

Appeal to G20

by Jamal Khashoggi's fiancée and RSF's secretary-general

Ever since the UN General Assembly so resolved in 2013, the fight against impunity for crimes of violence against journalists is celebrated on 2 November. Considerable mobilization is needed at the international level because more than 90% of these crimes go unpunished, in both countries at war and at peace. Should it be necessary to demonstrate the overriding need for this fight, there are murders that – because of the circumstances, protagonists or victims – have a special impact.

Jamal Khashoggi's murder inside Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul belongs to a category one might have thought long forgotten, the category of "state crime." Perpetrated by Saudi government thugs and planned at a political level that the trial in Riyadh is taking care not to reveal, it will leave an indelible stain on the regime unless all the consequences have demonstrably been accepted and acted upon. It is not enough for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to belatedly acknowledge "responsibility" because it happened "under my watch."

A state crime requires a full public apology, says Agnès Callamard, the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial executions. We are waiting for this apology. Just as Khashoggi's loved ones are waiting for his remains, and for justice to be done. The trial taking place behind closed doors does not respect international standards on justice. Rather than regarding a possible death sentence for five of the alleged perpetrators as a harsh punishment, we would regret that Saudi justice had thereby silenced forever men who know some of this affair's secrets.

Since this tragedy, Saudi Arabia has continued to persecute its journalists with exceptional violence. At least 32 professional and non-professional journalists are arbitrarily detained in Saudi prisons. This is twice as many as before MBS took over. Rarely has fear been so palpable, not just in the Arabian Peninsula but everywhere Saudis are to be found in the world. It's against this backdrop that Riyadh is getting ready to hold a conference on the media in early December. Foreign journalists and media experts have been invited to a "Saudi Media Forum" to discuss media freedom and independence. We fear it will be pure fiction even if we'd like to believe otherwise.

Aside from the expressions of international outrage last October, the sanctions adopted by Washington, Ottawa, Paris and Berlin against a handful of individuals suspected of involvement in Jamal Khashoggi's murder have not sufficed to persuade the regime to moderate its repressive policies. Germany was alone in suspending arms sales to Saudi Arabia. US Vice-President Mike Pence suggested that the release of Raif Badawi, a blogger sentenced to ten years in prison and a thousand lashes, would help to restore Saudi Arabia's international reputation. But just a months before that, US President Donald Trump insisted that Mohammed bin Salman stand beside him in the front row for the group photo of the G20's leaders during their meeting in Osaka, Japan.

The sons of Malta's Daphne Caruana Galizia, Gauri Lankesh's sister in India and the families of Javier Valdez and Miroslava Breach in Mexico have already been fighting for two years to learn the truth about their deaths. Three years ago, the colleagues of Jean Bigirimana in Burundi and Pavel Sheremet in Ukraine tried to make up for the failings of the police by carrying out their own investigations in attempt to identify those responsible for Bigirimana's disappearance and the car bomb that killed Sheremet. The list of victims get longer by the day. In Mexico, at least 150 journalists have fallen victim to the organized crime and the vicious cycle of violence and impunity since 2000.

The G20's leaders have a duty to act if they want to comply with the principle of responsibility. Without free, independent, trustworthy and diverse journalism, humankind will not be able to properly address any of the great challenges it is facing. Heads of state and government cannot content themselves with being the passive spectators of the murders of journalists. And yet, Saudi Arabia is poised to take over the G20's presidency for a year.

Treating Saudi Arabia's G20 presidency as a presidency like any other would be to give the Saudis a "licence to kill," to give them permission to suppress the truth and extinguish media pluralism. We call on the G20 not to trample on Jamal Khashoggi's memory. We ask its leaders to obtain clear undertakings from Saudi Arabia to respect press freedom and, as a first step, to release the 32 imprisoned journalists because, as Khashoggi said in his last column, "*What the Arab world needs most is freedom of expression.*" This is also true for the rest of the world.

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