



Think tanks reconsider Saudi support amid Khashoggi controversy

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October 15, 2018

As prominent investors, media organizations, and even lobbyists have begun to pull back from involvement in projects associated with the Saudi government, some of Washington's most prominent think tanks appear to also be rethinking their relationship with Riyadh.

On Friday, the Brookings Institution — the center-left think tank that is perhaps the capital's most prominent — announced that it would sever its ties with Riyadh. “The Brookings Institution has decided to terminate our sole research grant with the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, effective immediately,” the statement said.

Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist who wrote most recently for the Washington Post, disappeared a week ago after entering the country's consulate in Istanbul. Khashoggi, a regime insider who had become a critic of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his reform efforts, was apparently tortured, murdered and dismembered by Saudi henchmen, according to reports leaked by Turkish officials.

The alleged murder — which the Saudi government has denied — has led not only to the usual denunciations but also to a widespread rejection of Saudi largesse, which the kingdom has used to influence opinion and policy abroad. The push to disassociate from Saudi Arabia for its apparent murder of Khashoggi has proven especially complex for Washington's most prominent public policy institutions. Though think tanks pride themselves on intellectual independence, they rely on philanthropic funding, and some have come under scrutiny for accepting money from foreign governments.

In the case of Brookings, the kingdom's grant, now terminated, was intended to foster analysis of Saudi think tanks. But the disappearance of Khashoggi, who was well known in Washington's media and policy circles, made such work unpalatable. Brookings senior fellow Shadi Hamid has been particularly outspoken in recent days about Saudi Arabia's culpability in Khashoggi's disappearance. In its statement, Brookings said it has “no plans to accept any potential funding from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia or any of its known affiliates.”

The Middle East Institute, a 72-year-old think tank in Washington, also appears to be considering a similar measure. “The recent tragic developments relating to Mr. Jamal Khashoggi, a friend and colleague of MEI, have raised very critical issues,” the think tank said in a statement provided to Yahoo News. “The MEI Board of Governors is meeting next week to review the situation and make the appropriate board-policy decisions.”

According to its financial disclosures, MEI receives hundreds of thousands of dollars from Aramco, the Saudi state-owned energy company. Its 2017 disclosures also show a contribution exceeding \$1 million from the government of the United Arab Emirates, which has been accused of human rights abuses.

The Wilson Center, where Khashoggi has been offered and accepted a position as a fellow, said that in July, it had requested funds from the Saudi government for work on an index of female leaders. “The Saudi Arabian government never confirmed that funds would be forthcoming,” said Wilson spokesman Ryan McKenna in a statement. He added that if it turns out that Khashoggi was indeed murdered by the Saudis, “we will withdraw our pending funding request.”

Not all think tanks are rushing to distance themselves from Saudi Arabia. In a statement, the Center for Strategic and International Studies’ spokesman, Andrew Schwartz, told Yahoo News that the think tank “has received funding from the Saudi Arabian government to conduct diplomatic training exercises.” “We are following the Jamal Khashoggi story closely and haven’t made any decisions,” he said.

Several think tanks were able to say that they do not accept any Saudi government funding. These included several prominent conservative and libertarian institutions, including the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute and the Cato Institute. The Council on Foreign Relations also said it did not accept funds tied to the Saudi government.

“Saudi influence on the think tank world is deep,” said one expert associated with Think Tank Watch, a website that monitors policy institutes. “Think tanks don’t always report all of their funding sources, and thus, it is nearly impossible to get an accurate picture of how many think tanks they fund. Moreover, lobbyists and PR firms who represent foreign governments sometimes donate to think tanks, so there is also that gray area of funding,” added the expert, who did not wish to be identified so they could speak freely to the press.

The expert added, “In return, the foreign governments often expect/request studies that are beneficial to them, the hosting of events that help promote a certain view, introductions to U.S. governments officials/lawmakers.”

For example, a 2015 list of advisers to the Council on Foreign Relations includes Lubna Olayan, chief executive of a major Saudi corporation. Also on that list was Vladimir Potanin, a Russian oligarch closely linked to Vladimir Putin. (Potanin remains an adviser; Olayan appears to no longer be one.)

While influence-peddling may be regarded as standard practice in Washington, including at think tanks, Khashoggi’s murder has brought that practice into stark relief.

“There are several Washington think tanks that should be ashamed,” wrote Karen Attiah, Khashoggi’s editor at the Washington Post, on Twitter. “Some of them definitely knew or hosted @Khashoggi at events. Quiet now so as to protect their Saudi funding.”

But James McGann, director of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania, cautions against such widespread condemnation. There are 1,800 think tanks in the United States, he points out. “These institutions have thousands of donors, foreign and domestic,” he said.

Few such grant-makers have stood accused of murdering and dismembering, but many are tied to governments and corporations with records some may consider contrary to the mission of the institution being funded. For example, ExxonMobil, the oil giant, has funded both liberal and conservative think tanks.

“Are we applying the same rules to every case?” McGann wonders. “One needs to be very careful when you dip into these waters.”