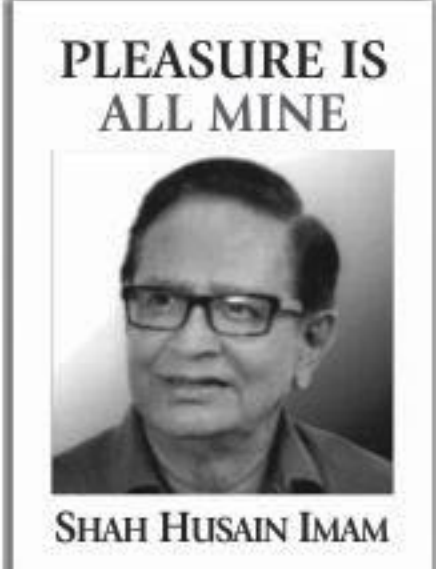


Of dissent and critique



PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

GETTING rid of a high-profile dissenter of any powerful government is almost invariably "surrounded by mysterious circumstances." The reported murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a prominent critic of the Riyadh government, last week inside his own country's consulate in Istanbul is no exception. His inexplicable disappearance from the Turkish consulate is perhaps a reflection of a deeper syndrome.

But he must have had a premonition given that he left his cell phone with his fiancée with an advice to call up a certain Turkish official in case he did not return.

The disagreement between the Turkish and Saudi authorities over Khashoggi's status and their differing versions of the episode are revealing rather than being shrouded in mystery. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Salman said, "Khashoggi had left the consulate shortly after he arrived on Tuesday." In stark contrast, the Turkish authorities maintained that "Khashoggi never left the consulate."

The matter is confounded "by the thicket of security cameras around the consulate, monitoring the entrances and perched on the walls of villas nearby." Yet, neither of the two governments released any video in corroboration of their stated positions. In this case though, the onus is on Turkey to come out clean.

On the contrary, to allude to a BBC report, it appears that a 15-man Saudi team had visited the consulate and left it with CCTV footage. A Saudi team was allegedly "sent specifically for the murder", two people with knowledge of the probe said. But they gave no proof to back up their claim. Turkey's Anadolu news agency stated that Istanbul's Public Prosecutor's office had opened a probe

into Khashoggi's disappearance.

Political dissidents from Saudi Arabia who have settled in Turkey over the past years will have to be on guard after the vanishing of Khashoggi without trace from the Saudi consulate considered to be a part of his homeland.

The wily and disingenuous treatment of the dissident Saudi journalist on Turkish soil may aggravate the rift between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, both regional powers that have competed for influence in the region.

Importantly, it may complicate Saudi-US relations. Khashoggi used to write for *Washington Post*, and with panache. The paper ran a blank column last Friday under Khashoggi's name as a mark of reverence.

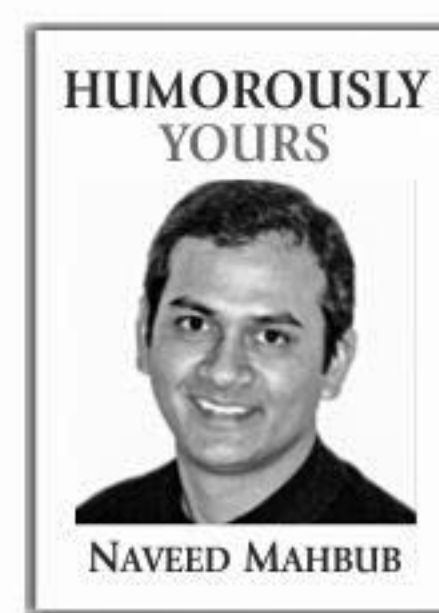
"If reports of Jamal's murder are true, it is a monstrous and unfathomable act," Fred Hiatt, the director of the *Post's* editorial page

The critics in Congress were dissuaded by the administration from stopping US military sales and assistance to the KSA. For the Saudi monarchy is the world's largest purchaser of American defence hardware as well as key partner in "White House's plans to bring Iran to heel and forge an Israeli-Arab alliance."

At the same time, Trump bragged about telling King Salman, "Your monarchy wouldn't survive for even two weeks if it weren't for the presence of American soldiers." Therefore, you ought to pay for their services, he added. He reveals in "lots of beautiful military equipment" he keeps the Saudis supplied with, surely not for free!

Le Figaro, the French paper, issued a critique a shade softer than a dissent but just as powerful an opinion on a populist government. Gerard Collomb, Interior Minister in Macron's cabinet, had in recent weeks been

The Four Commandments



HUMOROUSLY YOURS

THE sophomore (second-year) engineering student sitting in front of my desk is sharp and confident. But being a typical *Bangalee*, I can't get rid of a parallel train of thought: what's up with his rather unusual circumstances of applying for the position of a summer intern? Ok, that's not the unusual part; what strikes ME as unusual is that he is perhaps old enough to be my dad.

But of course, I don't ask any questions to help me from losing sleep over others who are actually sound asleep. After all, Holly Koss, the HR Head at Takata Corporation, Farmington Hills, Michigan told me specifically of four absolute *haram* questions/topics during any interview with regards to the candidate: his/her age, marital status, religion and sexual orientation. Not only out of respect, but also as an insurance policy in a litigious society.

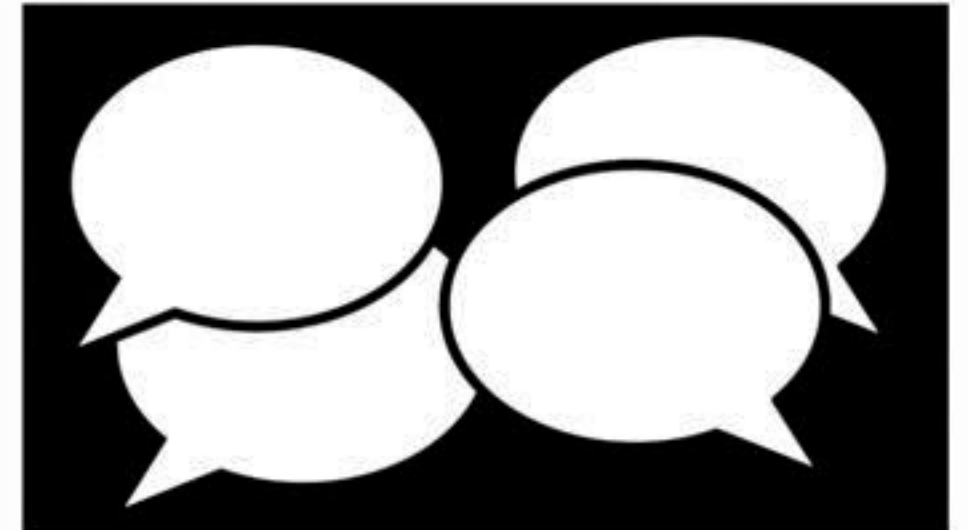
This is a trump card I play well too. As a straight, brown-skinned, unmarried Muslim (this is pre-9/11 America) in his 20s, I can literally get away with murder. During one of my momentary lapses, I kick MY manager, Mike O'Boyle (himself a thin fused *Mike, oh, boil over*), out of MY office (yes, I have my own office instead of a plebeian cubicle, perhaps so that the minority me doesn't feel discriminated against) through a barrage of colourful exchanges. Mike is surprisingly, but obviously, restrained, based on Holly Koss's Four Commandments, while I am obviously ARMED with those same Four Commandments. If it was a purebred Californian Nathan Morris instead of the purebred Comillaian Naveed Mahbub, the former NM would have discovered his badge not working at the entrance of the office within a span of 30 minutes.

But this is America, the land of the free, where those like us originating from places where freedom is really 'freedom, i.e. an 'f' word, take full advantage of a host country turning that f-lettered word into 200 percent of what it really is meant to be.

Coming back to the intern. He is hired. He is working in the lab with a bunch of other sophomores and juniors (third-year students), all as summer interns. And by interns, I don't mean running menial errands or making photocopies (remember those machines?), not unlike many interns with full-fledged degrees in our country, but doing actual, serious, mission critical work.

But my *desi* curiosity, despite the risk of the cat getting killed, makes me take him out to lunch to hear out his story. All it takes is a seven-dollar all-you-can-eat Chinese restaurant to waterboard the truth out of him. He is a former Warrant Officer of the US Army. His helicopter was shot down over Iraq during Gulf War I (1991). Severe back injury. Ten months of hospitalisation. Then honorary discharge with full payout from the GI Bill. The lump-sum amount helps him to finally attend college. He had joined the army after high school for lack of money to go to college. Now, in his early 40s—a married father of two—he is fulfilling his dream of becoming an engineer. And I can bet my Ascot that he already is a damned fine one.

Of course, nobody at Takata, let alone his cohort teenagers who he not only works with but also hangs out with after work, finds it odd that their granddaddy is going to college with them. It is "odd" only to me, bred of a society with zero tolerance towards odd, while being obnoxiously odd at all moments about not being odd. After all, it is not only not odd, but oddly enough, completely acceptable, that I get this message from a recruiter, to be shared in public so that he (the recruiter) can make a fast buck through some horse-trading.



And I quote verbatim, with all its errors in grammar, syntax, punctuations, spacing...not to mention the inherent flaw in the thought process and attitude of our workplace that, oddly enough, are not considered odd: "One CLIENT company needs the following: 1. Office Support Officer (Female with MBA & unmarried) good communication skills. Salary Tk 18,000/mo--23,000/mo, three bonuses yearly."

After catching my breath, I contemplate sending this to Holly Koss. Nah, she is 25 years older than when she first narrated her golden Four Commandments to me. I don't want her to get a brain stroke...

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Pictures of missing journalist Jamal Khashoggi are seen on police fence during a demonstration in front of the Saudi Arabian consulate on October 8, 2018 in Istanbul. PHOTO: AFP

said in a statement. "Jamal was—or we hope, is—a committed, conscientious journalist. He writes out of a sense of love for his country and deep faith in human dignity and freedom."

Khashoggi may have been considered "especially dangerous by the Saudi leadership," analysts said, adding "his criticism of the Royal family and its vast powers was delivered from his self-imposed exile in the United States," and could not be disregarded as the complaint of a long-term dissident.

The Saudi-US relations are deeply entrenched, multi-layered and mutually serving. Saudi action in Yemen apparently received Pompei's certification: "The Saudis were undertaking demonstrable actions to redress civilian casualties in Yemen caused by air strikes with US-provided weapons."

critical of Macron and had spoken of "a lack of humility" in his administration.

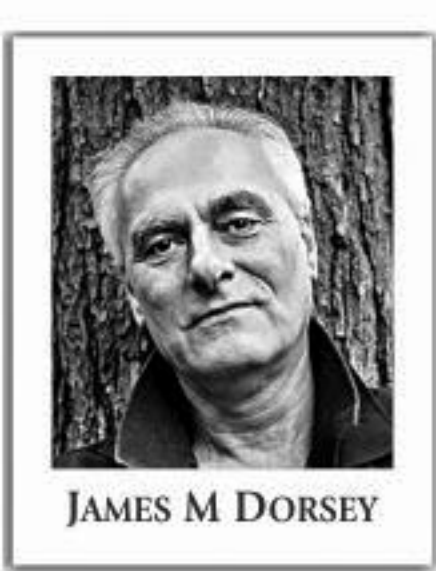
He also has taken issue with Macron's policies which he thinks favour the rich, and the French leader's personal manner is often described as "aloof and arrogant."

There is bit of a perceived conflict of interest prompting his resignation; he didn't want his interior ministry to be destabilised by his decision to run again for the Mayor of Lyon.

The two stories, one of an unexplained disappearance of a "dissenter", and another of a civilised critique have made news headlines overseas, thought-provoking as they have been.

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Khashoggi's disappearance challenges fragile Middle Eastern pragmatism



SAUDI Arabia and Turkey, despite being on opposite sides of Middle Eastern divides, are cooperating in Syria to enable youth and women to acquire skills that would either allow them to compete in the job market or turn them into entrepreneurs.

The Saudi-funded, Turkish-executed projects potentially highlight a newly found degree of pragmatism and fluidity among seemingly entrenched alliances in the Middle East that largely pitch Turkey, Iran and Qatar against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Saudi Arabia and Turkey differ on some of the Middle East's most important divides. Turkey backs Qatar in its 15-month-old dispute with a Saudi-United Arab Emirates-led alliance that is boycotting the Gulf state economically and diplomatically and is competing with Saudi Arabia, and even more so with its closest ally, the UAE, for influence in the Horn of Africa.

While Turkey and Saudi Arabia are closer in their approach towards Syria, Turkey hosts members of the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that has been banned in the kingdom and is at the centre of its conflict with Qatar. It also opposes US sanctioning of Iran that has been embraced by Saudi Arabia.

Turkey further has exploited Saudi reluctance to aggressively oppose US President Donald J Trump's pro-Israel policy to position itself as the leader of the Islamic world in supporting the Palestinians. Turkish officials have suggested that the UAE had funded a failed 2016 military coup.

The projects are but one indication of the seeming emergence of a degree of pragmatism on the part of parties on all sides of the Middle Eastern divide. Other indications include differences between Turkey, Russia and Iran over how to handle Idlib, the last rebel-held stronghold in Syria; Bahraini trial balloons suggesting a softening of the boycott of Qatar; and Turkish-German efforts to mend fences with one another.

The signs of flexibility are as fragile as the alliances themselves. They are being put to a test with the disappearance and

possible murder in Istanbul of prominent Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a critic of the kingdom's crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, who disappeared last week during a visit to the Saudi consulate.

Khashoggi, known for his close ties to the ruling family, went a year ago into self-exile in Washington, after being banned from publishing, which he feared was a prelude to arrest.

Turkish security officials assert that Khashoggi was brutally murdered while in the consulate by a 15-man Saudi hit squad that travelled to Istanbul. Saudi Arabia insists that Khashoggi left the consulate of his own volition after obtaining documents needed for his planned marriage to his Turkish fiancée.



It would not be the first time that Saudi Arabia has forcibly repatriated its critics.

A Saudi detention, nabbing, or killing of Khashoggi in Istanbul without at least tacit Turkish cooperation would embarrass Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and likely spark a further deterioration of Turkish-Saudi relations. If Turkey was complicit, it would bear testimony to increasing pragmatism.

More likely is that whatever happened to Khashoggi was without the knowledge of Turkish authorities. Irrespective of what happened, Saudi Arabia and its crown prince has suffered significant

reputational damage that could lead to a severe deterioration if not rupture in Saudi-Turkish relations, international condemnation and arms embargoes by Western countries. It could also weaken Prince Mohammed and strengthen his many opponents within Saudi Arabia's ruling family and beyond.

Meanwhile, Saudi-Turkish cooperation in Syria goes beyond relief and development aid. It helps Turkey create a sphere of influence in areas of Syria near Turkey's border that are controlled by Turkish troops and administered by Turkey.

In a bid to compliment Turkish hard power in Syria with soft power and counter Kurdish influence, Erdogan's Religious Affairs Directorate or Diyanet has trained Syrian religious personnel, according to a 104-page report published by the directorate.

The report said that the directorate had spent a total of USD 34.1 million in Syria on things like repairing mosques, distributing Kurdish-language Qur'ans, and educating 11,250 students.

Journalist Amed Dicle said that Diyanet had recruited 5,686 teachers from the ranks of rebels opposed to the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad whose curriculum emphasised Turkey's synthesis between Islam and nationalism and included anti-Kurdish teachings. "Kurds are portrayed as atheists, and the PKK, YPG and other Kurdish fighters are infidels," Dicle said,

referring to the outlawed Kurdish Workers Party and its Syrian offshoot, the People's Protection Units.

A Syrian imam told Al-Monitor that "we're getting paid by the Turkish government. We're grateful to them and we see that the local population here are happy to be under Turkish rule. For Turkey, religious and national allegiance are one and the same. But our interpretation of Islam may not always be the same. Turkey keeps Kurds under control and that's good for us. Plus, one day Syrians in Turkey may come and settle in these areas."

Saudi cooperation with Turkey and its anti-Kurdish agenda in Syria has not prevented the kingdom from establishing ties to Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region that borders on Iran with the opening of a consulate in Erbil, initiation of Saudia flights from Jeddah to Erbil, and a visit by Saudi businessmen.

Bahrain reportedly hinted last month that the Gulf states boycotting Qatar may re-open airspace to flights bound from and to Doha. The continued closure has forced Qatar Airways to fly longer routes to circumvent Saudi, UAE and Bahraini airspace at considerable cost to the airline. The report was widely seen as a trial balloon.

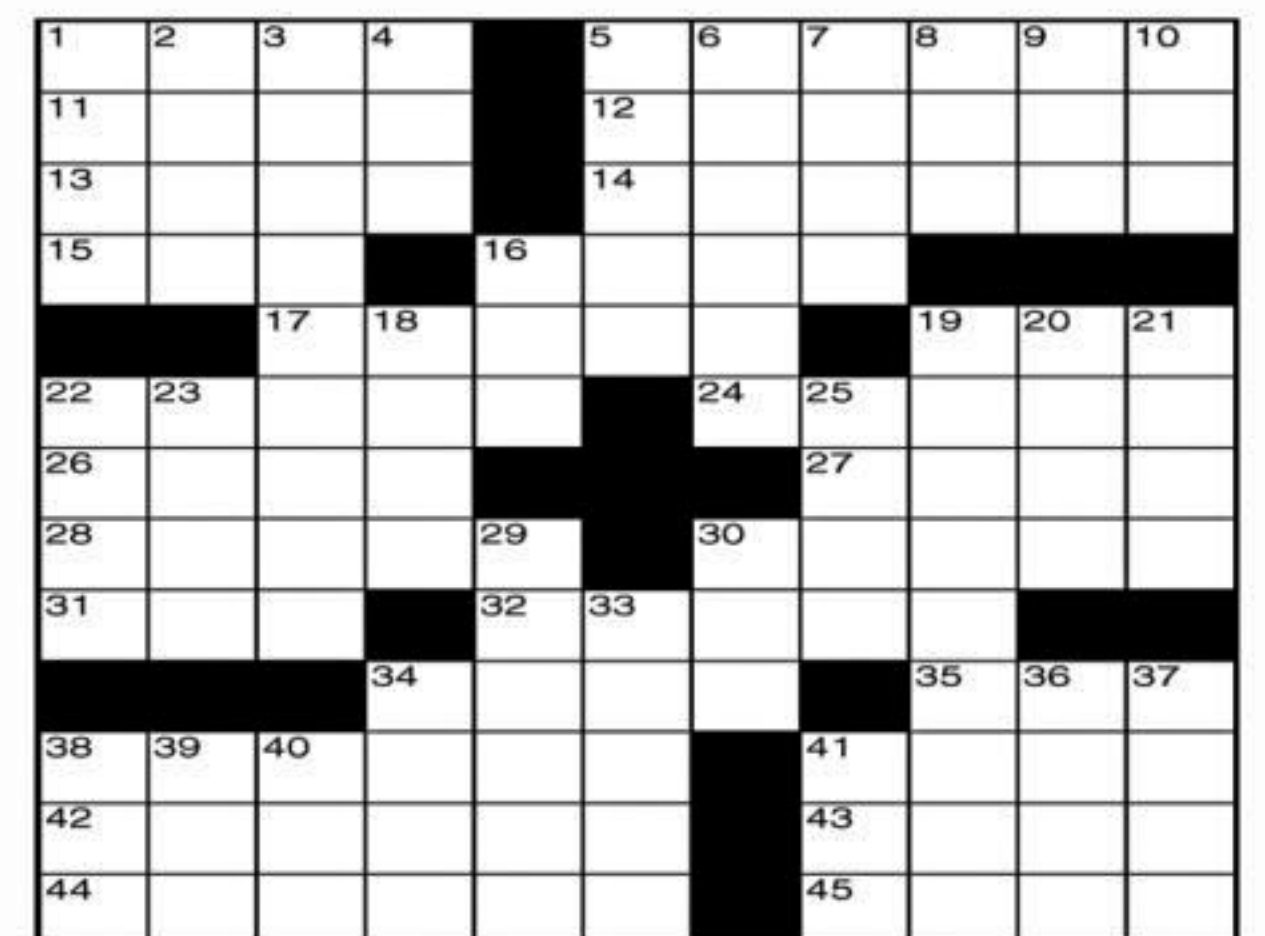
Similarly, Erdogan recently travelled to Germany with which it has had strained relations in a bid to increase his options following a summit with Vladimir Putin and Hassan Rouhani, the presidents of Russia and Iran, in which he, for now, delayed a Syrian-Russian assault on Idlib that would have sent hundreds of thousands, if not millions, fleeing towards the Turkish border.

The limitations of the notion, apparently shared by German chancellor Angela Merkel and Erdogan, that deep differences can easily be put aside to pragmatically focus on issues of common interest, a key pillar of Middle Eastern alliances, were on display with the European Parliament last week voting to withhold 70 million euros in pre-accession funding because Turkey had failed to reverse its moves towards authoritarianism.

Dr James M Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture, and co-host of the *New Books in Middle Eastern Studies* podcast. He is the author of *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer* blog, and a book with the same title, among several others.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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