

Continuing Furor Over Khashoggi's Murder

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It's hard remembering when the assassination of anyone, other than a key head of state, aroused as much international furor that won't die as Khashoggi's murder.

His elimination remains a headlined story over seven weeks since the October 2 incident.

The CIA and White House are at odds over who's responsible for what happened. Langley's damning conclusion, pointing fingers at Mohammad bin Salman (MBS), indicates opposition to his becoming Saudi king.

Key for the agency is he displaced a Western intelligence favorite – Mohammad bin Nayef, as well as Langley and some of Riyadh's closest allies believing he's too reckless and untrustworthy to lead the kingdom when his father, king Salman, passes.

Clearly he ordered Khashoggi's murder. Yet Trump and his regime hardliners refuse to lay blame where it belongs, sticking by MBS despite his reckless actions since becoming crown prince, destabilizing the region more than already.

On Monday, [Reuters](#) reported that "some members of Saudi Arabia's ruling family are agitating to prevent (MBS) from becoming king, three sources close to the royal court said," adding:

"Dozens of princes and cousins from powerful branches of the Al Saud family want to see a change in the line of succession, but would not act while King Salman – the crown prince's 82-year-old father – is still alive, the sources said. They recognize that the king is unlikely to turn against his favorite son..."

Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, king Salman's younger brother (age-76), appears their favorite to succeed him, according to unnamed Saudi sources.

He's supported by some royal family members, Saudi intelligence officials, and some Western nations. In 2017, he opposed MBS becoming crown prince, criticizing his actions.

In October, he returned to the kingdom from short-term self-exile in London, reportedly to challenge MBS or find someone else to replace him as crown prince – reportedly with US and UK guarantees for his safety.

His senior ruling family status may protect him. According to Middle East Eye sources, he was "encouraged to usurp" MBS, three unnamed senior princes backing him, a figure considered more stable and reliable than the crown prince.

Reuters said

“(s)enior US officials have indicated to Saudi advisers in recent weeks that they would support prince Ahmed...according to Saudi sources with direct knowledge of the consultations.”

US officials are concerned that MBS “urged the Saudi defense ministry to explore alternative weapons supplies from Russia,” said Reuters, citing unnamed Saudi sources, adding:

A May 15 kingdom letter, seen by Reuters, said MBS requested Saudi’s defense ministry to “focus on purchasing weapon systems and equipment in the most pressing fields” – notably Russia’s S-400 air defense system he and king Salman agreed to buy last year.

In early November, Saudi Ambassador to Russia Raed Bin Khaled Qrimli said talks on the purchase “are still ongoing. They are not over yet.”

The kingdom’s purchase was agreed on during king Salman’s first-ever state visit to Moscow in October 2017, MBS supporting it, angering Washington, pressuring Riyadh to cancel it, wanting the Saudis to buy Lockheed Martin’s Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic-missile system instead – despite superior S-400 technology, the world’s best.

Sources Reuters quoted and cited said actions by MBS weakened the House of Saud, adding:

“According to one well-placed Saudi source, many princes from senior circles in the family believe a change in the line of succession ‘would not provoke any resistance from the security or intelligence bodies he controls’ because of their loyalty to the wider family.”

Riyadh’s security apparatus “will follow any consensus reached by the family.” King Salman remains an obstacle to succession, sticking by his favorite son, “believing there(’s) a conspiracy against the kingdom,” said Reuters.

To succeed his father as king, MBS needs the kingdom’s 34-member Allegiance Council to agree to his ascension.

Saudi source told Reuters that MBS “destroyed the institutional pillars of nearly a century of Al Saud rule: the family, the clerics, the tribes and the merchant families. They say this is seen inside the family as destabilizing.”

The Khashoggi incident weakened his grip on power, whether enough to be replaced as crown prince remains to be seen.

A Final Comment

According to a [Middle East Eye](#) senior Saudi source, Mike Pompeo gave MBS “a roadmap to insulate himself from the (Khashoggi) scandal” during his mid-October visit to Riyadh, adding:

It “includes an option to pin (Khashoggi’s) murder on an innocent member of the ruling al-Saud family in order to insulate those at the very top” – the convenient patsy yet to be chosen.

I discussed the possibility in an October 18 article headlined: Saudis Likely to Follow Key Machiavellian Principle in Handling Khashoggi Incident Fallout, saying:

In The Prince, Machiavelli explained how rulers should distance themselves from state-sponsored criminality – shifting blame onto convenient patsies.

The Saudis are likely to follow this principle – if left with no other viable option. Recalling its Istanbul consul general, Mohammed al-Otaibi, and sacking him may, in hindsight, have been step one to shift blame away from where it clearly belongs.

There's virtually no doubt about MBS' direct involvement in authorizing Khashoggi's murder. All that's in doubt is whether he can remain crown prince.

The issue will likely come to ahead one way or the other in the coming days.

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