

VANITY FAIR

“This Administration is Hoping This Will Blow Over”: The Foreign-Policy Community Loses Any Remaining Faith in Trump

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The only surprise about **Donald Trump’s** response to the death of Jamal Khashoggi, *The Washington Post* columnist who was killed and dismembered inside the Saudi consulate earlier this month, was how little Trump pretended to care. For decades, a succession of U.S. presidents have disguised the brutal realpolitik of America’s relationship with Saudi Arabia under a patina of moral superiority and willful ignorance. Trump dispatched with the illusion entirely. “This took place in Turkey, and to the best of our knowledge, Khashoggi is not a United States citizen,” he told reporters, computing the value of Khashoggi’s life in real time. “He’s a permanent resident.” On the phone with Fox News, when asked about the possibility of canceling an arms deal with Riyadh, Trump was similarly forthright regarding the hard economic calculus. “I think that would be hurting us,” he said. “We have jobs. We have a lot of things happening in this country.”

Inside Washington, foreign-policy experts hoping for a reset swiftly downgraded their expectations. And as the Khashoggi affair has played out, disappointment has morphed to cynicism within the diplomatic community. “It’s fairly clear that this administration is hoping this will blow over in some respect or another,” **Peter Juul**, a senior policy analyst at the Center for American Progress, sighed in an interview. On Tuesday, Secretary of State **Mike Pompeo** had made a perfunctory concession to critics by revoking the visas for some of the Saudi officials linked to Khashoggi’s death. But it was largely an empty gesture—18 of the 21 Saudi suspects were already under arrest, and likely fated to die in a Saudi prison. (At least one of the men involved in the “hit team” had already [died in a mysterious “traffic accident” upon returning to Riyadh.) “This was a perfect moment for Trump to step out and say, ‘We Americans reject this, because we believe in what we believe,’” former U.S. ambassador **Nicholas Burns**, said, incensed. “He missed it, because he doesn’t think about these things . . . I think we’re seeing the hollowness of his presidency. Truly. There’s no moral center to it.”

Notably, many are sympathetic to the bind the Trump administration has found itself in. “To be fair, any administration of either party—Trump, Obama, Bush, Clinton—would have found this challenging,” Burns told me. “I don’t think there’s anybody out there, a senior person who’s

worked in government, saying we should end our relationship with Saudi Arabia over this.” After all, Saudi Arabia is a critical U.S. ally—from both a strategic and economic standpoint. The Saudis serve as an imperfect ally of Israel, and are seen as a check on Iranian hegemony in the Middle East. “To be honest, when it comes to tangible policy, another administration may not have been all that different than Trump,” **John Glaser**, the director of foreign policy at the Cato Institute, told me. “A typical administration would almost certainly have been more critical of the Saudis following the Khashoggi murder, but probably gently so. With the exception of some symbolic penalties—formal condemnations, calls for investigation, possibly a temporary suspension of arms sales—the U.S.-Saudi relationship would probably not be fundamentally altered.”

It is too early to tell whether Khashoggi’s murder has brought the U.S. establishment to a tipping point. Over the past weeks, both Republican and Democratic lawmakers have voiced frustration with Saudi Arabia, its war in Yemen, and the Saudi regime’s apparent disregard for America’s multi-billion-dollar patronage. But Washington is also awash in Saudi money, which funds dozens of think tanks, P.R. and consulting firms, and provides sinecures for all manner of Swamp creatures. The Trump administration, certainly, has yet to telegraph any interest in altering its relationship with Riyadh, let alone with Crown Prince **Mohammed bin Salman**, who has a close personal connection with **Jared Kushner**. If there was a window for Trump to exert his leverage over Saudi Arabia—a desert economy with a singular, but depleting, natural resource—he missed the opportunity. Nor did he bother to engage with the European Union or NATO allies, as past administrations likely would have done, signaling the extent to which “America First” has also come to mean “America Alone.” Meanwhile, Juul lamented, the Saudis are “very much all in on Trump. They’re trying to see what they can get away with in however long he’s in office. They’re trying to run the table.”

Thomas Lippman, who served as the Middle East bureau chief for *The Washington Post*, put it more succinctly. “The crown prince is clearly going to brazen it out. There is not going to be any fundamental rupture in relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States,” he said. “I am not saying that people are not upset about it. I am saying that on the scale of grievances that Saudi Arabia and the United States have had over the past 75 years, this too shall pass.” Lippman, the author of *Saudi Arabia on the Edge*, noted with dismay the limits of America’s historical memory, and the sins that are excused in the name of global stability. “Nothing that happened to Jamal Khashoggi is in the same ballpark as the death of the collective outrage in the United States over 9/11. And it did not lead to even a temporary rupture of economic and strategic relations with Saudi Arabia.”

As the White House attempts to move on, the diplomatic community has turned to Congress. “I think if there’s going to be any movement on it, it’s going to come from Congress,” Juul said. Outrage on Capitol Hill quickly eclipsed the White House’s glacial response as grisly details of Khashoggi’s death became public in the week since Khashoggi disappeared inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2. “We deal with bad people all the time, but this is in our face,” South Carolina Senator **Lindsey Graham**, a traditionally staunch defender of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, said during an interview with *Fox & Friends*, urging the president to “sanction the hell out of Saudi Arabia.” Such indignation spans the aisle. As one congressional aide told me last week, “Across the Hill, there is just absolute disgust at what seems to have taken place.”

What Congress will do, if anything, remains unclear. Sending a strong bipartisan message to the White House, 22 senators released a letter that triggered the Global Magnitsky Act, requiring the administration to open an investigation into the circumstances surrounding Khashoggi's murder and issue a report on whether it will sanction the individuals involved. But Congress cannot force Trump to sanction anyone under the act. "All they can do is call for a report from the executive, and kind of potentially embarrass the executive if they choose not to impose those sanctions," said **Jarrett Blanc**, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment who previously served in the State Department. "That is certainly what they are doing so far."

There are other areas, however, where Congress has greater leverage. For instance, any future U.S. arms deals with the Saudis will require congressional sign-off, and lawmakers have broad authority over funding U.S. involvement in Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen. "We could, bluntly, really end their war, depending on how far we want to push in terms of the different kinds of support that we provide, and not providing it," Blanc said. "They could radically change policy in that area if they choose to." To that end, a bipartisan group of lawmakers led by Congressman **Jim McGovern** have introduced a bill that would ban all arms sales and military cooperation with Saudi Arabia, effectively ending U.S. support for the war in Yemen. Last week, Senator **Jack Reed**, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said the U.S. should block all offensive arms sales to Saudi Arabia and that the U.S. military should stop refueling Saudi aircraft fighting in Yemen.

Criticizing the war in Yemen, a proxy battle with Iran, is not necessarily new ground for some members of Congress, but the Khashoggi affair could catalyze change. As a second Congressional aide explained to me, "There is a sort of backlash around this—based on the media coverage and, sort of, the interest in Congress—that is unusual, and would seem to be sort of pushing the needle a little bit, maybe."

But with Congress on recess until after the November midterms, there is a concern that any momentum could fade. "The timing is unfortunate. The lame duck is unfortunate," the second Congressional aide said. "But I do think that the level of public pressure on the administration is important. Hopefully, if for no other reason than it's the right thing to do. People should be outraged about this."

For now, the White House is stuck with Mohammed bin Salman, a monster of its own making. "He has been really successful in doing one thing, I think that may be his only real success. He has eliminated all competition and gave no other alternative to himself," **Ali Al-Ahmed**, a Saudi dissident and founder and director of the Institute for Gulf Affairs, told me. "That is reality. You like him or not, that is a fact. There is no one." The big question for the Trump administration is what will its relationship with Saudi Arabia look like moving forward, knowing that M.B.S. isn't going anywhere anytime soon. "That is, to me, the long-term question we have to ask ourselves," a former high-ranking State Department official told me. "Regardless of how this story plays out, regardless of how the narrative eventually evolves. Do we have a partner in Saudi Arabia on whom we can depend to conduct himself and the affairs of his nation in that mature, thoughtful, careful way?"