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Biden administration grants immunity to Saudi crown prince, murderer of Jamal Khashoggi

The US State Department has granted immunity to Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, shielding him from prosecution for the murder of US citizen and Saudi political dissident Jamal Khashoggi. The decision was disclosed last week, and widely reported on Friday.

This action shows that the Biden administration's claim to defend democracy and human rights—the supposed justification for its intervention in the Ukraine war and around the world—is a flat-out lie.

Biden said contemptuously during his visit to Saudi Arabia last May, when journalists questioned him about the murder and dismemberment of Khashoggi by a hit squad inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, “Why don't you guys talk about something that matters? I'm happy to answer a question that matters.” That is the authentic, arrogant voice of US imperialism.



In this image released by the Saudi Royal Palace, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, right, greets President Joe Biden with a fist bump after his arrival at Al-Salam

palace in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Friday, July 15, 2022. [AP Photo/Bandar Aljaloud/Saudi Royal Palace via AP]

The State Department was responding to an official query from a federal judge hearing the civil suit brought by Khashoggi's fiancée, Hatice Cengiz, and a human rights group Khashoggi had founded, seeking to hold bin Salman accountable for the murder. It issued instructions to the US Department of Justice to intervene in the case by informing the judge that bin Salman had sovereign immunity, "which the United States has consistently and across administrations applied to heads of state, heads of government and foreign ministers while they are in office."

The action appeared to be coordinated with the Saudi regime, since in September bin Salman was appointed prime minister by his father the king, who, according to Saudi custom, had carried that title, with his son as deputy prime minister. That appointment meant that bin Salman now qualified for the exemption from legal liability. Bin Salman has not traveled to Europe or the United States since the Khashoggi murder in 2018 to avoid possible legal problems.

Biden claimed during the 2020 election campaign that he would make Saudi Arabia a "pariah" on the world scene because of the Khashoggi murder. Once in office, he released an assessment by the CIA—which has vast experience both in murders and their cover-up—that bin Salman ordered the killing of Khashoggi, which was carried out under the direction of his personal security chief.

Fred Ryan, the publisher of the *Washington Post*, where Khashoggi wrote a regular op-ed column focused on the Middle East and particularly the Saudi monarchy, denounced the State Department, saying in a statement, "President Biden is failing to uphold America's most cherished values. He's granting a license to kill to one of the world's most egregious human rights abusers."

The record of bloody tyranny in Saudi Arabia extends far beyond the gruesome killing of Khashoggi. The monarchic regime kills dozens of its own subjects every year, mainly through public beheadings and hangings, especially targeting advocates of the rights of the country's Shia minority, who live mainly in the oil-rich Eastern Province. In the the most recent mass execution, last March, 81 men were beheaded at bin Salman's orders.

None of this matters compared to the Saudi supply of oil to the world market, and its lucrative arms purchases, mainly from American manufacturers, to bolster its critical military role in the Arabian Peninsula and against Iran, just across the Persian Gulf. Biden traveled to Riyadh in May to make amends to bin Salman for his campaign rhetoric and

plead with the de facto Saudi ruler to boost production to offset the cutoff of Russian supplies as a result of the war in Ukraine. Instead, bin Salman recently ordered a reduction in Saudi production, evidently seeking to force more US concessions, including the State Department declaration last week.

Biden's rapprochement with bin Salman is part of a broader pattern, in which Washington cultivates a network of autocrats and murderers around the world in order to maintain its global domination. Two weeks ago Biden traveled to Egypt to attend the UN-sponsored COP27 climate summit. There he was welcomed by the country's military dictator, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, shaking hands stained with the blood of thousands of Egyptian workers and youth massacred in the 2013 military coup that suppressed a budding revolutionary movement.

Biden praised el-Sisi's role in Gaza, where the military regime has helped prop up Israeli domination of nearly two million Palestinians by policing and virtually closing the enclave's border with Egypt. He pledged to preserve "our strong defense partnership," expressing the hope that "we can even say we're closer and stronger in every way."



President Joe Biden speaks as Egyptian dictator Abdel Fattah el-Sisi laughs during a meeting at the COP27 U.N. Climate Summit, Friday, Nov. 11, 2022, at Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt. [AP Photo/Alex Brandon]

This week, Biden's vice president, Kamala Harris, is meeting with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who aims to reprise his father's role as a dictatorial ruler of that country. Harris traveled to Manila Sunday after attending the summit of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Thailand.

In Bangkok, she had a cordial chat with Thai military ruler Prayut Chan-o-cha, who suppresses workers and small farmers on behalf of the monarchy, the big financial

interests, and the imperialist powers, especially the US and Japan. According to the official readout of the meeting, the two leaders “discussed our security cooperation ... and the benefits our alliance provides for our people as we promote a free and open Indo-Pacific.” That is diplomatic jargon for Thailand lining up with the US-led campaign against China.

The readout said Harris “reaffirmed the enduring partnership between the United States and Thailand, one that is rooted in common values, and discussed efforts to strengthen our cooperation across a range of bilateral and global issues.” Thailand’s military rulers have dispersed parliaments, rigged elections, banned opposition parties and violently suppressed antigovernment protests. To claim “common values” has an ominous ring.

Both Democratic and Republican senators spoke out in support of the State Department statement, citing the geopolitical interests of American imperialism in the Middle East as the overriding issue. Democratic Senator Mark Warner of Virginia said, “We need to be enough of a realist to realize that Saudi Arabia has been a bulwark against Iran. It is a leader in a very messy part of the world.”

Republican Senator Tom Cotton was even blunter. Asked about the issue during an interview on “Fox News Sunday,” he said, “Look, if we didn’t have allies and partners who don’t always share our political systems, our cultural and social sensibilities, we wouldn’t have any allies and partners. Saudi Arabia has been an important partner of the United States for 80 years. Presidents of both parties have worked with them.”

He continued, “[W]hat matters most about governments around the world is less whether they’re democratic or nondemocratic and more whether they’re pro-American or anti-American. And the simple fact is, Saudi Arabia has been an American partner going back 80 years.”

There is another issue in the embrace of the murderer of Khashoggi by the Biden administration, one which is perhaps even more important than the specific role of the Saudi regime in US foreign policy. As the State Department statement said, “Across administrations, there is an unbroken practice of the United States recognizing immunity for heads of government while they are in office—and we expect other governments to do the same for the United States.”

Former State Department lawyer Brian Finucane told the *Washington Post* that every US administration was concerned about American officials being prosecuted in foreign courts for war crimes and other charges. “Reciprocity concerns lie at the core of this rule,” he told the newspaper.

When it comes to murder and other barbaric acts, bin Salman, el-Sisi and Marcos Jr. cannot hold a candle to an American president. The victims of American military aggression, “targeted killings,” and economic blockades (Iraq, Iran, North Korea) number in the millions. No government since Hitler’s Germany has killed so many. Thus every American president fears legal consequences.

It is for that reason that the United States has refused, under both Democratic and Republican presidents, to join the International Criminal Court (ICC), and Congress even passed legislation authorizing US military action to rescue any American brought before the tribunal in The Hague, Netherlands.

As the leaders of the most powerful imperialist power, Biden & Co. can defy the toothless machinery of the United Nations and the ICC with impunity, as well as whitewashing the bloody crimes of their allies and stooges like bin Salman. Their downfall will not come through bourgeois diplomatic institutions, but through the mobilization of the American and world working class, in a revolutionary movement against the capitalist system as a whole.