Biden administration cynically invokes Khashoggi murder to “recalibrate” Saudi ties

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The US State Department Monday formally announced a ban on US visas against 76 Saudi nationals in connection with the savage October 2018 assassination and butchering of exiled Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. At the same time, it touted a “Khashoggi ban,” which will supposedly provide for similar sanctions against any government accused of “conducting serious, extraterritorial counter-dissident activities.”

The failure by the Biden administration to order any sanctions whatsoever against the principal author of the crime, Saudi Arabia’s de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, exposes the glaring hypocrisy of the US measures.

The administration’s highly circumscribed response to one of the most brutal state killings in recent history accompanied the release of a redacted US intelligence report. This four-page document included nothing more than what the entire world already knew: that the assassination, carried out by a 15-man hit squad that included the crown prince’s chief bodyguard, together with Saudi military and intelligence officers and a forensics specialist equipped with a bone saw to chop up the body, could not have been carried out without the authorization of Saudi Arabia’s absolute ruler.

“We assess that Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman approved an operation in. Istanbul, Turkey to capture or kill Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi,” the declassified report concluded. “The Crown Prince viewed Khashoggi as a threat to the Kingdom and broadly supported using violent measures if necessary to silence him.” That the CIA had issued a finding to this effect has long been known, despite the crude attempts at obfuscation by President Donald Trump, who claimed that it was impossible to determine bin Salman’s responsibility, and that the murder could have been the work of “rogue” elements.

That US intelligence possesses damning and conclusive evidence of bin Salman’s guilt is without question. Turkish intelligence had bugged the Istanbul consulate and recorded the entire grisly crime, including the forensic expert complaining about having to carve up the body on the floor, “...even if you are a butcher and want to cut, he hangs the animal up to do it,” he was taped as saying.

The Turkish recordings also disclosed the direct participation via Skype of the crown prince’s chief adviser, who instructed the hit squad to “bring me the head of the dog,” which, given the bloody character of the proceedings, can only be interpreted as a direct and literal order. The adviser, Saud al-Qahtani, was also monitored by US intelligence as he exchanged 11 text messages with bin Salman immediately before and after the killing. None of this evidence was included in the report ordered released by President Biden.

The Treasury Department placed a freeze on any US-held assets of al-Qahtani and banned any dealings with the Rapid Intervention Force, also known as the Tiger Squad, from which bin Salman drew his assassins.

Khashoggi’s Turkish fiancée, Hatice Cengiz, denounced Washington’s failure to take any action against bin Salman himself. “It is essential that the crown prince...should be punished without delay,” she said on Twitter. “If the crown prince is not punished, it will forever signal that the main culprit can get away with murder which will endanger us all and be a stain on our humanity.”

Agnes Callamard, special rapporteur on summary executions who led the UN’s probe into Khashoggi’s murder, issued a similarly stinging indictment of the US response. She decried the “lack of material information and evidence” in the four-page report

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released by the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Moreover, she told a Geneva press conference, “It is extremely problematic, in my view, if not dangerous, to acknowledge someone’s culpability and then to tell that someone ‘but we won’t do anything, please proceed as if have we have said nothing.’”

While during the election campaign, candidate Biden had claimed that he would turn Saudi Arabia into a “pariah” and would cut off all arms sales to the kingdom, his administration is now cynically defending its refusal to sanction bin Salman, claiming that its aim is to “recalibrate and not rupture” US–Saudi relations.

As for arms sales, a State Department spokesman said on Monday that each deal would be evaluated on a “case-by-case basis” according to “our interests and our values.” He added that the US remains “committed to its longstanding partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and to helping Saudi Arabia defend its territory as it faces attacks from Iranian-aligned groups.”

The principal group he had in mind was Yemen’s Houthi rebels, who have carried out sporadic rocket and drone attacks on Saudi facilities in retaliation for a six-year-long Saudi-led war and bombing campaign that has claimed the lives of 100,000 Yemenis and brought 13 million people, roughly half the country’s population, to the brink of starvation. While the Biden administration announced that it will cease the aid Washington has provided to this near-genocidal war, begun under the Obama-Biden administration, it will continue to provide “defensive” weapons that will be used to attack the country.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken justified the impunity granted to the Crown Prince bin Salman with the banal claim that “The relationship with Saudi Arabia is bigger than any one individual,” even though this “one individual” happens to wield absolute power in the kingdom. He has presided over not just the assassination of Khashoggi, but mass beheadings, the jailing of anyone daring to criticize the monarchical regime, systemic torture and the violent crushing of any hint of opposition from within the Saudi working class and the masses of brutally repressed migrant workers.

Among the outright lies trotted out to justify the pass for bin Salman was this from White House press secretary Jen Psaki in an interview Sunday on CNN: “Historically and even in recent history, Democratic and Republican administrations, there have not been sanctions put in place for the leaders of foreign governments where we have diplomatic relations and even where we don’t have diplomatic relations.”

This is sheer nonsense. Sanctions have been imposed against government leaders in Iran, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Sudan, Myanmar and other countries.

The reasons for the Saudi exception are 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 more than three-quarters of a century. It is also an ally of both Washington and Tel Aviv in an anti-Iranian axis that has threatened to push the region into a catastrophic new war. In addition, Saudi Arabia constitutes the number-one market for US arms exports, with an average of $10 billion in sales a year.

There is also the fear in Washington that a direct indictment of bin Salman could serve to destabilize the Saudi monarchy, opening the gate to a revolution against the Arab world’s most repressive regime.

Behind the Biden administration’s sham rebuke of Saudi Arabia over the Khashoggi murder lie definite imperialist interests.

The new Democratic administration wants to revive the politics of “human rights” imperialism, invoking democracy and supposed concern for human rights to justify the buildup to war, particularly against strategic rivals China and Russia. The so-called Khashoggi ban supposedly initiated in response to the murder in Istanbul is widely viewed as a weapon that will be turned against Beijing.

In a shift from the crudely transactional, chaotic and personalist foreign policy pursued by the Trump White House, the new Democratic administration wants a more systematic prosecution of US imperialist interests in preparation for “great power” conflict, particularly with China. To this end, it is seeking to subordinate the Saudi regime, as well as Israel and other regional allies, more directly to Washington’s global strategy.

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