

# Trump backs Saudi Arabia, suggesting “rogue killers” murdered Khashoggi

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Two weeks after the disappearance and apparent murder of Jamal Khashoggi inside a Saudi consulate in Turkey, multiple reports indicate Saudi authorities are about to admit to his death but claim it was the result of an interrogation gone wrong. The aim of this concocted tale is to shield the Saudi regime and above all its de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (known as MBS), from direct blame.

The Saudi claims, if that is the story that is finally made public, are simply not credible. Khashoggi, a high-profile journalist and Saudi insider who was critical of MBS, has not been seen since he entered the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2 to obtain divorce papers. Initially Saudi authorities claimed that he had left the consulate but provided not a shred of evidence.

Everything points to the torture and murder of the journalist by a 15-member team of Saudi agents who arrived in Turkey on diplomatic passports and entered the consulate shortly before Khashoggi's disappearance. Turkish sources told the media that the country's authorities have audio and video recordings indicating that the journalist was killed inside the consulate and have passed on the evidence to other countries, including Saudi Arabia and the United States.

There is next to no doubt that such a brazen murder would have been ordered from the very top of the Saudi regime. Plans to interrogate or render Khashoggi back to Saudi Arabia were reportedly approved by Prince Mohammed. The aim of the operation was to silence a critic who had become a thorn in the side of the Saudi king.

In advance, US President Trump yesterday backed the Saudi regime by suggesting that Khashoggi might have been the victim of “rogue killers.” Having spoken to Saudi King Salman for 20 minutes on Monday,

Trump told reporters: “It wasn't like there was a question in his mind. The denial was very strong. The king firmly denied any knowledge of it. He didn't really know... maybe these could have been rogue killers. Who knows?”

Trump also dispatched Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Saudi Arabia for talks with the king and top Saudi officials. The purpose of the mission is clearly to ensure that nothing upsets the longstanding US relations with Saudi Arabia, which along with Israel, is the closest of allies in the Middle East.

These alliances are critical as the Trump administration prepares to ramp up its confrontation and potential conflict with Iran. The US is preparing to impose draconian new sanctions on Iran, including oil sales, and requires the assistance of Saudi Arabia, the world's largest producer, to manage oil supplies and prices.

Pompeo will also try to limit the damage to Saudi Arabia's “Davos in the Desert” investment conference scheduled for October 23–25. A number of companies, media organisations and other guests have already pulled out following Khashoggi's disappearance, but as of Monday, US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin was planning to attend.

Trump's remarks have drawn ridicule from his political opponents and media critics. The *New York Times*, for example, cited the remarks of Democrat Senator Chris Murphy who tweeted: “Been hearing the ridiculous ‘rogue killers’ theory was where the Saudis would go with this. Absolutely extraordinary they were able to enlist the President of the United States as their PR agent to float it.”

While Trump's suggestion is absurd, the hypocrisy of his critics in American ruling circles is staggering. For decades, successive US administrations, Democrat and

Republican, have maintained the closest relations with Saudi Arabia, turning a blind eye to their repressive, anti-democratic regime at home and their criminal actions abroad.

Saudi authorities beheaded about 150 people in 2017 and executed another 48 in the first four months of this year. Last year, as he was seeking to consolidate his grip on power, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman launched the mass detention of leading figures within the Saudi royal family and ruling class. Khashoggi, who has close ties to rival sections of the Saudi elites, fled to escape the round-up.

While critics in the US congress are threatening to impose sanctions on Saudi Arabia over the Khashoggi affair, they have ignored the criminal war in Yemen being waged by Saudi Arabia, with American political support and military assistance. More than 16,000 people have been killed and many more are in desperate poverty facing disease and starvation.

The trenchant criticism of Trump over the Khashoggi killing is bound up with tactical differences in the US political and military establishment over his unilateral abrogation of the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, which has alienated America's European allies, and his confrontational stance towards China. The unending allegations of "Russian interference" in the 2016 presidential elections are aimed at confronting Russia, rather than China first, as the US seeks to maintain its global dominance. Those who denounce Trump for absolving the Saudi regime without any evidence, have been in the forefront of unsubstantiated accusations of Russian meddling in American politics.

In the end, once the Khashoggi affair has dropped out of the headlines, there is little doubt that Washington will come together to reaffirm relations with Saudi Arabia. A comment yesterday by *Financial Times* analyst Gideon Rachman was critical of Trump's association with the Saudi crown prince, but concluded "do not expect radical shifts in US Middle East policy despite the Khashoggi scandal."

Rachman declared: "Without a good relationship with Saudi Arabia, US influence in the Middle East will slide even further... The US, which used to be the undisputed kingpin in the region, currently has a much more limited set of relations than Russia. America has cut all channels to Iran, and its relations with Turkey are likely to remain fraught..."

"If the US now carries through on the threat of 'severe' punishment for Saudi Arabia, it will also alienate the Gulf States, and could leave it without any close allies in the region—apart from Israel. For that reason, it is likely that the Trump administration will do its best to limit the diplomatic fallout from the Khashoggi affair—and that even Congress will tread carefully. Given the grim realities of realpolitik, it is hard to blame them for that."

The cynical response to the murder of the Saudi journalist is a further warning of the anti-democratic and repressive methods that will be used to silence opposition, not only by autocratic regimes in the Middle East, but by the so-called democracies of the world.



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