

Trump scrambles to cover for Saudi regime as crisis over Khashoggi murder mounts

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Following US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's emergency talks in Riyadh and Ankara, and amid mounting reports implicating Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the murder of dissident Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the Trump administration is scrambling to shield Washington's closest ally in the Arab World.

On Thursday, Trump continued to suggest that Prince Mohammed and his father, King Salman, may have had nothing to do with the disappearance and evident torture and murder of Khashoggi on October 2 in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. However, after being debriefed by Pompeo following the latter's talks with Prince Mohammed and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Trump told reporters it appeared that Khashoggi was dead.

The official line is that Pompeo secured a pledge from the Saudi leadership to hold accountable anyone found in the course of the regime's own investigation to have played a role in Khashoggi's disappearance. On that fraudulent basis, Pompeo advised Trump to give Riyadh several more days to provide an accounting, after which the White House will decide its response.

Meanwhile, unnamed Turkish officials and the pro-Erdogan newspaper *Yeni Safak* reported Wednesday on the contents of what they claim is an audio recording of the events that transpired in the Istanbul consulate following Khashoggi's entering the building on the afternoon of October 2. The 60-year-old self-exiled Saudi national and resident of Virginia in the US, who went from being a regime insider to a *Washington Post* columnist and critic of the new crown prince, ostensibly went to the consulate to obtain documents in advance of his impending wedding to a Turkish national. He never emerged from the consulate.

According to the Turkish accounts, he was almost immediately attacked by a team of 15 men who had flown that day to Istanbul from Saudi Arabia, brutally tortured, drugged, murdered, beheaded and dismembered. These sources say his fingers were cut off, but do not stipulate whether that occurred before or after he had expired. One of those reported to have been in the group is a forensic doctor

who carried a bone saw.

The *Washington Post* on Wednesday published a detailed profile of the 15 men, complete with photos and scans of travel documents. It reported that at least nine of the men have ties to Saudi security. The *New York Times* reported Wednesday that at least four are directly linked to the crown prince, having traveled with him as part of his personal security detail.

The claim of Crown Prince Mohammed that he had no foreknowledge of a plan to kill the former regime loyalist-turned critic is absurd on its face. He is an absolute ruler in a brutal totalitarian dictatorship, and is known to closely oversee the activities of his security apparatus and to be personally extremely cruel.

Pompeo's meetings on Tuesday with King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed were aimed at signaling continued US support while making a pretense of seeking a full accounting of Khashoggi's disappearance. The same is true of his meeting the following day with Erdogan, at which he evidently did not ask for a copy of the audio recording of the events inside the consulate.

For his part, the Turkish president has yet to publicly make any accusation against the Saudi leadership or endorse the reports being leaked by Turkish officials and the media. At odds with Riyadh over the Saudi regime's support for US-allied Kurdish forces in Syria, its backing for the el-Sisi dictatorship in Egypt, and its lineup with Washington over Iran, Erdogan appears nevertheless to be reluctant to sever relations with the oil-rich Saudis and may be seeking to use Riyadh's crisis as leverage in obtaining concessions.

On Wednesday after meeting with Erdogan, Pompeo told reporters on his plane back to the US: "I do think it's important that everyone keep in their mind that we have lots of important relations, financial relationships between US and Saudi companies, government relationships, things that we work on all across the world. The efforts to reduce the risk to the United States of America from the world's largest state sponsor of terror, Iran.

"We just need to make sure that we are mindful of that as

we approach decisions that the United States government will take when we learn all of the facts.”

This amounts to an unwitting admission of the outright criminality of both governments.

As the former CIA director and current secretary of state, Pompeo’s reference to the “things we work on all across the world” includes conspiring to strangle, destabilize and potentially wage war against Iran, in alliance with Israel and most of the other Gulf oil sheikdoms.

These “things” also include the near-genocidal Saudi-led war in Yemen, which has already killed some 50,000 men, women and children and threatens another 14 million with starvation and deadly epidemics of cholera and diphtheria. The Saudis could not carry out their relentless bombing and de facto blockade of the Arab world’s poorest country without US arms, its mid-air refueling of Saudi bombers, its provision of intelligence and help in selecting targets and the assistance to its naval forces.

It is notable that in all of the US press commentary critical of Trump and the Saudi crown prince, there is virtually no mention of the US role in the slaughter in Yemen.

There is as well the collaboration between Washington and Riyadh in suppressing the Palestinians and propping up Israel, and their joint support for Al-Qaeda-linked Islamist terrorists in the war for regime-change in Syria.

The US is particularly reliant on the Saudi monarchy at the present moment, in advance of its November 5 deadline for imposing sanctions against all Iranian exports. It is counting on Riyadh to open its oil spigot to prevent a spike in oil prices as a result of a sharp reduction in Iranian oil exports.

At the same time, the administration is coming under increasing pressure, both internationally and at home, to distance itself from the crown prince. It made a reluctant concession to this pressure on Thursday with the announcement that Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin would join the swelling ranks of Western officials, bankers and media organizations that have announced they will not attend next week’s international investors’ conference in Riyadh, to be hosted by Crown Prince Mohammed.

Dubbed “Davos in the Desert,” the event is on the brink of collapse. On Wednesday, International Monetary Fund Managing Director Christine Lagarde pulled out. Businesses that have made similar announcements include Uber, JPMorgan Chase, Viacom, BlackRock and Blackstone Group. CNN, the *Financial Times*, CNBC, Nikkei and the *New York Times* are among the media organizations that have withdrawn as media sponsors.

The likely debacle of the investors’ conference will intensify an already acute crisis facing the Saudi monarchy. The *Wall Street Journal* reported Thursday that global investors are growing increasingly alarmed at what the

newspaper called Saudi Arabia’s “debt binge” in recent months. In the two-and-a-half years since May 2016, the country has floated \$68 billion in dollar-denominated bonds and syndicated loans—up from zero.

In addition, Saudi Arabia’s sovereign wealth fund took out its first-ever bank loan last month, raising \$11 billion. And the national oil company Saudi Aramco plans to raise up to \$50 billion.

Reflecting declining confidence in the regime, the cost of insuring against Saudi default has risen by 30 percent since the disappearance of Khashoggi, and even before the Khashoggi allegations, foreign direct investment had fallen to historically low levels.

Also on Thursday, the *Washington Post* published Khashoggi’s final column for the newspaper. Introducing the piece, Global Opinions Editor Karen Attiah explained that the *Post* had received the column one day after Khashoggi’s disappearance, but had decided to hold it in the hope that he would reemerge. In publishing the piece, the newspaper acknowledged that the author had died.

The content of the column points to Khashoggi’s likely links to sections of the US state and intelligence apparatus. A former aide to the Saudi chief of intelligence and one-time ambassador to the US, Khashoggi had long been known as an interlocutor between the Saudi regime and Western media and government officials. He also had close ties to Osama bin Laden.

In his final column he compares the suppression of speech and expression in the Arab world to the Soviet “Iron Curtain,” and calls for the development of an “independent” news source in the Middle East modeled after the cold war-era propaganda organ Radio Free Europe.

This would in part explain the furious reaction of Trump critics in both political parties, the media and the intelligence establishment to the administration’s efforts to alibi for the Saudi leadership. Obama’s CIA chief John Brennan, for example, has repeatedly denounced Trump’s attempts to cover for the regime and insisted that the crown prince personally ordered the murder of Khashoggi.



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