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BY PATRICK COCKBURN

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## ***Boris Johnson is Rehabilitating Mohammed bin Salman With His Servile Visit to Saudi Arabia***



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Nobody has ever accused Boris Johnson of having an over-delicate sense of political smell when it comes to dealing with toxic leaders, so it is unsurprising that he is playing an active role in enabling crown prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, to escape from his status as an international pariah.

The justification for rehabilitating MBS is that more Saudi oil is needed to combat President Vladimir Putin by freeing Europe from dependence on Russian crude. Johnson's visit to Riyadh this week was preceded by the execution on a single day of 81 prisoners, many of whom said that they had been tortured into making false confessions, but, even

so, the Prime Minister brazenly claimed to see signs of positive progress in the Saudi kingdom.

Great dollops of hypocrisy are visible here because, despite their different political backgrounds, MBS and Putin became political untouchables in similar ways. In March 2018, agents from Russian military intelligence tried to poison Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury with the nerve agent Novichok. The Skripals survived the attack, but Dawn Sturgess died some months later after accidentally spraying her wrist with Novichok contained in a discarded perfume bottle.

Six months later in October 2018 in an equally bizarre plot likewise carried out by government agents, the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered and his body dismembered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. A CIA report said that MBS must have known about the plan, though he denies any involvement.

Both of the Russian and Saudi assassination bids were against minor opponents, suggesting that dictatorial rulers like Putin and MBS feel threatened by and will punish dissenters, however obscure, even though the killing will inevitably transform little-known critics into well-publicised martyrs.

The Khashoggi murder led to MBS being ostracised overnight and forced to terminate his permanent roadshow in the US, during which fawning American media ate out of his hand, taking seriously his claim to be modernising Saudi Arabia while ignoring the increase in arrests, torture, executions – and even wars.

In reality, MBS deserved to be shunned from the moment three years earlier in March 2015 when, as Saudi defence minister, he led Saudi Arabia into a war in Yemen which has similarities with Putin's attack on Ukraine on 24 February.

As with the Russian invasion, the Saudi action was supposed to be brief and triumphant, but seven years later it is still going on with 377,000 Yemenis killed directly and indirectly in the conflict according to the UN.

Around 4.3 million Yemenis have been driven from their homes and the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs is warning that 19 million are facing “acute food insecurity”, or in other words starvation.

Food rations provided by the World Food Programme to eight million people have already been cut and a UN appeal for funds for Yemen last week raised less than one-third of the \$4.27bn that the UN says is needed to fend off severe malnutrition and disease.

Some will say that to speak of MBS and Yemen in the same breath as Putin and Ukraine is to divert attention from Russian atrocities and let Putin off the hook for ordering the

invasion. But, on the contrary, bringing MBS, who has committed much the same crimes as Putin, in from the political cold, dilutes criticism of the Russian leader as a war criminal and reduces it to a term of partisan abuse. As of last week, the UN was still describing Yemen and not Ukraine as the world's worst humanitarian disaster.

In the event, the Johnson visit to Riyadh was only one prong of a counter-offensive by MBS to take advantage of the Ukraine crisis and the West's need for Saudi Arabia to increase oil production so it could potentially do without Russian oil or at least prevent the price rising to \$300 a barrel.

The *Wall Street Journal* reports that he wants more – not less – US support for the war in Yemen, assistance with the Saudi nuclear programme, and legal immunity from court actions against him in the US. This will be a tall order, particularly as the West's need for Saudi cooperation will depend on the length of the war in Ukraine and the terms under which it ends.

But diplomacy is not the only means by which MBS hopes to rehabilitate his reputation, as became clear early this month when the influential *Atlantic Monthly* magazine published a 12,000-word article with the title “Absolute Power” by Graeme Wood, at the centre of which is an interview with MBS. The author proudly boasts: “His last interview with non-Saudi press was more than two years ago.” Reading the piece, MBS may well feel that in giving the scoop to the magazine he or his advisors chose the right publication, but already the way in which the interviewer dodges around or gives cursory mention to negative events relating to MBS has attracted much criticism.

“Washington media has a long history of cooking up overbaked puff pieces on murderous autocrats — especially when those autocrats are key US allies,” writes Karen Attiah, a columnist in *the Washington Post*, adding that the piece “is part of this tradition, a case study in everything that is wrong with access journalism and the immoral fixation on powerful, brutal men.”

Wood has responded to criticism of his interview in a separate piece, writing: “*The Atlantic* [...] expects its readers to understand, without being told, that someone who dwells on his own indignities as the result of a murder, rather than on the suffering of the victim, might not be the perfect steward of absolute power.”

However, among topics getting scant mention is MBS as the defence minister in 2015 who created the Saudi-led coalition that joined the war in Yemen. Of this period in MBS' career, when he took a decision that led to the death of hundreds of thousands of Yemenis,

Wood says dismissively that he “needed a couple of years as defence minister to burnish his CV”.

On a different point, human rights organisations say that there is strong evidence that a proportion of the 81 executed a week ago were tortured into confessing. One of them, Mohammad al-Shakouri, alleged to have taken part in violent anti-government protests, told a court that he suffered severe pain in his back and mouth after being tortured. He said that he had “lost most of his teeth after security officers had repeatedly punched him in the face”. He withdrew his confession, but was still executed.

Wood does cover some aspects of the Saudi prison system after he was taken on a conducted tour of a Saudi model prison where political prisoners have seen the error of their ways. They praise the Saudi government and are engaged in rustic pursuits, as Wood discovered when he was taken “to a small garden, where prisoners cultivated peppers under plastic sheeting and raised bees and harvested their honey to sell at the prison shop”. This may be the most shameful article to appear in a mainline American publication since *the New York Times* was reporting 20 years ago on Saddam Hussein’s non-existent weapons of mass destruction. The punch pulling will give heart to every blood-soaked autocrat on the planet who will see that media rehabilitation is still within their grasp.

*Patrick Cockburn is the author of [War in the Age of Trump](#) (Verso).*

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