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Saudi Arabia

Murder Most Foul: Accomplices After the Fact

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The abduction-torture-murder of Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey must have been planned as a kind of perfect crime in which the journalist would mysteriously disappear without a trace. It went “wrong” because the death squad dispatched by the Saudi royal court – which everyone knows means Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) – made several miscalculations.

They didn't anticipate that Khashoggi's fiancé would be waiting outside the consulate with instructions to sound the alarm if he didn't emerge within two hours. (Khashoggi evidently suspected he might be detained, even possibly kidnapped, although he never expected to be murdered on site.) They forgot that that he'd be seen on surveillance video entering the building, but not leaving. And they didn't know that Turkish intelligence, having bugged the premises, would have audio tapes of the killing and that the Erdogan regime would selectively leak information for its own complicated reasons.

The killers and those who sent them figured that their allies, first and foremost the U.S. administration, would be willing accomplices after the fact – that Trump and company would profess to have no knowledge of what had happened to Khashoggi. They weren't far wrong about that: Trump made every attempt to give the Saudi rulers the “benefit of the doubt” with Secretary of State Pompeo allowing them time “to complete their investigation” (coverup) and the appalling Treasury Secretary Mnuchin saying he still planned to attend MBS's showcase “Davos in the Desert” investment conference.

Gangster to gangster, Trump made clear that the profits from arms sales to Saudi Arabia are paramount, not mentioning the kingdom's past rescue of his failing real estate empire. The genocidal impact of those weapons on the people of Yemen was supposed to remain mostly hidden.

The arrangement came apart only when the series of blatant lies coming from Riyadh collapsed, with each new version exposing the fraud of the previous one. It's not that anyone actually believed, or was even expected to believe, that Khashoggi had left the embassy, or had been accidentally killed in a “fistfight” during some kind of “rogue operation” – rather, governments and media outlets were expected to *pretend* to believe it. The bumbling character of the coverup by a regime that's not accustomed to having its word questioned, whether internally or in the outside world, made the pretense unsustainable.

One member of the hit team has already been rubbed out, in proper gangland style, in a convenient “traffic accident” shortly after returning home. The rest, we're told, have been fired or arrested. They'll take the fall. Some may be quietly reassigned, others may even wind up permanently disappeared like Jamal Khashoggi. Whether such measures will salvage MBS's international stature as a “modernizing reformer” remains to be worked out inside the kingdom's factional knife wars, and in consultations among global capital's corporate and government mafia dons.

Without trying to unravel the geopolitics of all this, we do need to put MBS in a certain historical context. He's another in a considerable line of figures lauded in the West as promising reformers, or modernizers, or moderate bulwarks against “extremism.” It may be hard to remember now, but Bashar al-Asad was one. Saddam Hussein was another. For a time, Moammar Qaddafi was a third. The brutal Egyptian dictator al-Sisi has that status even now...and Turkey's autocratic strongman Erdogan is rehabilitating his own tattered image in the wake of the Khashoggi murder.

One way or another, these so-called reformers often outlive their usefulness and become disposable. Whether that happens to MBS himself is not certain, given Saudi Arabia's oil, its massive international investment and financial

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reach, and its strategic centrality in the war drive against Iran.

We shall see about the ultimate fallout. But we need to recognize that in their embrace of MBS and others like him, Western powers and U.S. imperialism above all make themselves willing accomplices – actually partners – in horrific repression and murder before, during and after the fact.

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