

Saudi regime declares Khashoggi assassination case “closed forever” after sham verdict

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In the consummation of a judicial travesty, a Saudi court Monday announced the commutation of five death sentences previously handed down in connection with the grisly October 2, 2018 assassination of dissident journalist and former regime insider Jamal Khashoggi at Saudi Arabia’s consulate in Istanbul. Instead, the five who were sentenced to die were given 20-year prison sentences, while three others were sentenced to between seven and ten years.

The Saudi prosecutor’s office issued a statement saying that the announcement of the sentences “closes the case forever.”

This is despite the fact that no one who ordered and directed the assassination—including Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the oil kingdom’s de facto ruler—has been held accountable. The entire trial was held in secret, with both the press and the public barred, and now not even the names of those sentenced have been made public.

Presumably the eight who are being sent to prison were members of the 15-member death squad sent to Istanbul to murder Khashoggi, though there is no way to know if even this is true. This squad included Saudi intelligence operatives and military officers, bin Salman’s chief bodyguard and a forensics specialist who came equipped with a bone saw.

The commutation of the death sentences came after Khashoggi’s sons said in May that they had “pardoned” his killers, a statement apparently secured through a combination of the monarchy’s threats and bribes.

Turkish bugs planted in the consulate recorded Khashoggi’s horrific last moments after he entered the consulate for the purpose of obtaining divorce papers so he could marry his Turkish fiancée. This included his being physically subdued, injected with a drug and then

suffocated. The tapes, provided to the CIA as well as UN human rights investigators, included the Saudi forensic expert telling his cohorts, “I often play music when I’m cutting cadavers. Sometimes I have a coffee and a cigar at hand.” He added, “It is the first time in my life that I’ve had to cut pieces on the ground—even if you are a butcher and want to cut, he hangs the animal up to do it.”

None of this stopped the sham court in Riyadh from ruling that Khashoggi’s killing was not premeditated.

Exonerated at the outset of the trial were two Saudi officials who are known to have played leading roles in the murder operation. Saud al-Qahtani, formerly bin Salman’s most influential adviser, was identified as the ringleader in Khashoggi’s killing by the CIA, which established that he had exchanged 11 text messages with the Crown Prince immediately before and after the murder. Turkish intelligence, meanwhile, reported that al-Qahtani made a Skype call to the Istanbul consulate in which he insulted Khashoggi and ordered the death squad to “bring me the head of the dog.” The Saudi prosecutor said al-Qahtani “was not charged because of lack of evidence against him.”

Also cleared was Ahmed al-Assiri, a former deputy head of intelligence, who was initially charged with giving the order to dispatch the squad to Istanbul. The prosecutor found that this “was not proved.”

The principal culprit who was never brought into the dock was Prince bin Salman himself. The CIA issued a finding that concluded with “medium to high confidence” that the prince, who rules Saudi Arabia with an iron fist, had ordered the killing.

Agnes Callamard, the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial killings who investigated the Khashoggi case, also issued an investigative report in June 2019 that found “credible evidence” that the prince and other senior

Saudi officials were responsible for the killing. She tweeted on Monday that the verdicts “carry no legal or moral legitimacy,” and that the trial was “neither fair, nor just, or transparent.” She added that “the responsibility of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has not even been addressed.”

Khashoggi’s fiancée, Hatice Cengiz, denounced the Saudi court’s ruling Monday as a “complete mockery of justice.” The prosecutor’s closing of the case “forever,” she added, left the essential facts of Khashoggi’s murder hidden. “Who planned it, where is the body?” she asked. “These are the most important questions that remain totally unanswered.”

Turkey also condemned the verdict, with a spokesman for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan saying that the final verdict “fell short of meeting the expectations of Turkey and the international community.”

Ankara is holding a separate trial and has indicted 20 Saudi citizens on murder charges, though none of them are in Turkish custody.

While the US government issued no immediate reaction to the new verdicts, when the initial verdicts, including the five death sentences, were handed down in December, a State Department official called them “an important step in holding those responsible for the terrible crime accountable.”

The muted or non-existent response of Washington and other Western capitals, as well as of the major media, to the travesty in Saudi Arabia stands in stark contrast to their frenzied reaction to the non-fatal poisoning last month of the right-wing Russian politician Alexei Navalny. While in the first case there is ample evidence that the Saudi regime and its chief, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, were directly responsible for the brazen murder and dismemberment of Khashoggi, who was at the time working as a columnist for the *Washington Post*, no sanctions whatsoever have been imposed on the monarchical regime. In the case of Navalny, who was not killed, Western politicians and media immediately declared, without presenting a shred of evidence, that President Vladimir Putin ordered the poisoning and are demanding sanctions against and confrontation with Russia.

The source of this discrepancy is clear. Saudi Arabia has served as a linchpin of reaction and US imperialist domination in the Arab world, under both Democratic and Republican administrations alike, for three-quarters of a century. It is now an ally of both the US and Israel in an anti-Iranian axis that is pushing the region toward a

catastrophic new war. It is also the number one market for US arms exports, with Trump using his first trip abroad as president to fly to the kingdom and sign a weapons deal touted as worth \$110 billion.

Washington turns a blind eye not only to the Saudi regime’s responsibility for the Khashoggi assassination, but to even more grotesque crimes, such as the mass beheading of the regime’s opponents, including children. Meanwhile, both the Obama and Trump administrations have provided indispensable support for Riyadh’s near-genocidal war against Yemen, which has directly claimed over 100,000 lives, while bringing fully half of the country’s 28 million people to the brink of starvation.

Nonetheless, the assassination of Khashoggi, who only fled Saudi Arabia after Prince Mohammed bin Salman began a purge in 2017 of prominent businessmen and even members of the royal family, had an undeniable political significance. The *World Socialist Web Site* stated in the immediate aftermath of his killing and dismemberment that it was: “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.”

The acceptance of this crime has only deepened with the passage of two years. Riyadh has been chosen to host the G20 summit in November, when every major capitalist leader in the world will clasp the bloody hand and accept the hospitality of the royal assassin Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. All of them are prepared to carry out such crimes, and worse, against the working class and socialist opponents of the capitalist system.



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