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THE CURRENT: How should the US respond to Mohammed bin Salman's role in Khashoggi killing?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

On Friday, the Biden administration declassified an intelligence report on the killing of Saudi journalist and dissident Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, which concluded that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman approved of and very likely ordered the brutal murder.

To talk to us about the report's findings and how the Biden administration is responding is Bruce Riedel, senior fellow and director of the Intelligence Project here at Brookings. Bruce, thanks for talking to us today.

RIEDEL: It's my pleasure.

PITA: Even before this report was released, it was strongly suspected that the crown prince, often known by his initials, MBS, had directed the killing for a variety of reasons, from who the operatives were who carried it out, to the brazenness of it happening at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, and a United Nations investigation, all pointed a finger at Saudi leadership. So, what is it that's new or notable in this report? Is it just having an official conclusion, or are there some other details in it that stand out to you?

RIEDEL: I think there's something new and important about this. You're absolutely right. Jamal Khashoggi was murdered in Istanbul in the Saudi consulate more than two years ago. And from the very day that he was murdered, many of us, myself included, pointed the finger at the Saudi crown prince as the person likely to have ordered it. But it's an entirely different thing for the United States government, particularly the United States intelligence community, to come out in writing and say he is the perpetrator, he ordered this. That matter adds a level of conclusiveness that we haven't seen before. It also suggests that, in addition to what's in the unclassified paper that you saw on Friday, there are probably considerable classified information that further points the finger at MBS, which the intelligence community, for good reasons—protecting sources and methods—did not put out.

The report is also significant because it led to some significant findings. The Department of State and the Department of the Treasury have now taken action against some of those people identified in the report.

PITA: Since the report was initially released, there was additional reporting over the weekend that, since its initial release, the names of some three men who were listed as amongst those complicit for the murder had been removed from the intelligence report. What should we be taking away from that?

RIEDEL: It's very puzzling. I'm really quite, I wouldn't say stunned, but I'm certainly puzzled by this. It shows that this production has been done in a rather sloppy way, and I think that there are other indications of that as well. While there are significant punishments in here, there is, of course, not the punishment of the crown prince, and that seems to have been ruled out right from the beginning, when it really should have been one of the central features of the whole investigation. The three individuals who were taken off the list include one who is currently a senior counterterrorism official in Saudi intelligence service. Did they decide that he was too important an interlocutor to be included in the list? Which would mean that the list is becoming a politicized document, not an intelligence document. It's puzzling and it's a bit alarming to see this kind of change in a document which they've had months to review in the Biden administration and years in the intelligence community. Presumably, this document was prepared some time two years ago. Why is it now having to be adjusted before it goes to the outside world? It's a puzzle and the administration should be compelled to explain itself on this issue, if not to the press, at least to the Congress.

PITA: As you mentioned, the Biden administration has announced a first round of some visa restrictions and sanctions on Saudi individuals, including MBS' security detail. And White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki has said that, "I would say that we've made clear from the beginning that we are going to recalibrate our relationship with Saudi Arabia." But also, as you said, there has, as of yet, not been any direct action or repercussions for the crown prince himself. What would be holding the Biden administration back from taking a step like this, and what do you think might lead them to ever change their minds on that front?

RIEDEL: I think the sanctions that they have taken are important. Sanctioning his protective detail in effect means he cannot come with bodyguards to the United States of America. That in effect means he's never going to come to the United States. But it's not sufficient.

I agree with the former head of the Central Intelligence Agency, John Brennan, that there should be additional steps. Those should include: No meetings with senior American officials with the crown prince and a ban on any further visit to the United States made publicly clear. Those I think are essential. John Brennan served in Saudi Arabia, he is one of the foremost experts on Saudi Arabia in the American government, and, I think his ideas are well worth being instituted.

I think the administration is regrouping right now. They say they're going to have further clarifications on U.S.-Saudi relations. In addition to what they've done to the crown princes' protective detail, they have, of course, also abandoned support for the war in Yemen, thankfully, after six years, and restricted some arm sales to Saudi Arabia. I think they need to do more and I think if they don't do more, the Congress will do it for them, and that would be a bad place for the administration. The administration should own this issue; it shouldn't find itself being led by the Congress into doing more than it has. I think it needs to regroup and move urgently on the matter of sanctioning of the crown prince directly.

I think what is holding them back is the fear that the crown prince is going to be the king of Saudi Arabia for decades and decades to come. He is, after all, only in his 30s, but I think that rests upon a rather exaggerated sense of his position in Saudi Arabia. His position is fragile. He's made many, many enemies. He's alienated the entire Nayef wing of the family by imprisoning his predecessor Mohammed bin Nayef in prison from almost a year now, and according to some reports, torturing him. He's also alienated the Abdullah wing of the royal family, the wing that belonged to the last king, King Abdullah. He's humiliated many members of the royal family by literally shaking them down at the Ritz Carlton for

money. His position is nowhere near as secure as I think the Biden administration seems to assume it is, and it will become even less secure if it becomes clear that United States government is going to treat him like a pariah, the term that Joe Biden used in the campaign when he referred to the crown prince.

PITA: As you mentioned, a priority for the Biden administration is ending the devastating war in Yemen, especially the Saudi-led blockade, which has been preventing humanitarian aid from reaching the country. How is this likely to play into that both as a priority, and as a humanitarian necessity?

RIEDEL: Well, I give the president great credit. He has made ending the war one of his top foreign policy priorities. In his first speech on foreign policy, he listed this as his top priority. It should be. According to the United Nations, this is the worst humanitarian catastrophe our lifetimes. It is a catastrophe caused in large part by the Saudi blockade of Yemen's ports and seaports. The administration has called for an end to the war. It has appointed a special envoy to secure that end and it has ceased support for Saudi offensive operations against the Yemeni Houthi rebels. But it hasn't gone so far yet as to call for a complete and immediate unconditional lifting of the blockade, which is, I think what they need to do. The blockade is what is creating this humanitarian crisis. It is the direct cause of the malnutrition that is now facing 16 million Yemenis every day. They should not link a ceasefire to lifting the blockade; they should call for an end the blockade immediately. Getting the Houthis to agree with ceasefire it's not going to be easy. The Houthis are winning the war on the ground and they know it. They under very little incentive to end the war as it is today. The immediate requirement is to lift the blockade.

These issues are very much linked. Mohammed bin Salman is the architect of this war. This is his war. This is his dangerous, reckless adventure that has bogged his country down in a war that is now costing Saudi Arabia tens of billions of dollars every year and which has no end in sight. It's an indication of what kind of leader he would be if someday he actually does become. If you want to preserve the United States-Saudi relationship, and if you want Saudi Arabia to be a stable, effective force in the region, then you need to get rid of Mohammed bin Salman, because a Mohammed bin Salman-led Saudi Arabia will not survive. It will crash and burn. The Biden administration should bear that in mind now as it plans what to do in the future, recalibrates the relationship.

PITA: All right, Bruce, thank you very much for your insights today and for talking to us.

RIEDEL: Thank you. Thanks for inviting me.