

Republican senators say “zero question” Saudi prince ordered Khashoggi assassination

By Bill Van Auken
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US senators, including leading Republicans otherwise loyal to President Donald Trump, emerged from a closed-door briefing by CIA Director Gina Haspel on Tuesday expressing their strengthened conviction that Saudi Arabia’s crown prince and de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman was responsible for the October 2 assassination of self-exiled journalist and former regime insider Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

Senator Bob Corker, the Tennessee Republican head of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, told reporters that if bin Salman were brought before a jury on murder charges, “he would be convicted in 30 minutes.”

“I have zero question in my mind that the crown prince directed the murder and was kept apprised of the situation all the way through it,” Corker said.

“There’s not a smoking gun, there’s a smoking saw,” Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina told the media, referring to the bone saw brought to Istanbul by the 15-member death squad dispatched from Saudi Arabia for the purpose of dismembering Khashoggi’s body.

“This just confirmed what I thought all along. This all leads up to the crown prince,” declared Senator Richard Shelby, the Alabama Republican. “It would defy logic” to believe otherwise, he added, noting that members of the prince’s own royal guard were part of the assassination team.

The testimony by Haspel, who traveled to Turkey in the wake of the murder and reviewed evidence of the crime, including an audiotape of the brutal murder, came one week after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Gen. James Mattis testified before the Senate. Both insisted that there was no “smoking gun” proving bin Salman’s responsibility

and warned that proposed legislation halting US backing for the near-genocidal Saudi-led war against Yemen or any other significant sanctions against Riyadh would undermine US national security.

In a repudiation of the administration’s position and in anger over the failure of Haspel to appear with the two secretaries to provide intelligence on the Khashoggi assassination, 14 Republicans joined with Senate Democrats last Wednesday in a 63-to-37 vote for a procedural motion to advance the bill cutting off aid to the Yemen war.

Some Republicans who voted with Democrats to move the legislation forward now indicate that they will either vote against it or to amend it. If it is finally passed, it is certain to be blocked by the Republican leadership in the House of Representatives. Trump has also signaled that he would veto any such measure.

While the Senate leaders and leading members of the national security and appropriations committees who heard Haspel’s testimony would not provide details of the classified briefing, Graham reported that the CIA director had brought a team of intelligence analysts with her and said of the briefing, “you can be assured it was thorough and the evidence is overwhelming.”

There have been multiple reports that the CIA had concluded with “high confidence” that bin Salman ordered the assassination. More recently, it has been revealed, based on leaks from the CIA, that communications intercepts had detected at least 11 messages between the crown prince and the Saudi official overseeing the operation from Riyadh immediately before, during and after the gruesome murder. Also intercepted was a message from a close aide to bin Salman who headed the death squad to the Saudi official in Riyadh instructing him to “tell your boss” that Khashoggi was dead.

Haspel, who herself oversaw torture at a CIA black site in Thailand and was subsequently involved in the destruction of tapes recording the torture sessions, was reportedly furious over the leaks.

Another aspect of the Saudi preparations for the assassination has been brought to light by a Saudi exile in Canada who filed a lawsuit this week against an Israeli cybersecurity firm, the NSO Group, charging that the company's software was used to hack his cellphone and transmit conversations he conducted with Khashoggi to the Saudi authorities.

The software employed, known as Pegasus, enables the hacker to access all information stored on the phone and use it to secretly conduct video and audio surveillance of the subject.

Legal papers filed on behalf of the Canadian-based Saudi exile, Omar Abdulaziz, 27, said that he and Khashoggi had discussed setting up a website advocating human rights in the Middle East as well as plans to buy foreign SIM cards for activists in Saudi Arabia in order to open Twitter accounts to criticize the country's monarchical regime. Other messages from Khashoggi were reported to have sharply denounced Mohamed bin Salman.

While the Israeli company has called the suit "baseless" and insisted that it is not responsible for how customers use its software, the Israeli and Saudi government have covertly pursued closer relations in connection with the anti-Iranian axis promoted by Washington in the Middle East.

The declarations of the US senators Tuesday ran sharply counter to the Trump administration's position, which has been that there exists no conclusive evidence linking bin Salman to the Khashoggi assassination. The White House has likewise insisted that the murder of the US resident and *Washington Post* columnist must not be allowed to interfere with the anti-Iranian campaign, the hundreds of billions of dollars in investments and arms sales that the administration claims to have secured from Riyadh, and the Saudi monarchy's collaboration in keeping oil prices low.

Both the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* published worried editorials Tuesday criticizing the Trump administration's response to the Khashoggi assassination, expressing disquiet within the American ruling establishment over the callous handling of a vicious international crime that serves to

undermine US attempts to posture as a champion of human rights in its pursuit of imperialist interests. There are no doubt also concerns that Washington has tied its Middle East policy too closely to the interests of the Saudi monarchy, instead of subordinating Riyadh more directly to American imperialism's own objectives.

The *Wall Street Journal* suggested that Trump should have "shown more disgust for the Khashoggi murder" and described the US-Saudi relations in less "transactional terms." At the same time, it cautioned that "cutting off arms sales would go too far in our view."

The *Post* stressed that "Saudi Arabia and Mohammed bin Salman are not synonymous" and that the crown prince is "out of control," as evidenced by the "high-five" he exchanged with Vladimir Putin at the G20 summit in Buenos Aires. Bin Salman, the editorial stated, must not be allowed to "damage US interests in the Middle East," suggesting that some in the military and intelligence apparatus may be contemplating regime change within the Saudi monarchy.

The hypocrisy of all of these protests is underscored by the fact that the top leaders in the Senate from both parties, as well as the editorial boards of the major US newspapers, have had no difficulty going along with the crimes of the Saudi regime, carried out with the full support of both the Obama and Trump administrations, as tens of thousands have been murdered in Yemen and millions pushed to the brink of starvation.

Their overriding concern today is not the personal fate of Khashoggi, nor the savage character of his assassination, but rather that the murder and its exposure may be symptomatic of a deep-going crisis in the Saudi monarchy, the reactionary pillar of US imperialist policy in the Middle East.

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