

US imposes limited sanctions on Saudi officials over Kashoggi's murder

By Mike Head
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In yet another attempt to protect the Saudi Arabian monarchical dictatorship, the Trump administration levied sanctions on Thursday against 17 Saudi officials allegedly involved in the gruesome killing of journalist Jamal Kashoggi. The sanctions were unveiled just hours after the kingdom's public prosecutor said he would seek the death penalty for five people who have been charged in the case.

Both the timing of the US Treasury's sanctions announcement and the narrowly targeted character of the measures point to the White House seeking to shore up the latest Saudi version of the events, which explicitly denies that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ordered the murder inside the country's consulate in the Turkish city of Istanbul on October 2.

In effect, the US government is backing a bid by the Saudi regime to single out a handful of officials as sacrificial lambs. Some may be executed in another brutal exercise to save the monarchy, which has been a crucial linchpin of US foreign and military policy for decades.

The US Treasury said the targets of the sanctions—including Prince Mohammed's former adviser, Saud al-Qahtani, senior aide Maher Mutreb, and Riyadh's counsel-general in Istanbul, Mohammed al-Otaibi—were blacklisted for gross human rights abuses.

The cynical nature of this claim to oppose human rights abuses was underscored by the fact that the list did not include the crown prince or another close aide, Major General Ahmed al-Assiri, the ex-deputy head of Saudi intelligence. The Trump administration has been desperately trying to shield Prince Mohammed from blame, and sponsor the theory that “rogue actors” carried out the plot without his knowledge.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said the

individuals “targeted and brutally killed a journalist who resided and worked in the United States,” and “must face consequences for their actions.” He also said the Saudi government “must take appropriate steps to end any targeting of political dissidents or journalists.”

In reality, the Saudi regime had made plain its intent to continue its ruthless suppression of any internal dissent by declaring the crown prince totally innocent. Adel al-Jubeir, the kingdom's foreign minister, said a Saudi investigation had shown that “his Royal Highness the crown prince has nothing to do with this issue.” Instead, “this was a rogue operation,” by individuals who acted beyond their authority and “for their mistakes they will pay the price.”

Khashoggi, a *Washington Post* columnist, was a tactical critic of the Saudi government, reflecting divisions within the royal family itself. He was killed inside the consulate on October 2 by a specialised death squad dispatched by the Riyadh regime, which Prince Mohammed has ruled with an iron fist since he was anointed crown prince by his ailing father, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, in June 2017.

Under Washington's sanctions, any assets the 17 Saudi officials have within US jurisdictions are frozen, the individuals are blocked from entering the US, and US-based firms are prohibited from any transactions with them. These restrictions will have no impact on the massive US aid and arms sales to the regime, which is conducting a murderous war in Yemen as part of its long record as a key US ally throughout the region, including against Iran and Syria.

Conscious of the domestic and international outrage over the slaying of a well-known journalist by a key US ally, Trump's administration claimed it was leaving the door open to further measures. Secretary of

State Mike Pompeo said a US investigation would continue and his department would “work with other nations” to hold accountable those involved in the killing.

Earlier this week, however, US National Security Advisor John Bolton effectively ruled out any finding that implicated the de facto Saudi ruler. Bolton declared there was nothing on Turkey’s audio tapes of the killing that incriminated the crown prince. That was despite the Turkish government hinting that it holds separate, as yet undisclosed, material that brings the assassination to the royal court’s doorstep.

Saudi Arabia’s death penalty announcement was full of contradictions. The prosecutor’s office did not release the names of 11 people it said it has charged in the case, and claimed that the five people who face the death penalty confessed to their crime.

This announcement came with a third version of events. Initially, Saudi authorities denied government employees played any role in Khashoggi’s disappearance, saying the journalist left the consulate shortly after he entered it. Then, on October 20, the Saudi government acknowledged Khashoggi was killed inside the consulate.

On Thursday, Riyadh said the operation was ordered by Assiri, the then-deputy intelligence chief, who tasked a team of 15 operatives with returning Khashoggi to the kingdom, either voluntarily or by force.

At the media briefing, the public prosecutor’s spokesman acknowledged a degree of premeditation, saying there was evidence the team leader prepared for a possible execution in the event negotiations with Khashoggi failed. The spokesman said team members included a forensics expert tasked with covering up evidence if force had to be used.

After Khashoggi entered the consulate, the team leader concluded the journalist could not be persuaded to return and had to be killed, the prosecutor’s office said. Khashoggi was injected with a fatal dose of a tranquiliser, his body was dismembered in the consulate and his remains were handed over to a local associate. By this implausible account, the team then submitted a false report to Assiri, saying Khashoggi left the consulate after negotiations failed.

Washington’s backing for this fraud faced immediate difficulties. On Thursday, Turkey’s foreign minister,

Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, disputed the Saudi narrative. “It was not a momentary decision to dismember this body, it was pre-planned,” Cavusoglu said. “Necessary equipment was brought beforehand. It was planned how he will be killed and dismembered.”

The Turkish government, whose strategic interests in Syria and across the Middle East have come into conflict with those of the Saudi regime and the US, has conducted a drip-feed of evidence that has placed the conspiracy at the feet of Prince Mohammed.

Turkey is yet to release full transcripts of its audio tapes. However, they have been shared with allied intelligence agencies and even played to a Saudi agent, according to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Some members of the US Congress also expressed disbelief in the Saudi story, concerned that the whitewash was too obvious. Representative Adam Schiff of California, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said: “I don’t find the shifting Saudi explanations particularly believable. It has a ‘let’s round up the usual suspects’ kind of quality to it.”

This is window dressing. Successive governments in Washington, Republican and Democrat alike, have turned a blind eye to the Saudi regime’s crimes and repressive methods, which have included routinely beheading political opponents and non-violent offenders, putting 150 to the sword in 2017 alone.

Before Khashoggi’s disappearance, an estimated 30 Saudi journalists already had been imprisoned or disappeared, without any protest from the US or its allies, who sell billions of dollars in arms to the kingdom each year, profit off its oil wealth and rely upon it to enforce their geo-strategic interests in the Middle East.

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