudi government fights jihadists, while Iran sponsors them.

While Iran is in fact a far greater threat to security and human rights in the Middle East than Saudi Arabia, Whitson noted that international outcry over Khashoggi’s murder has had an effect. “By some definitions, probably the Saudi definition,” MBS “and Saudi Arabia have paid a steeper price, for torturing and murdering Jamal Khashoggi than any other leader has paid for murdering and torturing a political dissident.” She added, “or for that matter hundreds of thousands of people such as Bashar al-Assad,” Iran’s Syrian dictator proxy.

Whitson even argued that recent extraordinary Saudi women’s rights reforms are “really just part of paying the bill for murdering Jamal.” Due to public relations concern, she argued, the Saudis had a “desperate need to do something that changes narrative.” Despite Whitson’s dismissal of Saudi reforms, MBS has recently implemented others, including recognizing a Jewish right to a homeland in Israel.

Changing Saudi relationships with Israel, another Iranian target, raised doubts about the panelists’ human rights bona fides, as suggested by Saudi media documentation of HRW’s pro-Iranian, anti-Saudi bias. Whitson boasted of none other than HRW’s rabid anti-Israel positions in order to fundraise at a 2009 gala dinner in the Saudi Arabia she now condemns. Likewise

panelist Abdullah Alaoudh, an ACMCU senior fellow, has touted his father, Salman Al-Odah, currently sentenced to death in Saudi Arabia, as a liberal reformer, but his Islamist biography proves otherwise.

The Iranian attack on vital Saudi Arabian oil installations two days after the panel revealed some of its claims as risible, but ivory tower misinformation is no laughing matter. Proposals and theories discussed in Middle East studies are no parlor game, but have real-world consequences when policymakers and politicians act on their skewed, politicized views. In this case, deemphasizing the Iranian threat to the Middle East at the cost of devaluing an important, if flawed, American ally could plunge the region into war.