

Demetri Kofinas: 00:00 Today's episode of Hidden Forces is made possible by listeners like you. For more information about this week's episode, or for easy access to related programming, visit our website at hiddenforces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you listen to the show on your Apple Podcast App remember, you can give us a review. Each review helps more people find the show and join our amazing community. With that, please enjoy this week's episode.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:48 What's up, everybody? My guests on this episode of Hidden Forces are Wall Street Journal reporters Bradley Hope and Justin Scheck. They are the co-authors of a new book that chronicles the rise to power of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and the intersecting worlds of business, finance, and political intrigue that come with it.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:11 The first 15 minutes or so of our conversation deal with Bradley and Justin's process for writing the book, their cultivation of leads, and how they went about fact-checking stories. The rest of the episode, and the overtime, focuses on Salman's approach to statesmanship, his role, and that of his family as "swing investors" in Silicon Valley, and what it means for the politics of the greater Middle East should he assume the throne. With that, please enjoy my conversation with Bradley Hope and Justin Scheck.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:48 Bradley Hope and Justin Scheck, welcome to Hidden Forces.

Justin Scheck: 01:52 Thank you so much for having us.

Bradley Hope: 01:53 Thank you very much.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:55 Would someone say who is who real quick. Justin, could you just say, "Hi," a second.

Justin Scheck: 01:59 Yeah, Hi, I'm Justin.

Demetri Kofinas: 02:00 And Bradley?

Bradley Hope: 02:00 This is Bradley.

Demetri Kofinas: 02:02 All right, great, that'll make it easy for the audience and for our transcriber. So, how are you guys doing?

Justin Scheck: 02:08 Pretty well, thanks.

Bradley Hope: 02:10 Yeah, it's a very nice evening here in London.

Demetri Kofinas: 02:12 Are you both in London?

Justin Scheck: 02:14 No, I'm in Brooklyn.

Demetri Kofinas: 02:15 Okay. Justin, you're in Brooklyn and Bradley, you're in London. Justin, weren't you living in London for a period in time?

Justin Scheck: 02:22 Yeah, actually when Bradley and I started writing about Saudi Arabia we were both based in London. A few years ago I moved to Brooklyn.

Demetri Kofinas: 02:28 So, how many interviews have you guys done so far. The book was published when? I mean, I got it before the publication, was it September 1st?

Justin Scheck: 02:35 Yeah, exactly.

Bradley Hope: 02:36 Yes.

Justin Scheck: 02:36 September 1st. We've done a bunch. We've done some TV, we've done some radio, a couple podcasts, and started to lose track a little bit. I don't know that we've been plastered up there on cable TV, but we've done a little bit here and there.

Demetri Kofinas: 02:48 Well, you were on Morning Joe, which is kind of a good outlet for a book like this. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic I guess they don't really have people in studio anymore, which kind of sucks. I feel like if I was going to be on a show like Morning Joe, I'd really want to be in studio. It's like one of those shows.

Bradley Hope: 03:02 Yeah, totally.

Demetri Kofinas: 03:05 Congratulations. This is actually the second time that we're doing a podcast on Mohammed bin Salman, and on the kingdom, on Saudi Arabia. The previous one was back in March with Ben Hubbard. That was during like the outbreak of coronavirus. So, some of the questions, some of the subjects, will intersect. I would say that your book, Blood and Oil, is actually a bit less biographical than Ben's book was, which was actually called, MBS. One of the things that you guys do that I really liked is that you talk a bit more about the financial angles and some of the interlocking relationships with foreign banks, foreign funds, like the Vision Fund, SoftBank, and some of these foreign institutional relationships that the kingdom has. The thing for me, ... Again, you guys talk about Khashoggi. We'll get into that, Khashoggi and the murder of Khashoggi, and it's relevance, and things like this.

Demetri Kofinas: 04:05 Of all the things that stand out to me when I learn about Saudi Arabia is just the enormous level of wealth that is kind of thrown around. I'm curious ... Well, actually we'll ask you guys about that later. So, maybe the best way to start is for you guys to tell me how this book came about. What led to it and when did you guys begin working together? Was it just for this book?

Bradley Hope: 04:34 Justin and I met in London. We both knew each other's bylines but we didn't know each other before we met in the office in London. We started working initially on very Wall Street Journal-style stories, things like Saudi Arabia's playing to the list, it's oil company it's going to be the biggest IPO in history. Let's get behind this, find the back story, find out what this company's really like. That was kind of where we first started working together. We could tell as we talked and figured out what we were interested in that there was so much more to look into. It was a great moment to start paying attention to Saudi Arabia.

Bradley Hope: 05:07 Obviously, things had already kicked off a little bit before that, but that was when things really kicked into gear. We continued to cover Saudi Arabia in a way that almost very few people have this opportunity because, for one, this country was long very opaque. The only way to get inside it was to actually travel there, and make friends like famously, Robert Lacey, a great British journalist. He wrote two

books about Saudi Arabia. Each one of them involved him living there for a number of years.

Bradley Hope: 05:34 Because of the nature of Mohammed bin Salman this was a great moment for a business journalist to use their entryways into a story. There's also opportunities to go there, of course, but it wasn't just that. Justin and I kept working together, we kept finding more and more fascinating stories. We did one particularly memorable story we did was about this terrible fire that occurred in Saudi Arabia in ARAMCO housing. It's hard to say that you ever feel like writing a book in the midst of a breaking news story, but a little bit down the line, after the Khashoggi murder, after that had sort of the shock of that had started to wear off a little bit, we really got to thinking that ... We actually we thought we knew a lot about Saudi Arabia, but we realized we knew very little.

Bradley Hope: 06:16 It's a kind of perfect moment to start a book project, because the only way to start a book project is to try to unlearn everything you think you know and start from scratch. We also thought there was a real opportunity, because while the Khashoggi murder was a complete travesty it was also a tragedy for Saudi Arabia. We thought there was a real opportunity to get to the bottom of MBS. What's driving him, what's motivating him, and also to explore these relationships that you talked about before, the business relationships, and things like that.

Demetri Kofinas: 06:46 What made you realize that you knew very little about the kingdom?

Justin Scheck: 06:51 We'd been writing about Saudi Arabia for two, probably almost three, years. At the time ... It's a little different now, but at the time it wasn't that big a leap to go from where we started, which was writing about the oil company, to writing about the government, to writing about the royal family. It was all really enmeshed. So, we pretty quickly, our work went from writing about things like an IPO, and a devastating fire at an oil company, to like a palace coup in which Mohammed bin Salman had his cousin, the crown prince, locked up in a room overnight and forced him to relinquish his place in line of succession. We went from kind of there to there, I think. By that point, after a couple years of this, we really thought that we had kind of cracked how to report on Saudi Arabia and how to write on Saudi Arabia.

Justin Scheck: 07:37 Then, once you get deep into a subject and you start doing stories like that, more and more people sort of come out of the woodwork. It's easier to get access to people. People come to you, and people were telling us these things that we had no idea about. We had heard all these stories about the crown prince is this impulsive guy who was, his giant foreign policy decisions were dictated by temper tantrums, and he was making decisions kind of off the cuff.

Justin Scheck: 08:03 We kept on hearing from people who were closer and closer to the center of power about how he was a planner. He was a methodical planner. He was this person who would plot out this chess match like years ahead. It was like, this is like the opposite of the person we'd been hearing about from these other people. So, it was almost like the deeper we got into it the more we realized that our understanding was very superficial.

Bradley Hope: 08:26 One other little thing to note, Demetri, is the other thing is Justin and I are not really subject matter experts in a sense. Even though, I mean I have six years' experience living in the Middle East and like a life-long interest, I think of us as

much more of having a system of doing things that allows us to get behind very difficult stories. So, we've taken this approach to other topics, as well. We just have a kind of way of working together where we can come across something that seems impossible, or opaque. ARAMCO was a good example of that. Back then everyone's, "Oh, you'll never figure out what's going on at ARAMCO. It's impossible, it's so secretive." I think in our careers we've just always considered that a challenge. We did it with bitcoin, we did it with all kinds of different topics. We just have a way of working together where we both have our certain ways that we get into a story, and we have a whole system. We can talk about any topic, and we can start getting into it right away.

Justin Scheck: 09:20 In that way investigative reporters are kind of like consultants where you're applying the same methodology to kind of whatever you're attacking.

Demetri Kofinas: 09:27 So, in a sense you're saying that because you didn't have preconceived notions, or because you did everything you could to disabuse yourself from those, that that actually worked to your benefit?

Bradley Hope: 09:37 Yeah, I think so. I think, really, for me especially, if I'm reading a book, or if I'm reading an article, or watching something, the thing that will thrill me the most is feeling the intellectual honesty that underpins that work. That's when I get excited, because I don't want to have something parroted back to me that I already think I know. I want to be surprised. I want to feel the complexity of something. I want to be pushed and pulled a little bit, and I think the story of Mohammed bin Salman is a perfect example of something that is much more complicated than it first appeared.

Bradley Hope: 10:09 Also, a lot of things that we thought we knew, for example there was like anonymous letters in The Guardian by a member of the royal family saying, "Mohammed bin Salman is corrupt and the father has dementia," and all that sort of thing. Then we learned in our reporting that the guy writing that was an extremely unreliable narrator, and he had extremely self-interested motives for putting that out. He was, essentially, trying to leverage that kind of publicity to get money from the royal family, his own family. It gives you a real sense that back then it fit with what everyone thought they knew about MBS. So, when it comes out it's, Oh, it just reconfirms my preconception. When we were reporting it out we were thinking, Wait a second, the people putting this out are foreign espionage agencies, disaffected princes looking for money. When you start to understand the motives then you started to question the authenticity of the information.

Demetri Kofinas: 11:03 Well, you're a relic in terms of jettisoning your preconceptions, Bradley. We don't live in a world that rewards that, although maybe that's not fair to say, because I think that's part of the success of this show, and I feel that there are many people that feel the way you do. I certainly do. Your point about motivations is interesting, because that was one the questions, which is what was, and I'd love learn about your system, as well, in answering this question. But, what were the motivations do you feel of the people that were speaking to you? Were they varied, and to that effect how did you weight their responses based on what those motivations were? Did you need to have multiple sources who didn't know each other confirming the same story independently for you to use it?

- Justin Scheck:** 11:54 I can start out on that. So, often times, and this is not specific to Saudi Arabia, but often times with any investigative reporting project you start out early on talking to the aggrieved, because those are the people who are most enthusiastic about talking, and the most accessible. Often times the people who are at the center of a story are disinclined to talk, people in power. The reason people are aggrieved is often because they are not in power. They lost power. So, in almost any project you're starting out with those people on the periphery, and they will tell you a lot of things, and some of what they tell you is often wrong, and some of it is right, and much of it is some combination of right and wrong. You build up a body of information from people who are maybe on the outside. The more of that you have the more you're able to convince people who maybe don't have an obvious incentive to talk that, number one, we're going to write your story no matter what, and if you don't participate we have to rely on people who might not like you.
- Justin Scheck:** 12:55 Number two, you're showing them that you know enough that you're interested in them, and you're interested in the truth, and you're coming to them because you really want their side of things, and you really want to write something truthful and not to write something that is say funded by a foreign government, or funded by a domestic enemy, which are things that happen in the region. It is really no secret, or like science to it, it's just a matter of gathering information from the available sources. The more information you have the more it sort of snowballs, and at a certain point people who maybe don't have an obvious incentive at the beginning to talk to you feel that it's in their interest to do so.
- Justin Scheck:** 13:32 So, when you ask about confirmation, we heard so many things from like, one guy says something, and we're pretty sure it's true, but just if one person says something it's not enough. We want to write a nonfiction book, and this is a situation, a place, where rumors sort of take off, and there's such a culture of like passing on misinformation all around the region that we really have to have multiple sources for anything we were going to write about.
- Bradley Hope:** 13:58 I think the other thing that I would say is, there's a lot of preconceptions about investigative reporting that are probably not true, as well. One thing you notice as a journalist working in a newsroom, the guy next to you, or the gal next to you, will do it completely differently than you do and be just as effective, or maybe even more effective than you are. Somebody might be really mean, and aggressive, and they will get people to deliver information to them that way, and somebody might take the complete opposite approach and be even more successful. So, I always like to think ... This is the way that I make myself feel like no task is impossible. I always say to myself, This person that I'm going to speak to, or I'm going to try to speak to, there's a combination of words that I can say that will unlock everything they have inside their head. So, basically I say to myself, "What's the combination for this person?"
- Bradley Hope:** 14:47 It's not even a manipulative process, it's just understanding their motives, their body of information, what they may have had access to, what would be a persuasive reason why they should release it? I think that's where Justin and I, we both have very different approaches to that. But, I think especially in our case it works very well together. One of the other things that's really important about investigative reporting, I think, is that the people that could become the best possible sources on something are also sometimes the least likely people to be the best sources on something. I can tell from previous experiences in my career

that sometimes the person that was the source for everything was the person that I was writing about. I was thinking about a particular hedge fund story I wrote where everyone said, "How did that story happen? How'd you do it?" The truth was we just once we had all that information, like Justin said, we called that guy and said, "Hey, we're going to write a story about these things." He said, "No, no, no, you've got it wrong. That's not how it went down."

- Demetri Kofinas:** 15:42 Was this the 1MDB JLo story?
- Justin Scheck:** 15:44 No, this is a different one, but I probably shouldn't say too much about it or else I'll start revealing sources. So, I think there could be a person on the sidelines who had an amazing window into something. Actually, this book in particular I think is a good example. Every chapter ... It's not following a group of three people from the beginning to the end. There's always new people, there's new scenes, there's new interactions that MBS is having, or Saudi Arabia is having.
- Justin Scheck:** 16:08 We've got one chapter that's all about the art auction. That chapter has its own group of sources that is completely different than other chapters. So, I think it was us we were, as we kind of figured out our timeline and our structure, we had to think who are we going to go to. You really try to go to everyone, as well. You don't try to go to one person. Also, at one point if you would have asked us six months into the project versus one year into the project we had completely different concepts of how we were going to get the job done. Things that seemed very likely petered out, or fell apart, and other things came forward.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 16:39 In the overtime I do want to ask you about 1MDB, because that story continues and recently Malaysia dropped the criminal charges against Goldman Sachs. You've written a really great book on that. I think that'll be a good opportunity to talk about that. Did you guys ever try to reach out to the crown prince himself?
- Justin Scheck:** 16:57 Well, we have to be somewhat ... The short answer is, Yeah, of course we reached out, but we have to be a little bit vague about specifics, but what we can say, and this isn't a secret, is that while we were at the Wall Street Journal, in the context of working at the Wall Street Journal, met him a couple times in Saudi Arabia, and in the U.S., and spent some substantial time with him.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 17:16 You reached out to him on behalf as a Wall Street Journal reporter interested in --
- Justin Scheck:** 17:19 No, not reached out. What I mean to say is like spent like personal face time, spent time with him in Saudi Arabia.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 17:25 Was it pre-planned, or was it ...
- Justin Scheck:** 17:26 Yeah, yeah.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 17:26 ... something that just there was ... Okay.
- Justin Scheck:** 17:30 No, no, that's a good question. So, while in the context of working as a general reporter, I and a couple colleagues spent substantial time with him in Saudi Arabia, and then some time with him elsewhere. Then, and this isn't a secret, and this is something that is perfectly fine to talk about. Then, once we got into the book, you'll notice in the book one thing we tried to do was write it not like a

newspaper story, and not like a first-person thing, but we tried to write it as sort of a narrative, nonfiction where we don't have a lot of, According to this person, not a lot of attribution, mostly for readability.

- Justin Scheck:** 18:05 Also, part of that is that a lot of the reporting work we did specifically for the book, and away from the Journal, we can't really say who our sources were. What we can say is that everything in the book prior to publication the royal court had a chance to comment on all of it. So, there was nothing they were surprised by in there-
- Demetri Kofinas:** 18:25 Is it possible, is this something that happens where you write a book about someone and that person goes off the record, speaks to you off the record? Is that possible?
- Justin Scheck:** 18:36 I mean, look. There's every single version of people talking, or not talking to you, you can imagine in the newspaper context. What we could say in this, maybe a different answer, the culture of the Wall Street Journal, the rule of the Wall Street Journal, is that there can't be any surprises. If you're writing about someone they need to know what you're going to say about them in advance so they have the opportunity to respond. We followed those principles in writing the book. We spent so much time, and years, and worked on so many stories, so much book research in dealing with the royal court that it's not like we can get to them, and we can be in dialogue with them.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 19:10 So, what is he like in person?
- Justin Scheck:** 19:13 Well, speaking from the Wall Street Journal experience?
- Demetri Kofinas:** 19:16 From your personal experience of having actually like spent time with him? What is he like?
- Justin Scheck:** 19:21 One of the things that impressed me, and he's big. He's a big guy.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 19:24 Big, and he's physically large?
- Justin Scheck:** 19:25 He's physically imposing.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 19:27 I think about 6'4"?
- Justin Scheck:** 19:28 Yeah, he's about 6'4", ...
- Demetri Kofinas:** 19:29 6'5"?
- Justin Scheck:** 19:29 ... and he's not skinny. He's 6'4". He's got some meat on his bones. He's a little bit overweight. In my experience in dealing with members of the royal family, the stereotypes they tend to be a little bit reserved, a little bit just the body movements a little bit aloof. Something that struck me, and you can see this in videos of him, as well, is the way he moves, he leans forward when he moves. He's very tactile. He sort of, I don't say lurch, but when he comes into the room he's bent forward, he moves to you quickly. There's an enthusiastic --
- Demetri Kofinas:** 20:02 He seems uncomfortable in his own skin.

Justin Scheck: 20:05 Well, he has sort of a twitch, and that maybe makes him look uncomfortable but, actually, I viewed it a little bit differently. If you look at some of these, and these are people a generation older than him, but even his father, and the other royals, often they'll have carefully manicured dyed goatee, and then they're very ... There's a lot of attention paid to being kind of coming across perfectly, and he's not, like he doesn't shave his neck. He's got like a neck beard.

Demetri Kofinas: 20:32 So interesting.

Justin Scheck: 20:33 He is who he is. He's got a twitch. He's going to kind of be in your face. He's not, I don't think he's particularly self-conscious. Now, he didn't learn English until he was an adult, so I think it's taken a little while for him to be comfortable speaking English. He really is pretty self-possessed in the way that like, you know you meet like the maestro, or the famous composer, doesn't care that his comb over is hanging over on one side. It's kind that. He is who he is. This is how he looks. What are you going to do about it? There's not a lot of, he doesn't put a lot of attention into trying to impress with his appearance.

Demetri Kofinas: 21:06 Hmm.

Justin Scheck: 21:06 It terms of what he's like as a person. He's someone who has a tendency to go off on talking points, like a lot of political figures do. When confronted with a difficult question he kind of exudes an enthusiasm to answer it. He may not answer it in a satisfactory way, he may answer it in a surprisingly obtuse way, but when it's someone who's not a threat, when it's a foreigner, or a journalist, asking him a direct question he sort of accepts, he seems to relish the sort of opportunity for confrontational exchange.

Demetri Kofinas: 21:37 That's interesting. I would also imagine that he would see the opportunity to speak with someone at the Wall Street Journal, or the Financial Times, or the New York Times as yet another opportunity to brandish his image and to elevate his status as a kind of world leader, an important thought leader and contributor. Bradley, I'm curious what your thoughts are about that, if you want to add anything to Justin. Then, I'd love to rattle off a few questions that I have for you guys.

Bradley Hope: 22:07 I think there's a kind of BK and AK, before Khashoggi and after Khashoggi. Before that he was one of the world's most popular characters. He was lauded in columns, and TV channels were coming over all the time. There was more publicity about Saudi Arabia then maybe there's ever been, good publicity.

Demetri Kofinas: 22:28 Because of his liberal reforms?

Bradley Hope: 22:30 Yeah, because of his liberal reforms, because he was pretty exciting, pretty charismatic, young-

Demetri Kofinas: 22:34 Dynamic.

Bradley Hope: 22:36 Yeah, even the Prime Minister here, not at the time but Boris Johnson seemed to have a real kind of connection with him. Everybody was kind of excited about him. This was a country that had been so slow, and there was a sense from the West that it was backwards, and stuff. Suddenly this guy was just shaking everything

up, and he was technology obsessed, he's a millennial. It was pretty exciting. At think at that time he couldn't meet enough people.

- Bradley Hope:** 23:02 Then, after Khashoggi everything changed. It was so dramatic the turnaround, and the anger, and the kind of revulsion that you haven't seen him do that again. I mean, it's really been very, very minimal. He still has these State visits. There was a Frontline documentary that came out not too long ago where they sort of ambushed onto the scene. There was a 60 Minutes episode where he did speak, but in general he's become much more guarded because he knows that all the questions are going to be pretty harsh, and he doesn't want to be in that position. So, there's been a big change in that respect.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 23:35 I was thinking about this. The Khashoggi murder, it's so bizarre because the official story was, basically, that because this guy was criticizing MBS, MBS had him murdered. If that's true that's a really extreme reaction to have. It's psychotic really. So, one of my questions is, How content are you that the mainstream narrative around Jamal's death, and murder, is really representative of the facts, and that Western media has properly characterized it, and him?
- Demetri Kofinas:** 24:18 Then, my kind of follow-up question, which is a larger question really to start the proper conversation which is, Even if this is true, and even if this guy let's say is a, I'm not saying you guys are saying this, and I'm not even saying I'm saying it, but let's say he's just another sort of semi-psychotic, sociopathic inheritor of a throne, or a dictator in the vein of a number of other people that have come in the Middle East of all flavors, why should we care? What is the big deal? We've seen plenty of despicable, dislikable, aggressive figures arise in the world, not just in the Middle East, but in other places. Why is this guy so important?
- Bradley Hope:** 25:03 So, I think, in general the facts are true. The general view, and especially like what happened to Jamal and who killed him, and what happened inside the consulate. I think that's all pretty clear. I think the parts that Justin and I sort of uncovered that we felt a little bit differently about is in a few different categories. One, is Jamal Khashoggi a journalist? Well, I think we have a kind of, at least especially I have, a bit of a mixed view about that. I think of him more as a kind of unique persona that exists in a country like Saudi Arabia, where he was really a lifelong servant of the royal family, and of the different people that he was connected with there. He did journalism in service of that, and he would do columns, and go on television defending, and sort of espousing, the Saudi Arabian government perspective. So, in a way he was kind of like an unofficial spokesman.
- Bradley Hope:** 25:59 At the same time is that he had some other things he did, which was he would push the envelope a little bit on social reforms, but still kind of with permission, especially in the pre-MBS ERA. He wasn't sort of completely a dissident character, or anything like we would imagine a muckraker, or a gadfly, or anything like that. He was very much part of the system. He even had, ... I even heard an anecdote from one person I spoke to where he came to a talk in London when he was in London, and he went up to one of the speakers afterwards who was a Saudi person and said to them, "You know, you shouldn't be saying things like this. You know, we keep an eye on things like this." So, that's a very different image than the one that people generally have of Jamal Khashoggi. He's kind of lionized as the ultimate journalist, speaking truth to power. There is truth to that. I mean, that's kind of what he was doing towards ...

Demetri Kofinas: 26:49 You're saying-

Bradley Hope: 26:49 ... the end of his life.

Demetri Kofinas: 26:50 He was an institutionalist is what you're saying, and he was very much invested in preserving the Saudi institution of the kingdom and the royal family?

Bradley Hope: 26:58 Yeah. Then, so the other things are, even after he left Saudi Arabia he was still eager to continue doing that. We have a specific section in the story where he is calling up his contacts asking for them to support him creating a think tank, a pro-Saudi think tank, in Saudi Arabia. So, he'd already fled Saudi Arabia. He was in Washington. His first instinct was, "Okay, I've angered some people. Maybe I can still do what I'm good at," sort of shill for Saudi Arabia. In though, the documents of that are quite interesting. He refers to another case. There was a blogger who was arrested in a very severe way, called Raif Badawi, I think. He mentions it in his proposal. He said, "Oh, the world got a really bad impression of Saudi Arabia from this case, and if this institution was here we could have essentially spun it differently." So, it was a pretty fast transformation for him.

Bradley Hope: 27:50 So, and the third thing I think is very different, or that people don't get the impression about, or they don't understand, is the issue of perceptions. So, Jamal Khashoggi wasn't from the perspective of Saudi Arabia, and also Justin found this really amazing part, as well, in terms of revelations, that Jamal was in the very early stages of cooperating with the 911 plaintiffs against Saudi Arabia, to be kind of a cooperator, give them intelligence, information that they could use in their lawsuit, which leads me to my next point which is. The perception of Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia, in the royal court. They never saw him for a moment as a journalist speaking his mind about the reform plans and criticizing MBS because he intellectually disagreed. They saw him as not only sort of as a puppet for foreign powers. They believed very clearly that he was a Khatri paid for agent. They also saw him as an increasingly a locus of dissidence, of dissent in general.

Bradley Hope: 28:46 He was in the process of creating an NGO that was kind of a pro-democracy NGO for the Gulf, which is for the first time in his life he was sort of going up against the royal family, the absolute monarchy itself. He was having talks with other people about creating a kind of anti-Saudi Arabian Twitter army to battle the pro-Saudi Arabia Twitter army that was attacking him. So, from their perspective I really feel strongly he was much more of a threat than he seemed, and it was less about the columns, and the words, but it was still partially about those. It was about who is this guy and is he a traitor to our country?

Bradley Hope: 29:25 I'll just answer briefly your other question before Justin has a perspective. Why do we care, or why should we care? I think what made this such a bone-chilling case was the details. The idea of someone being lured into a consulate and then just disappear. It's so captivating and scary. Then, when the details started coming out it was almost like a made-for-media moment. I was glued to it just as everyone else was, to think where is Jamal? Where's his body? As soon as we figure ... Then, it was almost just like this escalation, and it was so visual. It struck you in your core that there was no way to not be really deeply affected by it.

Demetri Kofinas: 30:06 Yeah, the details are gruesome, and the recording is really gruesome, too.

Justin Scheck: 30:09 Something I would add to that is that the way ... When you get to this issue of it seeming like a psychopath, or being crazy, I think, and I'm not making excuses, or anything, or saying it's not psychopathic or crazy, but I think ... This is one of the things that it helps to have some context to understand the Khashoggi side where they didn't view him as a journalist, they viewed him as someone who was acting on behalf of a foreign state, which doesn't excuse anything. The context in how the Saudi royal family has historically dealt with dissent is important. In recent history when a prince, or a blogger, or a person is criticizing the royal family in a way that's public, that they feel is unacceptable, what they sometimes do is kidnap that person. This has been done many times, and in some cases, like the prince we were talking about earlier sort of criticizing them, he was kidnapped twice for criticizing them, more than a decade apart.

Justin Scheck: 31:09 The second one of those kidnappings was done with the same leader as the Khashoggi team, this guy Saud al-Qahtani, who was sort of MBS's enforcer. He, in person, dealt with taking this prince and physically taking control of him and locking him away, bringing him back to Saudi Arabia from Europe, and making him disappear.

Demetri Kofinas: 31:28 Have we heard what's happened to him since?

Justin Scheck: 31:31 He's been locked up. There are many sort of flavors of prison. There is what Saudi officials say, "Oh, he's at a luxury villa at the prison," or then it's just prison, or then there's house arrest. So, he's in some version of like nobody's allowed to see him. How this relates to Khashoggi is what MBS, the narrative that he has put out there is, "I didn't tell them to kill him, but ultimately I'm responsible because these guys work for me." With that in mind, it is plausible that he told his closest advisors, "You need to deal with this guy. He can't be out there criticizing them," and the way they dealt with him was they went to Turkey, and perhaps they wanted to kidnap him, and it didn't work out. Perhaps they set out to murder him. In any case, someone interpreted the order as we should kill this guy and dismember him.

Justin Scheck: 32:19 I just think, not to excuse it, but I think fitting into the bigger context you can see sort of a progression to how this, up until a certain point, this fit into sort of what the Saudi royal family does to a certain type of person, and then it kind of took a left turn.

Demetri Kofinas: 32:35 So, to the point about the why should people care about this, let's say MBS becomes king and, actually, that kind of makes me think about another question I have which is, Where is king Salman in all of this? Are the rumors about what he thinks about what his son is doing, does he approve, all of this. What's his reaction to the killing of Khashoggi? Let's say MBS takes the throne, what do you guys think that that means based on your research and reporting? What does that mean for the region? We're actually recording this on 911, on September 11, interestingly enough, and we're also recording it on the same day that Bahrain signed a peace agreement with Israel. This now comes on the back of the UAE deal. I wonder, what does this mean potentially for reconciliation with Israel, which would be kind of huge if Saudi Arabia were to do this? What are kind of the implications of his rise for the world should he become king?

Bradley Hope: 33:40 Well, I think, the interesting thing about MBS in that context is that he's someone who's much less constrained by the history of these grievances, whereas his

father had a whole career of dealing with Palestinians, and helping with fund raising for them at various points and feels a much more emotional connection to that many decades long battle between the two sides. So, I think if MBS were to become the king, what I would predict would happen is I would most certainly think that a complete rapprochement with Israel is on the cards. In some part it's because of the disruptive nature of it. Not since Anwar Sadat have we had a leader of an Arab country sort of shaking hands with a leader of an Israeli country. It's a guaranteed move that would just change his whole dynamic, and perhaps the global perception of him. I think it's a card he has in his pocket. He knows it's a big deal. He knows it's risky, but he's definitely one that he accepts those kinds of risks. I think he would grab it.

- Bradley Hope:** 34:49 In general, though, for the region, he's somebody who isn't looking to hear all about the history of a problem. He'll want to hear a solution right away. The disruptiveness of it is actually kind of hard to even fathom, because everything Saudi Arabia has always done has been things like, We give you a whole boatload of money and you kind of grudgingly respect us on the international stage, and we have this kind of regional security plan that's based on the Gulf states sending money and supporting these leaders, and then their leaders, despite whatever their population may think, supporting the Gulf kings and other princes.
- Bradley Hope:** 35:25 I think what MBS is taking his sort of businessman's mentality to this where he's saying, "Look, we're giving you billions of dollars, and what you're giving us is very vague. We want actual things back. So, if we give you money we want to see you follow exactly what we have to say, so if our foreign policy is this, we're buying that from you." It's a very kind of scary concept because if countries start following that that's one set of consequences. If they start refusing then the whole regional cohesion could be up in the air. I think what we've seen from --
- Demetri Kofinas:** 35:58 I'm not following that exactly. If they refuse what? A quid pro quo, which is the kind of the way ...
- Bradley Hope:** 36:03 Yeah.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 36:04 ... that the kingdom has done business for all these decades?
- Bradley Hope:** 36:06 Yeah. If they were to ... A good example would be, take Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood. That was a situation where the pact between Egypt, one of the most important countries in the region, and the Gulf states was really fractured. There was no deal yet between them. If Egypt starts to operate with the Muslim Brotherhood-led government then other countries could be following that direction. It could lead to a growth in that movement. That's just an example of what happens when the pact starts to fall apart.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 36:36 It's interesting because, actually, we just did a recent episode on Turkey and Erdoğan has actually taken the opposite view, or made the opposite bet, which is that he's doubled down on conservatism and Islam, whereas MBS is basically saying, "We need to reform. We need to liberalize, because that's our best way to keep our grip on power."
- Justin Scheck:** 36:58 Yeah, I think that's right.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 36:59 Playing to different elements of the region which is really interesting.

- Justin Scheck:** 37:02 No, I think so, and I think that as we write, and as Bradley and I have spoken about a lot, MBS has this sort of very basic demographic issue where the country is, two-thirds of the population is under the age of 30, about two-thirds, give or take. They're relatively wealthy, and they have the world's highest social media saturation. They see on Twitter, and on Instagram, what young people are doing in other parts of the world, which is they can start companies, they can go get a job out of college at like a place where they can work their way up. They can go on a date, they can go to a movie, they can go to a concert. All these things that haven't been possible in Saudi Arabia, because the country is this sort of ossified structure where historically the royal family gets to legitimacy in the eyes of the population from its alliance with these very conservative Islamic clerics, so, they keep this very restrictive religious order in place.
- Justin Scheck:** 38:01 Because they've had so much oil money they can just sort of give people enough money that you don't really need to form a real economy. Nobody gets taxed. It was all sort of frozen like that. Mohammed bin Salman realizes the population is growing fast enough, and the market for oil is uncertain enough, meaning the oil could run out or the demand could run out, where you're not going to have the oil money forever. The young people don't want any more of these religious restrictions, so he realized that in order for him and his family to maintain power all of these things were going to have to change.
- Justin Scheck:** 38:31 Those things include the social liberalization, the attempt to diversify the economy, which we will see if it works, and also the enhanced crackdown on dissidents. Going harder after people who are criticizing the royal family on Twitter is part of this broader move to consolidate power and change things. It's not like on the one hand he's reformer, and on the other hand he's not. It's all sort of unified in trying to consolidate power and solidify his family's rule, and his own claim to the throne.
- Bradley Hope:** 38:59 I think that, actually, brings up ... Your question brings up a really important point. What's the most uncertain thing about the future? I think MBS really hasn't laid out his vision for the role of religion in Saudi Arabia, and in the region. He's immediately in these first five years he's locked up the most conservative, and the most influential, what we call Wahhabists, and he's liberalized the country radically. You know, take the religious priest off the street, allow people to mix, and music to be played in restaurants, and all that sort of thing, but he hasn't really taken into account the fact that in the region, and around the whole world, people have religion and it's a big part of their lives. When you start to shake up how that works for them on a daily basis ...
- Bradley Hope:** 39:44 Even just for example, what's going on with the UAE, Israel, and Bahrain, how is that being viewed in Saudi Arabia? I mean, the people that I speak to say that people are genuinely bewildered, confused. It's led to these kind of WhatsApp conspiracies that the end of times are near. We've got the COVID-19, those reconciliation with Israel, and I'm not sure if the government communications side has really taken that into account and figured out what to do next.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 40:12 Can you elaborate on that? How much of that has to do with the sense of betrayal towards the Palestinians? How much of it has to do with other factors? What accounts for that?
- Justin Scheck:** 40:22 The disillusion?

- Bradley Hope:** 40:23 As a child in the Middle East it's very likely that from a young age you were hearing disparaging things said about Israelis. A lot of that came even from, it could have come from religious leaders in your local area, at the mosque the Imam could have said something about it, talked about this particular thing that's happening in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. So, you grew up with that. Remember, those Imams are essentially state-sponsored, state-funded, they're communicating on behalf of the government in some ways.
- Bradley Hope:** 40:54 Then, suddenly, after a lifetime of that you're told, Actually, these guys are our friends now. We're all equal, we're all friends, and our neighbors who are extremely closely allied with have a rapprochement with them, and what they got in exchange was, obviously some measure of regional security, but really it's got business deals, a pause on the annexation that's been going on, and potentially some F35s from the U.S. it's being seen kind of cynically, and people are worried, if that's the kind of thing ... How could we have held the line for so many decades and then that was it, that was the caving point?
- Demetri Kofinas:** 41:31 It seems all so ironic to me, because as I understand the history of extremism in Saudi Arabia, the country institutionally became more extreme, or more fundamentalist, after the Iranian revolution of '79 and the attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca, because the government, or the royal families, sort of felt that the region generally was becoming more fundamentalist, or the appeal of fundamentalism was rising, and if they wanted to hold onto power that they would have to, basically, absorb that and bring it into the institutions of government. Ironically, the generation that grew up after those reforms, and the introduction of more stringent teachings, and Wahhabists texts into the curriculum is actually the generation that seems to be less inclined to follow that. Is that right?
- Justin Scheck:** 42:24 Yeah. I think there's truth to that. That's also the narrative that Mohammed bin Salman is found of and it's a little more nuanced than that, because his line is, Saudi Arabia, historically a very conservative place, was liberalized, the 70s was liberalizing. Then, when the attack on the Grand Mosque happened, my predecessors, the members of my family running the country, became so afraid of extremism. They felt they needed to just give the extremists what they wanted and really crack down on any social reforms. We swung in the other direction, became a much more conservative country after years of liberalizing, and now I'm trying to undo that. I wouldn't say that's untrue but, really, I think that sort of excludes some important information.
- Justin Scheck:** 43:10 First off, they also, for more than 200 years ... The royal family have been allied with these Wahhabists fighters, clerics on fighters, and they have centuries long alliance, when they also would have ruled parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Earlier in history it was through that alliance, and that's the alliance that took over modern Saudi Arabia around a century ago and created the kingdom as it is now. That alliance was together all the way through. Saudi Arabia in the '70s was a very conservative country. Perhaps there were some liberalizing around the fringes, but the power base for the royal family, their legitimacy came from their allegiance with the clerics. In 1979, as much as this idea of needing to swing back to placate the extremists is true, they also saw in Iran there was a religious revolution. So, it's a nuance.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 44:04 They're like, We don't want that to happen to us.

Justin Scheck: 44:06 Right, exactly. It's a small difference, but it wasn't just a fear of extremism and terrorism, it was a fear that the people could rise up and overthrow the monarchy and try to install some kind of religious government. So, there was, indeed, a sort of a tightening of social restrictions, but one of Mohammed bin Salman's favorite lines that he said to many Westerners is, "What is Wahhabism. I don't know what that is. I don't know what Wahhabism is. You explain to me what that is."

Demetri Kofinas: 44:35 That's like a very Putinesque thing to say.

Justin Scheck: 44:37 Yeah. Right. What that sounds like to people, I think what it sounds like to a lot of Westerners is he's saying, "This is your creation. It's not a concept we have here. This isn't ours." What that sounds like to Wahhabists is Wahhabists don't feel like there's Wahhabism. To them there's Islam and then there are infidels. So, Wahhabists don't believe in Wahhabism. What they believe is Islam. So, that's the kind of statement that sort of speaks to these two constituencies at once. To Bradley's point, further muddles what is his vision for religion in Saudi Arabia? I think it's probably by design to some extent that he doesn't really want to say what the vision is. It's better to kind of leave it open a little bit, because if he's too definitive right now he's not the king yet. He's next in line. It could have unintended consequences.

Demetri Kofinas: 45:26 So, I'm kind of struck by the fact that there doesn't seem to be a concern anymore about a revolution in Saudi Arabia. It's not, at least something that's discussed in the press and, in general, extremism doesn't seem to be a thing anymore. Is that just because it isn't talked about, or has the threat of extremism and a revolution in Saudi Arabia genuinely declined? If so, what's the reason for that?

Bradley Hope: 45:55 What exactly is extremism? Even the word Wahhabism I don't particularly like it myself. Having lived in Egypt for a number of years I prefer this term Salafism, which is actually rooted in what we call Wahhabism but, basically, it's the idea of we need to return to what life was like for the first three generations after the death of the prophet Muhammad, that pure era. I think even Salafism itself it is a kind of austere fundamentalist approach, but it's not extremist in the sense that it necessarily leads to violence, or something.

Demetri Kofinas: 46:30 What I mean is the appeal of organizations like Al-Qaeda, or the Iranian regime that existed, or were prevalent, or at least we were told they were after 911. Has that diminished in the region in the years since?

Bradley Hope: 46:48 It was probably never prevalent in the sense. Prevalent makes it sound like that people were a part of their local AQ chapter. I think it was something that had a popularity among a certain minority, so people who are already Salafists who probably felt under represented, and on the fringes, and felt repelled by what was going on in Western society and how it was infiltrating their country.

Bradley Hope: 47:14 I think, we're not necessarily in any kind of era where that's less appealing, or more appealing. It may be more difficult in some ways, but as we saw with ISIS and the way that that spread like a wildfire across the region, it's always there to be tapped and you need a certain --

Demetri Kofinas: 47:28 That's sort of where I was going with that was I was wondering if the rise of ISIS and ISIS' control over parts of Iraq and Syria actually turned a lot of people off to

that type of ideology in various flavors, not necessarily in the most extreme form that Baghdadi expressed it, and ISIS expressed it?

- Bradley Hope:** 47:48 One thing that, I think, isn't that well understood by a lot of Americans is that in the years after 911 Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula became extremely active, and Saudi Arabia had like a devastating series of really horrible terror attacks and cracked down in an extremely intense way. There was this sort of widely written about program to re-educate extremists, try to prevent terrorism on the one hand, and on the other hand there were just a really draconian crackdown on anyone who was espousing the kind of views that people considered, that could lead to terrorism. So, part of it is there may be a lack, declining interest, but also there was this state response with a level of, I don't want to say brutality, or a level of kind of assertion of power, that like you couldn't do in a country like the U.S. it's the kind of thing you can do in a monarchy.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 48:41 So, guys, I want to actually move the rest of our conversation to the overtime, and I've saved the financial parts of this conversation, and the parts of your book, like I mentioned the Vision Fund and also was it Vision 2030? What was the name of the NEOM project and all the wild stuff, this like desire to build ... I think for listeners who aren't familiar, NEOM is basically, I would call it a kind of exclusive Babylonian, or post-Babylonian techno-utopian surveillance state.
- Justin Scheck:** 49:15 That's about right.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 49:16 Yeah, with like robot dinosaurs and like fake moons, and like glowing beaches. I mean, it was really wild. So, I have a lot of questions. I'll save those for the overtime, but like I said I also want to talk about SoftBank and the Vision Fund, and the origins of that fund and its relationship to Saudi Arabia. I'd also like to talk a little bit about Saudi's finances, because I'm curious to what extent those are. They're, obviously, tied up in oil prices, but oil prices have been persistently low for some time now. I wonder how that's impacted ... We know how it's impacted official foreign exchange reserves, and how that impacts the kingdom's stability.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 49:54 For anyone who's new to the program, Hidden Forces is listener supported. If you want to access the rest of this conversation, as well as the transcripts and rundowns to each episode, head over to patreon.com/hiddenforces. There's also a link in the summary page to this episode with instructions on how to connect your overtime feed to your phone so that you can listen to these extra discussions, just like you listen to the regular podcast. If you ever have any problems with that, and you're a subscriber, you're a Patreon subscriber, just hit me up on Patreon. I'll be happy to walk you through it and make sure that you get connected. Bradley and Justin, stick around. We're going to move the rest of our conversation into the overtime.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 50:37 Today's episode of Hidden Forces was recorded in New York City. For more information about this week's episode, or if you want easy access to related programming, visit our website at hiddenforces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you want access to overtime segments, episode transcripts, and show rundowns full of links and detailed information related to each and every episode, check out our premium subscription available through the Hidden Forces website or through our Patreon page at patreon.com/hiddenforces. Today's episode was produced by me and edited by Stylianos Nicolaou. For more episodes you can check out our website at hiddenforces.io. Join the conversation at Facebook,

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