

Royal Road Ahead: Saudi Crown Prince Leaves G-20 Confident, Turning Corner After Khashoggi Scandal

World appears to be moving forward following shocking murder of journalist and Mohammed bin Salman appears happy to join them

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There was a [high-five from Vladimir Putin](#). And for [Xi Jinping](#) and Narendra Modi it was business as usual.

At home, Saudi Arabia's media trumpeted Mohammed bin Salman's meetings with world leaders, tweeting pictures of his encounters, which also included the presidents of South Korea, Mexico, and South Africa.

However, Western leaders appeared to avoid the crown prince during the family photo at the Group of 20 summit in Buenos Aires – after almost two months of global outrage at the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The only Arab leader there, the prince stood rather isolated at the end of the line, at times looking uncertain and nervous.

US President Donald Trump, [Prince Mohammed's most vocal backer](#), did not have time for a one-on-one meeting.

Argentina's President Mauricio Macri kept the prince hanging on when it came to finding time to talk.

During an informal conversation on the sidelines of the summit, [French President Emmanuel Macron was overheard admonishing Mohammed](#), saying he “never listened”, while the crown prince tried to assure him that “it's OK”. French officials later said the men were discussing the killing of Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul and the war in Yemen.

Similarly, British Prime Minister Theresa May opted to focus on those two topics, rather than economics and trade as her country struggles with the uncertainty of Brexit, the UK's departure from the European Union. May insisted Riyadh needed “to build confidence that such a deplorable incident could not happen again”, referring to the Saudi team sent to Turkey to murder Khashoggi.

The message Prince Mohammed probably took home from the G20 summit was that illiberal democratic, authoritarian and autocratic leaders were happy to do business with the kingdom and the crown prince despite persistent assertions that he ordered the killing.

Trump and western Europe's leaders appeared to play to public opinion but do nothing to threaten their relations with the kingdom. The US president also chose not to have a formal meeting with Prince Mohammed's [foremost detractor, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#).

The crown prince may also have been heartened that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada, which Saudi Arabia had a diplomatic row with earlier this year, was the only leader to raise the Khashoggi issue during the G20's formal proceedings.

Other US allies made clear the kingdom's financial largesse and willingness to guarantee the flow of oil would go a long way to ensure they would choose realism above principle.

The Saudi Press Agency reported after Mohammed's meeting with Modi that the crown prince pledged to meet India's oil and petroleum product needs.

Prince Mohammed may have achieved his goal of showing Saudi Arabia – specifically himself – remained a player by attending the G20 summit, [despite the storm surrounding Khashoggi's death still raging](#).

But the prince is not out of the woods yet. The kingdom, eager to project itself as a regional and world power, has suffered significant damage to its reputation which will take time and hard work to repair.

Just how hard depends on whether the US Congress decides to sanction Riyadh, if the Europeans will follow suit, and on Turkey successfully pushing for an international investigation into the killing.

"We have never seen Khashoggi's murder as a political issue," Erdogan told a news conference in Buenos Aires. "For Turkey, the incident is and will remain a flagrant murder within the Islamic world. International public opinion will not be satisfied until all those responsible for his death are revealed."

He described Saudi Arabia's response to the killing as "unbelievable".

The US Senate, meanwhile, pushed forward last week – [despite opposition from Trump](#) – with a [resolution that would end American military support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen](#), a conflict which has caused a major humanitarian crisis.



Yemenis queuing up to get their daily bread rations from a food aid distribution centre in Sanaa, Yemen, on November 28, 2018. Photo: Xinhua

Prince Mohammed's case was not helped by [the leak of a CIA report saying he sent 11 messages to Saud al-Qahtani](#) – a former close aide – at the time Khashoggi was killed. However, the intelligence agency admitted it lacked direct evidence of the crown prince “issuing a kill order”.

Qahtani has been accused of overseeing the killing and been fired from his position as Mohammed's adviser and information tsar. He has also been sanctioned by Washington.

The CIA claims Prince Mohammed told associates in August 2017 they “could possibly lure [Khashoggi] outside Saudi Arabia and make arrangements” if the *Washington Post* columnist refused to return to the kingdom from the US.

Nevertheless, the G20 summit suggests Prince Mohammed and the kingdom may have taken their first step towards putting the Khashoggi affair behind them. Even if US lawmakers slap sanctions on the kingdom, the prince is likely to remain secure in his position as king-in-waiting.

Keeping Khashoggi in the headlines will prove increasingly difficult as it seems much of the world has signalled that it is moving on.

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