

MIT refuses to cut ties to Saudi regime

By John Marion
22 February 2019

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The administration at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has made clear that it will not cut funding ties with Saudi Arabia, despite growing outcries from students and faculty.

Calls for the severing of the extensive ties between the university and the Saudi regime came after the killing of the Saudi dissident and journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Turkey in October of last year.

MIT President Raphael Reif's decision to reject these calls is based on a report and recommendation made by Richard Lester, an associate provost for international partnerships, who was commissioned to review the university's relationship with the Persian Gulf monarchy in late October 2018.

Last March, Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman visited the MIT campus for an "innovation forum" at which he was warmly received by Reif and Executive Vice President Israel Ruiz. In bin Salman's entourage during the visit was Maher Abdulaziz Mutreb, later accused by the US Treasury Department of "coordinating and executing" the Khashoggi assassination.

A now infamous photo on the campus shows Reif shaking hands with a smiling bin Salman, with Mutreb in the background.

The administration was forced to commission a review of the university's relationship with Saudi Arabia in the face of immense public pressure from the students and faculty.

Lester's preliminary report summarized what he referred to as the "large-scale activities that MIT is carrying out with the Kingdom." These activities include funding from the Saudi government and

state-owned companies for sponsored research in fields like energy and water management, and private and corporate gifts from Saudi sources.

Some of the largest Saudi sponsors of research at MIT include Saudi Aramco, the state-owned company that is the world's biggest oil and gas producer; King Abdulaziz City of Science and Technology (KACST), the Saudi National Science Agency and National Laboratory; and SABIC, one of the world's largest chemical producers.

The report does not give an overall dollar figure for Saudi-sourced gifts and sponsored research contracts, but a federal database shows that MIT has reported receiving more than \$77 million in gifts and contracts from Saudi sources over the past six years.

Lester's report acknowledges the role played by Saudi Arabia in the war in Yemen and "large-scale violations of political, civil, and human rights in Saudi Arabia." Lester justifies the relationship with Saudi Arabia by stating that the university felt the country "was on a path toward becoming a more progressive society" before the Khashoggi murder and that the university felt, "by expanding our engagement with the Kingdom we might contribute to this development, even if only in a small way." He laments that, "the Khashoggi murder has deflated many of those hopes."

Despite these statements, Lester ends his report by recommending against ending any of the university's current engagements with Saudi Arabia. He writes, "It is true that those organizations are part of a government that has been implicated in the murder of journalist Khashoggi, that is pursuing repressive policies at home, and whose participation in the Yemeni civil war has been widely condemned... However, there has been no suggestion that any of these organizations had any role in the planning and execution of the operation that ended in Mr. Khashoggi's murder."

The conclusion, in other words, states that since the

organizations themselves did not carry out the murder, the university can continue its relationship with the monarchy.

These developments underscore the deep integration of academia into the military intelligence apparatus. The continuation of such relationships with the Saudi regime is sanctioned only because the regime is a long-standing ally of the US in the Middle East.

Relations with Saudi Arabia are connected to the close integration of MIT and other universities with the US state apparatus. One upcoming event on campus will feature former Secretary of State and notorious war criminal Henry Kissinger, former Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman and hedge fund billionaire Stephen Schwartzman, to inaugurate the Stephen A. Schwartzman College of Computing.

Under the Obama administration, Carter oversaw American military participation in the Yemen war and the regime change operation in Syria.

Under the Ford and Nixon administration, Kissinger played a leading role in numerous war crimes, including the US war in Vietnam, the CIA-backed coup in Chile, and the Indonesian invasion of East Timor. Provost Martin Schmidt issued a statement Monday defending the inclusion of Kissinger, claiming that “last summer, Dr. Henry Kissinger wrote a provocative reflection for *The Atlantic* that addressed his views on the ethics and dangers of artificial intelligence, topics directly relevant to the launch program.”

In November 2017, after having been a guest in bin Salman’s “ornate adobe-walled castle,” Friedman wrote in *The New York Times* that “not a single Saudi I spoke to here over three days expressed anything other than effusive support for [his] anti-corruption drive.”

Meanwhile, MIT has been increasingly forced to separate from scientific collaborators in China and Russia. Funding received from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration for basic Space research on campus can no longer be used for bilateral endeavors with educational institutions in China. This restriction was mandated by the US Congress under the Obama administration in support of the US government’s “pivot to Asia.”

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