



Amid Khashoggi Criticism, Saudi Arabia Shows No Signs of Changing

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Saudi Ruler Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and his government have offered no indication that allegations of involvement in the kidnapping and reported murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi at a Saudi consulate in [Turkey](#) will affect the kingdom's future policies.

Despite widespread and enduring international condemnation, [Saudi Arabia's](#) most important supporters appear willing to help contain the outrage. Officials in [Egypt](#), [Jordan](#), Kuwait, [Lebanon](#), Oman, the Palestinian Authority, the [UAE](#) and the Yemeni government in exile in Saudi Arabia have all come out in support for Riyadh amid continued speculation it dispatched a special team that killed Khashoggi in the consulate.

President [Donald Trump](#) has also pushed back against the criticism, telling [The Associated Press](#) Tuesday that Saudi Arabia has been treated as "guilty until proven innocent." Trump has said Salman and his father vehemently deny any involvement in the disappearance of Khashoggi, a U.S. legal resident, outspoken critic of the Saudi government and regular contributor to [The Washington Post](#).

That support appears to be enough to reassure the Saudi government that there is little chance of punitive international action, including from Congress, experts say.

"So long as Trump continues to express his explicit and implicit support for MBS and Saudi Arabia, I don't see any major changes in the Saudi kingdom's foreign policies, at least not in the near future," says Noha Aboueldahab, a regional expert and fellow at the [Brookings Doha Center](#) in Qatar, using a popular acronym for the crown prince.

"It's important to remember that the arbitrary detention and torture of Saudi dissidents and activists is fairly routine," she says. "Khashoggi is a singular but high profile case because of his close ties to the Saudi royal family and his pieces in [The Washington Post](#). That, combined with the brutal scenes described by the Turkish investigators into his alleged torture and killing, is what drew international attention to Khashoggi's disappearance."

Aboueldahab and others point to other Saudi actions that have drawn widespread rebuke, including a military campaign against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen that has involved what the U.N. calls [war crimes](#). Saudi Arabia has also sought to isolate [Qatar](#) and has engaged in diplomatic and economic spats with [Canada](#) and [Germany](#) in recent months.

Each of those sparked criticism but ultimately did not adversely affect the kingdom and indeed those governments continue to provide what Aboueldahab calls "unconditional military and political support." So, experts question, why should Riyadh believe this incident won't turn out the same way?

"The Saudis don't seem to see this as a particular problem," says Emma Ashford, a research fellow at the Cato Institute. "Their sense seems to be that this will blow over."

"My own take is that the Saudis were really caught off guard with the reaction from the international community," says Colin Clarke, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University's Institute for Politics and Strategy. "They've done so many things before that would likely be considered more severe."

The Saudi Embassy in Washington, D.C. did not respond to requests for comment.

Attention to Khashoggi's disappearance on Oct. 2 has been buoyed in large part due to the government of Turkey – considered one of Saudi Arabia's chief rivals in the region. Turkish intelligence and government officials have released a steady stream of information to international news outlets in the subsequent weeks, including grim details that a team of assassins dismembered Khashoggi's body, that a cleaning crew wiped the crime scene of evidence, and that Turkey has audio of a brutal interrogation gone wrong that led to Khashoggi's death. Turkey released passport scans to The Washington Post of Saudi agents it says carried out the operation.

Trump previously said Riyadh would face "severe punishment" if evidence emerged that it was involved in Khashoggi's reported killing. But the president also backed away from talk of sanctions, saying that jeopardizing the billions of dollars of Saudi defense spending in the U.S. would harm American businesses. Subsequent reports say current Saudi business in the U.S. is worth \$4 billion, not \$110 billion as the president claimed. And the kingdom's prior reliance in American equipment means it could not shift quickly to a Chinese or Russian alternative, as Trump has said. Its F-15s, for example, still need spare parts and maintainers to be able to fly.

Yet this support from the U.S. does not mean that Saudi Arabia and its crown prince, who has spent the last few years pushing a narrative that he and his government are in a period of deep reform, won't come under increased international pressure.

Several high-profile individuals and companies, including Google, CNN, Bloomberg, World Bank President Jim Yong Kim and the CEOs of J.P. Morgan Chase, Blackrock, Blackstone, Ford and MasterCard, have already pulled out of sponsoring this year's Future Investment Initiative, a fundraising event in Saudi Arabia known as "Davos in the Desert."

And a growing number of members of Congress are pushing for sanctions under the Magnitsky Act, a 2012 law that would allow the government to further punish human rights offenders, including freezing assets and barring entry into the U.S.

"The United States must send a message that this killing will not go unpunished," Sen. Dianne Feinstein said in a statement on Tuesday. The California Democrat and ranking member of the Judiciary Committee added she would not support further arms sales to Saudi Arabia or ongoing U.S. intelligence, refueling and logistical support for its war in Yemen.

"For any country to feel emboldened to kill a man in this manner speaks to a breakdown in international norms that must be addressed," she said. "We must strongly rebuke any government that would kill an individual in its own consulate."

Speaking on the Fox TV program "Fox and Friends," Sen. Lindsey Graham said Tuesday that the crown prince "had this guy murdered," and that he has "no interest in engaging with this government" until "something new happens in Saudi Arabia." The South Carolina Republican, rumored to be a potential replacement for Attorney General Jeff Sessions, added that the crown prince has "got to go."

Trump dispatched Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to meet with Salman in Riyadh on Tuesday; Pompeo told reporters after his meeting that the crown prince pledged he would "conduct a thorough, complete, transparent investigation." Pompeo added that "they made a commitment, too, to hold anyone connected to any wrongdoing that may be found accountable for that, whether they are a senior officer or official."

But when pressed about the details of the incident, including whether Khashoggi is indeed dead, Pompeo remained firm.

"I don't want to talk about any of the facts. They didn't want to either, in that they want to have the opportunity to complete this investigation in a thorough way."

The secretary arrived in Turkey on Wednesday to meet with counterparts there.

Clarke says the widespread attention to this incident may cause autocratic countries to pause before they do something similar in the future, and that Saudi Arabia may have lost political capital it could use to gain the benefit of the doubt regarding potential future claims of abuse. But ultimately this incident will blow over, he says.

"Something else is going to dominate the headlines. The Saudis have been violating international norms for a long time now. A lot of money is involved, and people come crawling back to the money," he says. "I'm not sold that this is going to have a lasting impact."