

Murder in Istanbul

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As more and more details emerge about the disappearance on October 2 of the well-known Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, after he entered the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, it is becoming clear that a monstrous crime has been committed with serious worldwide implications.

The Turkish media has published photographs and video footage documenting the arrival at Ataturk airport—on the same day as Khashoggi’s disappearance—of a 15-member Saudi death squad. It included two air force officers, intelligence operatives and members of the elite personal guard of the Saudi monarchy. Also among them, according to Turkish authorities, was a forensics expert, who reportedly came equipped with a bone saw.

Turkish media reports indicate that Khashoggi had visited the consulate a week earlier seeking documents he needed for his planned marriage to a Turkish woman. He was told to return on October 2 at 1 p.m. Local staff were instructed to take the afternoon off as the 15 state assassins arrived. Khashoggi was, according to accounts of Turkish security officials speaking on condition of anonymity, dragged from the consul’s office and killed, and his body then dismembered with the saw.

This crime has attracted worldwide attention for its brazenness and brutality, as well as because of the identity of the apparent victim. Khashoggi’s journalistic career has been that of an insider within Saudi ruling circles, with close connections to some of the Kingdom’s most powerful officials and billionaires. He served as an aide to the long-time Saudi intelligence chief and former ambassador to the US, Prince Turki bin Faisal, and was known as an interlocutor between the monarchy and Western media and officials.

In September 2017 the kingdom’s de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS)—praised by the Western media as a great “reformer” and feted

by the Trump administration as well as America’s financial elite—launched a brutal crackdown, including against members of the royal family, prominent business figures and some journalists. The dictatorial actions were largely ignored or supported by the Western media. The inefable foreign affairs columnist for the *New York Times*, Thomas Friedman, who was wine and dined at a royal palace in Riyadh, wrote at the time that “not a single Saudi I spoke to here over three days expressed anything other than effusive support for this anticorruption drive.”

Khashoggi chose to avoid imprisonment through self-imposed exile in the US, where he was given a column in the *Washington Post* and initiated the process of becoming a US citizen. He used the column to criticize Mohammed bin Salman from a standpoint reflecting the divisions within the royal family itself. Most recently, he wrote a condemnation of the war waged by the Saudi regime against Yemen, an intervention initiated by MBS.

Despite his prominence, the Trump administration has been extremely reticent to call any attention to Khashoggi’s disappearance, waiting a week to make any statement. Trump told reporters at the White House on Tuesday that he knew “what everybody else knows—nothing” about the journalist’s fate. Meanwhile, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a statement calling on the Saudi monarchy to support a “thorough investigation” of its own crime.

It appears, however, that the US government was well informed of Saudi plans to eliminate Khashoggi, with the *Washington Post* reporting that before his disappearance, US intelligence had intercepted communications between Saudi officials revealing a plan to abduct the journalist.

Whatever the case, Saudi Arabia’s vicious monarchical regime has long been the linchpin of imperialist domination and political reaction throughout

the Middle East. These ties—under both Democratic and Republican administrations—have remained firm as the regime has routinely beheaded political opponents and non-violent offenders, putting 150 to the sword in 2017 alone.

Before Khashoggi's disappearance, an estimated 30 Saudi journalists had already been imprisoned or disappeared, without any protest from the Western powers, the US chief among them, who sell billions of dollars in arms to the kingdom and profit off its oil wealth.

The US-Saudi connection has grown only closer under the Trump administration, which has sought to forge an anti-Iranian axis based upon Saudi Arabia and Israel, while continuing and expanding US aid to the near-genocidal war against the people of Yemen.

This relationship—underscored once again by Washington's official reaction to the disappearance of Khashoggi—exposes the unmitigated cynicism and hypocrisy of US imperialism's "human rights" pretensions and feigned outrage over alleged crimes carried out by governments that it views as strategic rivals or that it is seeking to overthrow, from Russia and China to Iran, Syria and Venezuela.

The Khashoggi affair has far broader international significance. It is emblematic of a sinister shift in world politics, in which such heinous crimes are becoming more and more common and accepted. It recalls the conditions that existed in the darkest days of the 1930s, when fascist and Stalinist death squads hunted down and murdered socialists and other opponents of Hitler and Stalin throughout Europe.

Journalists have suffered the consequence of this change in global politics, with the Committee to Protect Journalists reporting 48 killed this year—a 50 percent increase over all of 2017—as well as another 60 "disappeared" around the planet.

Targeted assassinations, developed by the Israelis as a central instrument of state policy, were adapted by Washington in its so-called "global war on terror" on an industrial scale. The killings, torture and "extraordinary renditions" begun under the Bush administration—for which no one was ever punished, not to mention a "black site" torturer being elevated to director of the CIA—were institutionalized under Obama with the White House organizing its so-called "terror Tuesdays" in which targets for assassination were

selected from files and photographs presented to the president and his aides.

US wars of aggression that have claimed the lives of millions, the routine assassination of supposed "terrorists," and the wholesale repudiation of international law as an unacceptable fetter on American interests, have created a fetid global political environment in which crimes like that committed against Khashoggi are not only possible, but inevitable.

In the face of growing social tensions and sharpening class struggle rooted in the crisis of the global capitalist system, there has been a sharp turn to the right and toward authoritarianism in bourgeois politics, from the rise of Trump in the US, to the increasing strength of far-right forces in Europe, to the near election of a fascistic former army captain in Brazil. Under these conditions, the methods of assassination and disappearances as a means of dealing with opponents of the existing governments and social order will become ever more prevalent.

The fate of Jamal Khashoggi, whose high-level connections apparently failed to protect him, must be taken as a serious warning. Those who place themselves in the hands of the state in virtually any country have no reliable expectation that they will emerge intact.

The only answer to this threat—and that of a global relapse into fascism and world war—lies in the building of a mass revolutionary socialist movement to unite the international working class in the struggle against social inequality, dictatorship and war.



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