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CIA director briefs Trump on Khashoggi torture tape

Gina Haspel, the director of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), briefed President Donald Trump Thursday on her trip to Ankara, Turkey, this week in which she met with her counterparts at the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) and other senior officials to review evidence related to the savage murder of journalist and former Saudi insider Jamal Khashoggi at Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul on October 2.

According to the pro-government Turkish newspaper *Sabah*, the evidence presented to Haspel included both audio and video tapes (apparently obtained through the bugging of the consulate by Turkish intelligence) of the torture and murder of Khashoggi and the subsequent dismemberment of his body.

Haspel's findings appear to have had no immediate effect on US policy toward Saudi Arabia, with the Trump administration thus far responding to the assassination of Khashoggi, a US resident who was employed by the *Washington Post* as a columnist, with only visa revocations for 21 Saudi citizens, all of them either charged by the Saudi monarchy in connection with the killing or fired from their posts.

The Saudi regime, meanwhile, has once again shifted its account of Khashoggi's death in its Istanbul consulate, which for 17 days it had denied ever happening. After claiming that he was killed in a "fist fight" with the 15-member death squad dispatched from Riyadh and then suggesting he was killed in a "chokehold" as part of a kidnapping attempt gone wrong, the country's attorney general issued a statement Thursday acknowledging that the murder was premeditated.

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“The public prosecution received information from the Turkish side through the Joint Working Group between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Turkish Republic, indicating that the suspects in Khashoggi’s case premeditated their crime,” Attorney General Shaikh Suood bin Abdullah Al Mo’jab said in a statement posted on the state Saudi news agency’s website.

Whether the latest change in the official Saudi account came in response to Haspel’s trip to Turkey and viewing of the evidence is not clear. The claims of some kind of accidental death, however, had become increasingly untenable under the steady flow of leaks from Turkish authorities exposing grisly details of Khashoggi’s death. Among the latest revelations was that his killers severed his fingers while he was still alive, reportedly to take back to Saudi Arabia’s de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as evidence of the mission’s success. Bin Salman had reportedly vowed to cut off the fingers of any Saudi writers criticizing his regime.

It has also become increasingly difficult for the Trump administration to sustain its alibis for bin Salman, whom it had promoted as a “reformer” and the chief ally of US imperialism in the Middle East. Asked by the *Wall Street Journal* whether the desert kingdom’s de facto ruler was responsible for the killing, Trump replied, “The prince is running things over there more so at this stage. He’s running things and so if anybody were going to be, it would be him.”

At the same time, he recounted a telephone conversation with bin Salman in which he said the crown prince had insisted he had nothing to do with planning Khashoggi’s murder and that those responsible were “at lower levels.”

Asked if he believed these denials, Trump responded, “I want to believe them. I really want to believe them.”

The statements follow a week in which the US president initially attempted to lend credence to the Saudi regime’s claims that it knew nothing about the Khashoggi murder, and then that perhaps he was the victim of “rogue killers.” Later, he appeared to be critiquing the Saudi killers for botching the job, saying that it “was carried out poorly and the cover-up was one of the worst in the history of cover-ups.”

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who traveled to Riyadh last week to discuss the matter with King Salman and his son Mohammed bin Salman, declared afterward in relation to Khashoggi’s murder, “I don’t want to talk about any of the facts, they didn’t want to either.” While there, he and bin Salman hailed the close alliance between the US and the criminal monarchical dictatorship.

Trump and other US officials have stressed the importance of the Saudi regime's role as a linchpin in US imperialism's Middle East strategy and its drive to war with Iran, while insisting that Washington will not halt arms sales to the kingdom, which are a major source of profits for American weapons manufacturers.

Thus far, the government of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, while insisting that Khashoggi was the victim of a "ferocious" premeditated murder and that all "those who ordered the crime and those who committed it" must be brought to justice, has failed to make public the tapes reportedly viewed by Haspel and has not charged bin Salman as the chief conspirator in the assassination.

Ankara clearly sees the Khashoggi assassination as a means of promoting the Turkish regime's interests in relation to Riyadh and Washington. It has shared tense relations with both the Saudi regime and US imperialism, including over Saudi Arabia's blockade of Qatar, a key ally of Turkey, and Washington's utilization of the YPG Syrian Kurdish militia as a proxy ground force. Ankara views the YPG as a branch of the PKK, the Turkish Kurdish separatist movement against which it has waged a bloody counterinsurgency campaign for more than 30 years.

While in political conflict with Saudi Arabia over a range of regional issues, the Turkish government also is not anxious to provoke a complete break with Riyadh, in large part out of concern that it would mean a cutoff of Saudi oil money that has been crucial to countering the country's severe economic crisis.

There is no doubt that Haspel's mission to Ankara was not just to review forensic evidence, but to see what price needs to be paid to secure Erdogan's collaboration in damage control over the Khashoggi murder.

The choice of Haspel for this mission has grim historical resonance. She herself is no stranger to forcible rendition and torture, having presided over a secret CIA "black site" in Thailand where detainees were subjected to waterboarding, prolonged confinement in coffin-like boxes and other forms of torture. She also was deeply involved in the illegal destruction of videotapes made by the CIA of torture sessions, including of those that she had overseen.

The dispatch of Haspel to Ankara to deal with the Khashoggi assassination only underscores the systemic criminality of US imperialism and its principal ally in the Middle East. This brutal murder has become a bargaining chip between regimes in Washington, Riyadh and Ankara that are all engaged in mass killings, assassinations, torture and political repression.

Whether these machinations lead to a CIA-orchestrated palace coup in Riyadh, replacing the “reformer” crown prince with another reactionary member of the royal family, remains to be seen.