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By Kevin Reed
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Saudi Arabia sentences hit men to death, shields organizers of Jamal Khashoggi murder

Saudi Arabia announced on Monday that five people were sentenced to death in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi last year. Three others were sentenced to prison terms for a total of 24 years.

The verdicts were announced at a press conference in Riyadh by Saudi Arabia's public prosecutor. Two senior government officials—one who is a top aide to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—implicated in Khashoggi's gruesome dismemberment at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2, 2018 were cleared.

The court proceedings were closed to the public, foreign officials who attended were told not to disclose details of the trial, and the names of the five people sentenced to death remained concealed.

The essential purpose of the sentences is to shield the Crown Prince and his advisors. The official narrative is that there was no premeditation in the killing because the lower-level men were given instructions to bring Khashoggi back to Saudi Arabia alive while the agents went rogue and killed him in a last-minute decision “on the ground.”

Jamal Khashoggi, a dissident journalist working for the *Washington Post* and living in Virginia since 2017, went to the Saudi consulate to obtain divorce papers needed to marry his Turkish fiancée. When he arrived at the appointed time, Khashoggi was confronted by a 15-member Saudi hit squad—including Saudi intelligence and military men, members of the royal family's elite guard, and a forensics specialist with a bone saw—and was murdered.

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Fred Ryan, the publisher of the *Washington Post*, said of the sentences, “The complete lack of transparency and the Saudi government’s refusal to cooperate with independent investigators suggests that this was merely a sham trial. Those ultimately responsible, at the highest level of the Saudi government, continue to escape responsibility for the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi.”

A Turkish foreign ministry representative issued a press statement that said, “The ruling of the relevant court in Saudi Arabia announced today on the murder of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi falls short of the expectations of Turkey and the international community for the clarification of all aspects of this murder and the serving of justice.”

Agnès Callamard, a special rapporteur at the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, said Saudi authorities who destroyed evidence were culpable for the murder. She posted on Twitter, “The hit-men are guilty, sentenced to death. The masterminds not only walk free. They have barely been touched by the investigation and the trial. That is the antithesis of Justice.”

Although there has been no official statement from the Trump administration, an anonymous senior State Department official told the *Post* that the verdicts are “an important step in holding those responsible for the terrible crime accountable. We’ve encouraged Saudi Arabia to undertake a fair and transparent judicial process, and we will continue to do so.” The official added later, “Let’s not lose sight of the fact 1,500 people were killed in recent weeks in Iran, according to Reuters. I’m not changing the subject. But there’s a lot of atrocities around the world.”

Congressional Democrats also slinked around directly blaming the monarchy for Khashoggi’s murder. Adam Schiff, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee and fresh off the Trump impeachment vote, said, “The suggestion that this was a rogue operation or a snap decision is contradicted by the evidence and common sense.”

The two Saudi officials who were exonerated are well-known to have been directly involved in the murder operation. Saud al-Qahtani, formerly bin Salman’s most influential adviser, was identified by the CIA as the ringleader in Khashoggi’s killing by establishing that he had exchanged 11 text messages with bin Salman immediately before and after the murder. The Saudi public prosecutor said al-Qahtani was investigated but “was not charged because of lack of evidence against him.”

The other top Saudi official cleared is Ahmed al-Assiri, a former deputy head of intelligence.

Assiri had been initially charged for giving the order for Khashoggi's forcible return to Saudi Arabia, but the prosecutor said on Monday that his guilt "was not proved."

While Khashoggi's remains were never recovered, Turkish officials who investigated his disappearance and inspected the consulate found evidence that he had been murdered and that the scene had been tampered with by chemical experts.

Turkish bugs in the consulate recorded the Saudi forensics expert saying, "I often play music when I'm cutting cadavers. Sometimes I have a coffee and a cigar at hand," adding, "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."

Despite a finding in November 2018 by the CIA that Mohammed bin Salman had ordered the assassination, the White House has dismissed it. President Trump issued a statement at the time saying, "It could very well be that the Crown Prince had knowledge of this tragic event — maybe he did and maybe he didn't." and that "In any case, our relationship is with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."

Pressure had been building for the monarchy to finish the case because foreign direct investment into the Saudi kingdom has slowed significantly since the Khashoggi murder. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has been working on a plan to revamp the Saudi economy and make it less dependent upon oil. Meanwhile, restoring the full collaboration of Riyadh with the Washington and the Pentagon in the Middle East is a top priority for US imperialism.

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