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The Khashoggi Incident: Trump's Special Relationship With the Saudi Monarchy



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The Saudi crown prince and *de facto* leader of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad bin Salman bin Abduld Aziz al Saud (33), has cultivated an international reputation as a progressive reformer, claiming in particular to improve the lot of Saudi women. His March PR visit to the U.S. included a warm and fuzzy interview with Oprah, visits to Harvard and MIT, meetings with Donald Trump, Bill Clinton, Michael Bloomberg, Rupert Murdoch, and of

course his friend Jared Kushner. His purpose was two-fold: to improve the global image of Saudi Arabia, and to call for common action against Saudi Arabia's arch-enemy Iran.

What is this young man's record? In March 2011 during the Arab Spring, when the prince was already a senior advisor to his father the king, Saudi Arabia headed an intervention of Gulf states in Bahrain, to quell protests against the absolute monarch. (The great majority of Bahrainis are Shiites, while the king of Bahrain is Sunni. Riyadh views any advancement of Shiite rights and power in the region, both as an expression of heresy—against Sunni Islam—and as an expansion of Iranian Shiite influence.) In June 2017 (after Mohammad had been made crown prince) Riyadh led an ongoing blockade of Qatar, mainly to punish it for its relatively cordial relations with Iran. That November Riyadh detained the Lebanese prime minister during a visit and forced his resignation (later retracted); this was an effort to punish him for his acceptance of the Hizbollah party in the Lebanese cabinet.

Since 2015 the Saudis have been bombing Yemen in an effort to dislodge the (Shiite) Houthi regime in Sanaa, claiming it's a tool of Iran. Over 10,000 civilians have been killed and over three million people displaced; the Saudi school bus bombing in August killed 51, mostly children, and attracted brief international horror.

The crown prince (MBS, as he likes to be affectionately called) has consolidated his power by the brutal handling of his many rivals within the extravagantly polygamous royal family. (His grandfather Abdullah had at least 35 children by 30 wives.) He is driven by hostility to Iran and all its allies including the Syrian government, Hizbollah in Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen (and perhaps the 15 to 20% of the Saudi population who are Shiites, mostly in the oil-rich Eastern Province that faces Iran across the Persian Gulf). He has warmed up to Israel, berating the Palestinians for not making peace, and cooperating with the Israelis to isolate Iran. Anyone paying attention knows he's a brutal thug.

Trump has made it clear to the Saudi royals that he doesn't care about their human rights record. The strict application of Sharia law, which he condemns everywhere else—the stonings for adultery, the gay men tossed off buildings, the crucifixions—is not an issue. All that's the Saudis' business, a matter of national sovereignty. And the Pentagon has made it clear that it will back the Saudi military effort in Yemen despite many reports of Saudi atrocities. MBS may feel he can act with impunity in the world and the U.S. president will have his back. He also may have miscalculated.

The Turkish police have concluded that U.S.-based Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered in the Turkish consulate in Istanbul last week, by a hit squad of 15 Saudis

including a forensic doctor flown in to kill him during his consulate visit. (He was apparently there to complete paperwork related to his planned marriage to a Turkish woman.) He was filmed entering the building but never exited as his anxious fiance waited. The police speculate that his body was dismembered and its parts removed by the hit squad that returned to Saudi Arabia on the same day.

Khashoggi, well known as a journalist in Saudi Arabia where he was once close to the royal family, had written mildly critical op-ed columns about it for the *Washington Post*. These may have offended the famously thin-skinned prince. They may have occasioned a royal court order for the execution of Khashoggi in the consulate, which is technically Saudi sovereign territory.

If the journalist was in fact murdered, one must wonder what was going through the head of MBS when he ordered the deed. Did he suppose the truth wouldn't out? Did he expect Turkish indulgence, and Trump's acceptance? Did he think the extinction of a moderate critic was worth the risk to his and his country's reputation? (Perhaps he was recalling the assassination of Kim Jong-un's brother Kim Jong-nam in Malaysia last year, which had no enduring consequences; Malaysia closed its Pyongyang embassy for awhile but it has now reopened. And Trump is now friends with Jong-un.)

The fact that the Turkish police have a week after Khashoggi's disappearance announced their assumption of foul play will surely affect Saudi-Turkish relations. The two countries have more or less coordinated their actions in Syria but are at odds on Iran, with which Ankara enjoys cordial relations, and on Qatar which has become a Turkish ally in the wake of the Saudi-led blockade. Turkish public opinion will seethe in indignation at a cold-blooded state-ordered murder in Istanbul.

Now the U.S. press reports that U.S. intelligence had intercepted Saudi officials discussing the kidnapping of Khashoggi. This makes MBS look even worse. You sense he won't be invited back on Oprah. But he might well be welcomed back in Washington. Trump could proclaim the murder story another "hoax" and say he trusts the prince's word that there was no collusion. So far he merely says he's unhappy with what happened.

"I'm very concerned about it," he said Monday, "there's some pretty bad stories going around — I do not like it."

Trump says whatever comes into his mind, whenever he wants. He has mocked the Saudi monarchy as being reliant upon his military support to remain in power. He told a wild pep rally Oct. 2 (the very day Khashoggi was apparently killed): "King: we're protecting

you. You might not be there two weeks without us,. You have to pay for your military.”
Rapturous applause!

Similarly, Trump said Christine Blase Ford’s testimony on Kavanaugh was “very credible. “I thought her testimony was very compelling and she looks like a very fine woman to me, very fine woman,” Trump said last week. “Certainly [Ford] was a very credible witness. She was very good in many respects.” But then he trashed her as a liar. He’s nothing if not mercurial, unpredictable.

Trump flatters himself with having excellent relations with almost all world leaders, from Kim Jong-un (whom he “fell in love with) to Angela Merkel (whom in fact despises him). But he can go from hot to cold at any time. He heaps praise on Xi Jinping and then lobs high tariffs on Chinese goods. He gives Turkey’s Erdogan “high marks” for “doing things the right way” then applies sanctions due to the detainment of a U.S. pastor in Turkey accused of complicity in a coup plot. He could turn on MBS anytime.

The basis of the Saudi-U.S. relationship has been from 1945, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt returning from the Yalta summit visited with Abdul Azziz bin Saud aboard a heavy cruiser in the Suez Canal: cheap oil in return for arms and political support. It was understood at the outset that the U.S. would remain what it was, and that the Saudi kingdom would remain an absolute monarchy guided by religious clerics empowered to administer strict Sharia law.

Decades of U.S. rhetoric about freedom and democracy have always rung hollow as the U.S. has chosen as its key allies not only the NATO and Japanese bourgeois democracies but the dictatorships of Park Chung-hee, Ferdinand Marcos, Suharto, Thai juntas, Pakistani juntas, Latin American juntas, the Greek junta, Francisco Franco, Iran’s Shah, Haile Selassie, Mobutu Sese Seko, Augusto Pinochet, Fulgencio Batista, Papa Doc in Haiti... “The Free World” as taught in U.S. schools comprised the *non-communist* world. Still, the U.S. government, through the State Department, habitually expresses at least the minimal degree of “concern” about “human rights abuses” here and there. Saudi Arabia is always deplored in the annual assessments, but usually credited with making incremental advances. In any case the U.S. mass media pays little attention, until a school bus is bombed in Yemen, and then the matter’s dropped.

Now however Saudi Arabia is in our face, in the form of news reports on the apparent embassy murder. On Oct. 8, six days after the reported disappearance, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo publicly urged the Saudis to investigate The most haughty and unpleasant Heather Nauert, spokesperson for the State Department, tells journalists that in

the interval there was high-level discussion with Saudis but she has nothing to report about it.

So here's the thing. Trump, who is clueless, will sit down with Pompeo and Bolton. They will say that this looks bad, and the young prince is out of control. He needs to be reminded of what you told the Saudi king the other day: you might not be there two weeks without us. When you kill and dismember a U.S. resident *Washington Post* journalist with kids that have U.S. nationality you embarrass your friends, the president and his son-in-law, who could be shamed by that politically influential paper for not denouncing the murder of its contributor. You jeopardize your access to U.S. weaponry and refueling services in your ongoing Yemen war. You have to own up to this and apologize.

Somehow I don't think that will happen. No red line in the sand has been crossed. Trump and the prince probably already chatted on the phone and MBS has denied any knowledge or involvement. Trump can accept that and move on, or do what he's done with Russia and Turkey: apply sanctions in response to human rights violations. But given the triangular tension in the region (Turks, Iranians, and Arabs, all intervening in Syria and involved in Iraq) plus the complex relationships of Israel to both Turkey and the Saudis, any U.S. move in response to this incident could produce a new crisis.

Those in Congress militating against the Saudi war on Yemen and U.S. involvement in it will surely seize on this incident to curtail arms sales to the Saudis, and impose sanctions on Saudis considered responsible. Trump's stance will define him morally every bit as much as his stance on Kavanaugh, and he'll present it in front of a world which generally despises and mistrusts him.