

Khashoggi fiancée Hatice Cengiz: ‘Jamal was not their enemy’

Doctorate student talks over the chain of events that led to the Saudi journalist’s killing in Istanbul

Roula Khalaf JULY 26 2019

“I don’t want to cry” are the first words Hatice Cengiz utters when I sit down across from her in a burgundy leather booth.

I am anticipating an emotional lunch and conscious of the need to tread carefully. I know that the young Turkish woman with small sad eyes is living through a terrible trauma. Cengiz was the fiancée of [Jamal Khashoggi](#), the Saudi journalist who was butchered last October at his country’s embassy in Istanbul. The doctorate student was that lonely, distraught figure, recognisable by her headscarf, who waited restlessly outside the building for Khashoggi to re-emerge as TV viewers around the world looked on.

She was the first to sound the alarm about his disappearance, assuming initially — and for many days afterwards — that he had been whisked out of the embassy and kidnapped. But as she would eventually learn, he was murdered within minutes of his arrival at the consulate to pick up papers he needed to marry; his body was later cut in pieces with a bonesaw.

Ten months after the execution, his body parts have not been found and Cengiz is still demanding answers. Why was he killed, and why so ferociously? And why is no one insisting on accountability?

Khashoggi was living in self-imposed exile in the US until he met Cengiz at a conference in Turkey last spring and decided to start a new life there. He had early in his career been an adviser to members of the Saudi royal family but in recent years he had become a prominent critic of the regime led by the 33-year-old crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman. While his columns in the Washington Post could be trenchant, he hardly posed a threat to MbS, as the crown prince is widely known.

“Jamal was from the palace, not from outside it,” Cengiz tells me in a soft but steady voice. “He was not their enemy.”

When I arrive at Kibele, a funky Turkish restaurant close to Oxford Street that Cengiz picked (randomly she says), she is already there with a translator, settled in a booth past a bar with hanging yellow lights. It's a sunny day outside and the restaurant is noisy. Our corner is dim, strangely fitting the mood of our lunch. Cengiz is wearing a green satin headscarf that elegantly drapes around her neck and a long-sleeved top with a shiny abstract twist on an animal print. Her scarf and thin-rimmed glasses hide a handsome face that looks younger than her 37 years.

She stands up and embraces me as if we are old friends, though we've never met before. Before I can glance at the menu, she fires off questions at me because I had known Khashoggi for about 20 years as a fellow journalist. I had first met him when he was a foreign correspondent and an expert on Islamist groups, then reconnected with him when he edited a liberal newspaper in Saudi Arabia. He was someone whose insights about Saudi Arabia I often sought. He once had Islamist leanings, but he was also a liberal thinker. He had been enthused by the democratic flourishing in the Arab Spring but depressed when the uprisings were suppressed.

We switch from Arabic, which she speaks fluently, having spent time in Oman during her postgraduate degree in anthropology, to English, where she needs translation. I tell her of my regret at not having taken up Khashoggi's lunch invitation in London only days before he was murdered.

"I wish you'd seen him," she laments. He had been in the process of setting up an online platform to share independent economic news with the Saudi public, she reveals. That must, she says, have been the reason he wanted to meet the FT.

The first time he went to the consulate the staff had been nice to him, they'd hugged him and offered coffee. They even told him they were happy to hear he was getting married

She brightens up, if only briefly, when I ask her to tell me her love story. Their relationship was deep and intense but shortlived. She met Khashoggi in May and he died in October. I can feel her anguish — her legs nervously shaking under the table throughout our lunch. But going back to the early days also brings a smile to her face, and even a few laughs. She shows me the profile picture of a smiling couple on her WhatsApp; it was taken the day they met at an Istanbul conference on the Gulf.

"I walked up to him during a coffee break and introduced myself; I said I wanted to interview him for a political website. He came over to me during the second break and agreed to talk," she recalls. "He later told me that he'd liked my attitude and the fact that I spoke Arabic, not that he was interested in my looks."

At times she sounds like a student who developed a crush on an older professor; at other times, she is the intellectual who fell for an idea. It took only a few more meetings before he asked her to marry him.

“Then, within 20 days, he’d met my parents and bought an apartment for us. He was practical,” she says. “He also knew what he wanted; he was lonely and he was in pain.”

We are lost in her memories so it takes us nearly 20 minutes before we order. We decide to share a mezze plate of grilled aubergine and garlic yoghurt and another of grilled asparagus. She picks a beyti — yoghurt-coated skewered lamb wrapped in tortillas — and I opt for a less adventurous chicken walnut salad.

I ask Cengiz about her parents’ reaction to the romance. She comes from a conservative middle-class family in eastern Anatolia, part of a small business community that forms the bedrock of support for the neo-Islamist party that rules Turkey (and which has much to answer for in its own treatment of journalists). Her parents were uncomfortable with the age difference but they understood, as she puts it, that Khashoggi was “a great man, a special man” and said her life was her own decision.

We nibble on the mezze, neither of us able to muster an appetite over a conversation that soon leads us to that fateful October day. Khashoggi had landed at 4am and Cengiz had left him breakfast in the apartment he’d bought for them. She joined him there a few hours later. He took a nap and then called the consulate to confirm that he would soon be there to collect the papers. He had visited a week earlier to put in the request for the documents showing that he was divorced.

“He was anxious the first time he went to the consulate but he’d come back out within half an hour and the staff had been nice to him, they’d hugged him and offered coffee. They even told him they were happy to hear he was getting married.” The visit, however, was to launch an elaborate murder conspiracy. When I ask Cengiz whether she wished she’d never set eyes on Khashoggi nor planned to marry him, she shakes her head.

Kibele

**77 Great Portland Street,
London W1W 5PJ**

Set lunch menu £15.95

Mixed mezze

Chicken walnut salad

Coban salad £3.50

Grilled asparagus £4

“I never regret. It’s fate.” He was not killed because he was her fiancé, she reminds me; he was killed because he was Jamal Khashoggi. For weeks after, Cengiz refused to believe the leaks flooding the Turkish media and describing the execution in all its gory details.

“I had once asked Jamal what was the worst that could happen to him and he said kidnapping or jail or a seizure of his passport,

Lamb beyti £17

Espresso £2.50

Latte £3.25

Still water £3.95

Total inc service £56.40

but he was sure no one would dare hurt him on Turkish soil.” He was wrong. Khashoggi may have been the most astute analyst of Saudi Arabia I knew, but he had underestimated the ruthlessness of the regime. MbS had detained Lebanon’s prime minister against his will; he had arrested cousins and top businessmen,

jailed them at Riyadh’s Ritz hotel and stripped them of their assets; and he had launched a senseless war in neighbouring Yemen.

The Saudi version of the killing shifted and twisted over weeks, settling finally on a rogue agent theory and a rendition gone wrong, for which 11 people have been charged. It is not a tale that Cengiz accepts. Turkish intelligence’s audio recordings of conversations inside the consulate indeed point to a premeditated killing.

The plot unfolded like a horror movie, with two planeloads of Saudis, including a forensics expert and security officers close to MbS, arriving in Istanbul on the same day of the murder — eerily, around the same time Khashoggi landed. The dismemberment is discussed before Khashoggi’s arrival at the consulate and later the journalist is heard gasping: “I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe.” I asked Cengiz if she had listened to the recording.

“I couldn’t bear to listen to it,” she says.

The Saudis assumed they had conceived the perfect murder: one member of the Saudi hit squad was of Khashoggi’s build and he was captured on camera leaving the consulate from a back door, wearing the writer’s clothes (though, stupidly, not his shoes). The body would be dismembered, never to be found, and there would be no proof that a crime had been committed. What the plotters hadn’t expected, however, was that the Turks would be listening in on them.

The brazen murder alarmed western allies of Saudi Arabia. They had feted the royal heir as a reformer who was standing up to the clerics and liberating the youth from the shackles of gender segregation. Now, analysts all over the world were likening him to Saddam Hussein. A [UN expert who investigated the case](#) said last month that there was “credible evidence, warranting further investigation” that the crown prince and high-level officials had “individual liability” for an “extrajudicial killing”.

But, at least for now, MbS appears to have weathered the Khashoggi storm. Donald Trump, the US president, has expressed openly what other leaders mutter privately: that business with oil-rich Saudi Arabia is worth more than Khashoggi’s life. It is a conclusion that pains Cengiz but also drives her campaign for the truth.

“If the world doesn’t speak now, what will it speak for? If there is no punishment for committing this ugly crime, is anyone safe?” she asks. “Am I safe?”

I have lost interest in my salad and I set the plate aside when Cengiz’s tears rush down her cheeks. Her voice cracks as she relates the night of October 19, more than two weeks after the disappearance, when the Saudi authorities finally admitted that Khashoggi had been killed. She had gone to bed that night at 2am but had been woken up by repeated buzzing on her phone. “I was afraid to look at it, afraid to look at social media. When I finally did, I saw a message from Jamal’s best friend. It said ‘God rest his soul’.” She tells me she prayed for the news to be fake. “I thought I would lose my mind. I knew my life had completely changed and I didn’t know if it would have meaning after Jamal.”

Cengiz starts digging into her beyti, as if the weight of recounting the horror of that night had suddenly lifted, restoring some of her appetite, and we turn to geopolitics. For several weeks she was the face of the Khashoggi tragedy, but Cengiz later retreated while the repercussions of the murder played out.

“I couldn’t be involved when it was a power game between governments,” she explains. Khashoggi’s death triggered a political battle between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, two regional powers that already had fraught relations.

Throughout the Arab spring, Ankara had supported the rise of Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood; Saudi Arabia had led the counter-revolution. Ankara now had a powerful stick with which to beat Riyadh, and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan seized the opportunity. But his apparent hope of derailing plans for MbS to succeed his ailing father, King Salman, were thwarted by the Trump administration’s support for the prince.

“The US reaction is a scandal,” Cengiz tells me. The UN report that came out [last] month was encouraging, yet there is no indication that its recommendation for an international inquiry will be adopted. We are nearing the end of our lunch and Cengiz is now venting her anger. Her voice rises in condemnation of the global powers.

“Where are the five members of the UN Security Council?” she says of the US, China, Russia, Britain and France. “Is MbS responsible? I want to know. I want to understand who ordered the killing,” she says. “It’s unacceptable.”

Her latte and my espresso have long been consumed, but Cengiz has more to say. She speaks of her determination to keep the Khashoggi case alive, however many obstacles are put in her way, because freedom of expression is what he was struggling for. It was now her own mission.

I leave her thinking of something she had said in passing. Once she was a student of the Middle East's agonising politics — now she has become part of it.

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