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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Bill Van Auken

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One year after Khashoggi murder, US CEOs flock to Saudi Arabia

Today marks one year since the savage assassination and dismemberment of dissident Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul.

The crime, characterized by its extreme brutality and utter brazenness, has yet to be fully investigated, while its principal authors, first and foremost Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, have gone unpunished.

Bin Salman used an interview with the CBS news program "60 Minutes" broadcast on Sunday as a vehicle for whitewashing his culpability in the assassination. He is anxious to clean up the Saudi monarchy's sordid image as Riyadh prepares to welcome a flock of US banking and corporate CEOs to an event dubbed "Davos in the Desert" scheduled in a few weeks.

The crown prince denied that he had ordered the killing, but added, "I take full responsibility as a leader in Saudi Arabia, especially since it was committed by individuals working for the Saudi government." He went on to dismiss the suggestion that the assassination had hurt Riyadh's relations with Washington, insisting: "The relationship is much larger than that."

Indeed, the relationship is "much larger." Saudi Arabia has served as a historic lynchpin of reaction and US imperialist domination in the Arab world, under both Democratic and Republican administrations alike, for three-quarters of a century. It now functions as an ally of both the US and Israel in an anti-Iranian axis that is pushing the region toward a catastrophic war. It is also far and away the biggest purchaser of US arms, with Trump

using his first trip abroad to fly to the kingdom and sign a weapons deal touted as worth \$110 billion.

This special relationship is between Washington and what is unquestionably one of the most reactionary regimes on the face of the planet. An absolute monarchy based on the most reactionary strain of Islam, Wahhabism, the Saudi regime labels its critics as “terrorists” and punishes them with beheading. More than 130 such barbaric executions have taken place this year alone, including of children arrested for the “crimes” of supporting protests and posting material critical of the regime on social media. In some cases, the victims’ corpses have been crucified and their heads exhibited on pikes to intimidate the population.

Washington’s indifference to this savage repression—as well as its active support for the near genocidal four-year-old war in Yemen, whose death toll is expected to reach 233,000 by the end of this year, according to the UN—gives the lie to all of US imperialism’s attempts to promote its predatory interests under the filthy banner of “human rights.” It also explains why bin Salman believed he could act with impunity in murdering Khashoggi.

Thus far, no one has been punished for the killing of the journalist, a former insider who edited pro-regime newspapers and served at one point as an aide to the long-time Saudi intelligence chief and former ambassador to the US, Prince Turki bin Faisal. Khashoggi fled the kingdom in the midst of a so-called “anti-corruption” crackdown in 2017 in which prominent Saudi figures were abducted, imprisoned and tortured in a hotel and shaken down for money. Obtaining residence in the US, he was offered a column in the *Washington Post* to criticize bin Salman, largely from the standpoint of the interests of rival factions within the monarchy.

As is well known, Khashoggi was murdered after going into the Saudi consulate in Istanbul to obtain divorce papers he needed to marry a Turkish woman. With the appointment set up well in advance, he was met by a 15-member death squad comprised of Saudi air force officers, intelligence operatives, leading members of the monarchy’s elite personal guard of the Saudi monarchy and a forensics expert, who came equipped with a bone saw.

In the run-up to the first anniversary of the assassination, two investigators who listened to tapes recorded on listening devices covertly placed in the consulate by Turkish intelligence have provided hideous new details about the crime.

Helena Kennedy, a British lawyer who participated in the UN investigation into the killing, recounted to the BBC's "Panorama" news program broadcast Monday night that the assassins referred jokingly to Khashoggi as the "sacrificial animal."

The Turkish bugs also recorded the Saudi forensics expert telling his cohorts, "I often play music when I'm cutting cadavers. Sometimes I have a coffee and a cigar at hand."

He went on to complain: "It is the first time in my life that I've had to cut pieces on the ground—even if you are a butcher and want to cut, he hangs the animal up to do it."

Kennedy also said that the tapes made clear that the man directing the operation was Maher Abdulaziz Mutreb, one of the most prominent members of bin Salman's security detail.

The UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial killings who investigated the Khashoggi case, Agnes Callamard, states that the journalist, in terror, asked his abductors whether they were going to give him an injection, to which they say "yes."

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"The sound heard after that point indicates that he is being suffocated, probably with a plastic bag over his head," she recounts. "His mouth was also closed—violently—maybe with a hand or something else."

Afterwards, Kennedy states, the bugs recorded someone saying: "He's a dog, put this on his head, wrap it, wrap it." She added, "One can only assume that they had removed his head."

No one has been punished for this grisly murder, and the Saudi authorities have never even revealed the fate of Khashoggi's remains.

Only 11 of the 15 death squad members have been criminally charged in Saudi Arabia. Their protracted trial is being held in secret. Among those not charged is Said al-Qahtani, formerly bin Salman's most influential adviser. The CIA has identified him as the ringleader in the killing, one of many carried out under his direction. It also established that he exchanged 11 messages with bin Salman immediately before and after the murder. Turkish intelligence has reported that al-Qahtani made a Skype call to the Istanbul consulate in order to insult Khashoggi and order his death squad to "bring me the head of the dog."

The horrific character of this crime notwithstanding, one year after Khashoggi's assassination, US banks and big business are prepared to put it behind them and grasp the bloody hand of bin Salman.

At least 40 US executives are preparing to attend the annual Future Investment Initiative (FII) conference, dubbed "Davos in the Desert," at the end of this month. Many of them bailed out of last year's event, held just weeks after Khashoggi's killing, sending subordinates to represent them in order to avoid being seen as openly endorsing the murderous methods of the Saudi monarchy.

Casting such qualms aside this year, senior executives from Wall Street's top financial firms—Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase, Citigroup and BlackRock—are all listed as coming, according to a report Monday in the *Washington Post*.

BlackRock's CEO Larry Fink told the *Post* that he believed "corporate engagement and public dialogue can help" the Saudi regime "evolve."

Who does he think he is kidding? The only "evolution" that BlackRock is interested in is that of Saudi Arabia's state-owned oil company, ARAMCO, into a privatized and publicly traded corporation out of which Wall Street can extract hefty new profits. The monarchy has indicated that an initial public offering (IPO) covering as much as 5 percent of the company could come in the next several months.

Also included on the list of those attending is Citigroup's CEO Michael Corbat and JPMorgan's head of global banking, Carlos Hernandez.

Jared Kushner, President Donald Trump's son-in-law, is expected to lead a delegation of US officials.

In the immediate aftermath of the brutal murder of Khashoggi one year ago, the *World Socialist Web Site* **warned** that the assassination was: "emblematic of a sinister shift in world politics, in which such heinous crimes are becoming more and more common and accepted. It recalls the conditions that existed in the darkest days of the 1930s, when fascist and Stalinist death squads hunted down and murdered socialists and other opponents of Hitler and Stalin throughout Europe."

The list of attendees at this year's "Davos in the Desert" expresses not only the profit grubbing of America's parasitic financial oligarchy, but also their acceptance and approval of such methods in dealing with opponents of existing governments and the capitalist order they defend. If Khashoggi's high-level connections failed to protect him, clearly the threat to working class and socialist opponents of capitalism is all the greater.