



Lawmakers and Human Rights Activists Urge the Biden Administration to Take Punitive Measures Against the Saudi Crown Prince

This past week, the Biden administration declassified an intelligence report from 2018 that attributes the brutal murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The report, first written under the Trump administration but kept classified to protect the crown prince, illustrates the extent to which bin Salman was responsible for the killing of Khashoggi. However, despite the declassification of the report, President Biden has been criticized for not doing enough to punish Mohammed bin Salman. During his campaign, Biden promised to recalibrate the US-Saudi alliance, which included holding MBS responsible for his actions in ordering the hit on Khashoggi. Thus far, the administration has failed to live up to these promises, with no punishment being leveled against MBS. Lawmakers and human rights advocates pressed the Biden administration to implement sanctions on the crown prince, but it was reported that the White House never seriously considered doing so. Ultimately, the Biden administration has expressed its belief that the diplomatic cost of directly penalizing the Saudi crown prince is too high.

Prior to President Biden taking office, he had promised to hold Saudi Arabia accountable for their human rights violations, beginning with the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. However, after declassifying the report attributing Khashoggi's murder to Mohammed bin Salman, Biden has failed to implement any sort of punishment on the crown prince. Congressional Republicans and Democrats alike criticized the president for failing to take action, and warned that it would only lead to additional transgressions from Saudi Arabia and its crown prince. To defend his lack of action, Biden said there was no precedent for sanctioning the leader of an ally. This indicates that despite Biden's professed distaste for MBS, he is averse to abandoning the US-Saudi relationship.

Human rights advocates have also criticized Biden for not enacting punitive measures on Saudi Arabia for the ongoing violations committed by the Kingdom. White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki pushed back on the notion that the president wasn't strong enough against Saudi Arabia and MBS, and said Biden was acting in the "national interest of the United States." Since taking office, the Biden administration has halted offensive weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, issued statements criticizing the Saudi regime's human rights record, and froze the assets of members of the Saudi security services. However, human rights organizations have criticized these measures as being insufficient, and warned that MBS would be undeterred from additional destabilizing actions in the future.

Senior administration officials involved in the decision to abstain from punishing Mohammed bin Salman said there was broad agreement from within the administration that better ways existed to recalibrate the US-Saudi alliance. Several examples have been floated, such as a suggestion from former CIA Director John Brennan to bar Saudi Arabia from participating in upcoming international summits. However, both the United States and Saudi Arabia have affirmed their commitment to the partnership in recent statements, which indicates that both sides are looking to move forward together.