Saudi Relations at a Crossroads

ROBBINS: Hi. Good morning, everyone. Welcome to today's Council on Foreign Relations conference call on U.S.-Saudi relations at the crossroads.

We're very lucky to have with us Steven A. Cook, who is Eni Enrico Mattei Senior Fellow for Middle East and Africa Studies at the Council and the author of *False Dawn: Protests, Democracy, and Violence in the New Middle East*; and Ambassador Martin Indyk, who is a distinguished fellow and director of executive education at the Council, and he's former U.S. ambassador to Israel, former U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs. And they are both great experts on this region, so we're very lucky to have them.

I'm Carla Robbins, I'm an adjunct senior fellow at the Council, and a longtime journalist from *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and I'm also at Baruch College.

So that's who we are. And we're very lucky to also have the members here today. So just to give you a sense of the format, we're going to chat among us for about fifteen minutes and then we're going to throw it open to the members for questions.

So just to jump right into it, Steven, so the Khashoggi murder was so horrifying and so brazen, how could the crown prince—MBS as he is known—and his inner circle think they could get away with it? I mean, what does it tell us about the arrogance, the insularity, and the delusion about this leadership?

COOK: Well, I think—and thanks, Carla, and let me thank everybody for calling in this morning. I think, in a way, you've answered your own question when you talked about the insularity and arrogance of Mohammed bin Salman and his inner circle. I'm reminded of the *Newsweek*—of the *Bloomberg Businessweek* interview that he did that was posted probably a week into this—into this crisis in which Mohammed bin Salman's attitude was, essentially, I'm the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, my critics really need to get over it.

And I think that, you know, from there, from this relatively small circle of relatively young people, not all of them entirely worldly, when they look around the globe, in addition to the, essentially, the blank check that the Trump

administration has given the Saudis and the kind of way Mohammed bin Salman has become a focal point for this administration, if you take that and then add to it the fact that the Russians are killing their critics and dissidents in places as different as St. Petersburg and Washington, D.C. hotels, Turkey is the leading jailer of journalists in the world, Egypt just yesterday arrested an economist, an Egyptian economist, for writing a book that takes issue with some of Egypt's economic policies, China has disappeared the head of Interpol and put about a million people in concentration camps—none of those governments have been held accountable for these acts. So why should Mohammed bin Salman and his inner circle, who, you know, see Saudi Arabia's greatness and see themselves as great, why should they act any differently? And so that is how we got to this brazen and reckless murder.

I think, obviously, the Saudis have miscalculated and this is a tremendous, tremendous—done tremendous damage to the prestige of the royal family and the—and the king himself. And it leads, I think, everyone to wonder about the wisdom of elevating Mohammed bin Salman at such a young age.

I'll leave it there. I'll let—I'll let Martin jump in on this as well.

ROBBINS: Martin, I mean, does it—yes, sorry, jump in.

INDYK: Good morning, everybody. Great to be on. I think that the only thing I would add about Mohammed bin Salman is that he is extremely thin-skinned, does not take to criticism, does not accept criticism. He is an authoritarian leader in every respect, and believes on top of that that he is a great reformer—and, of course, is (hailed ?) particularly in the United States for that. And the combination, I think, of immense power, which he's concentrated in his hands for the first time I think in—certainly in recent Saudi history, he has all of the security and armed forces under his control. He's been able to eliminate any opposition within the royal family through a range of things to them that nobody would have thought he could get away with. And I think that just all adds to the arrogance and the belief that he can do whatever he likes.

ROBBINS: So he has been able to do whatever he likes up until now. He forced Lebanon's prime minister to resign, yanked him to Riyadh, you know, and put him on television. Saudi authorities detained hundreds of people in the Ritz-Carlton, their relatives, over alleged corruption charges and milked them for billions. They

arrested women activists, you know, at the same time they were claiming they were going to be great reformers by allowing women to drive. They lashed out at Canada over a tweet and jeopardized just a fundamental relationship with Canada. I mean, they've been doing—he's been doing thing after thing after thing and paying, as far as I can tell, no price.

This, on the other hand, has captured the world's attention, in part because of how horrifying the crime is and in part by how much the Turks have raised this, international tension has not let it go, in part because *The Washington Post*, thankfully, has continued to lead the charge on this, as well they should. Do you think he's going to tough it out? Or is this potentially a tipping point? I mean, we were just watching him at the investment conference yesterday when he walked in at this "Davos in the Desert" and he was greeted first by a standing ovation. Today he said—he called the killing a heinous crime that could—that could not be justified.

So can he tough it out like he's toughed everything else out? Or is this potentially something in which everybody else around him, including the king, says maybe I made the wrong choice here?

Steve?

COOK: I think that it's—it is interesting to see his change of tone. And in addition to the speech that he gave in Riyadh not long ago—and in that speech, he actually had nice words to say about the Qatari. And, of course, the Saudis and the Qataris have been at odds most recently over the course of the last year with the Saudi-led blockade on the country.

He also called Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. And the Saudi readout is that Mohammed bin Salman told the Turkish president that they will not allow this heinous crime to be a wedge between the two countries and that they will get to the bottom of it. I think that, you know, there is a significant change in tone.

I'm not entirely convinced, as some have speculated, that Mohammed bin Salman can be removed from office. Of course, it is up to his father. He does, as Martin indicated, control all of the security services, the ministry of defense, the ministry of interior, the Saudi Arabian National Guard, which is, essentially, the pretorian guard for the royal family, but he has caused a significant blowback on Saudi Arabia, something that elites, his opponents, both royal and nonroyal, cannot be

happy about this. This is a significant problem for Saudi Arabia.

I suspect, though, that if the king were to say I made a mistake and, actually, I don't think that my favorite son should be the next king of Saudi Arabia, it would cause even further problems and instability within the royal family. So I suspect what we will see and more likely is a continuation of this change of tone and perhaps a trimming of the sails of Mohammed bin Salman and perhaps the king stepping out his kind of executive chairman role to be more visible in the management of the country. Of course, that really also depends upon his health.

But we can see that some of the worst enablers of Mohammed bin Salman, particularly Saud al Qahtani, have been relieved of their—of their—of their jobs. So this is perhaps part of that process of trimming the sails of Mohammed bin Salman. But my sense is that it's too big a step for the king to remove him.

ROBBINS: Martin, what do you think?

INDYK: Yeah, I think that's my instinct as well. Of course, it's the land of the seven veils and it's really opaque when it comes to what's going on in the royal family. And it's not impossible, the king has the ultimate say and he could do it, but I think he would only remove him in circumstances where it looked more like this was not going to go away. I think that Mohammed bin Salman is fairly confident now that he can tough his way through it—through this.

And the critical element is how Donald Trump and the United States respond. And if Trump were to send a message to the king saying, look, this is really bad and we can't support this and there will be real consequences for our relationship if you don't remove him—he'd have to do that quietly, not publicly—I think that that would make a big difference. But I don't see any evidence whatsoever that Trump is prepared to take that position. And short of that, I don't think the other members of the royal family that would want to get rid of him and are circling at the moment, I guess, have the ability to actually convince the king that he needs to do that.

ROBBINS: And I want to move on to both of your assessment of how President Trump has been handling this. But before we do, I just want to quickly ask you, I mean, MBS, we listed all the bad things that he's done, but he's also perceived as someone who is committed to reforming Saudi Arabia, which is considered to be potential for potentially reforming the region, certainly he presents himself that

way. Does this weaken him, his ability to push reform within the kingdom? Or does this give more urgency for him to push reform within the region—within the—within the regime?

Either of you.

COOK: I'll start out. My view of Vision 2030 and the other reforms—and let's be clear, we're talking about economic and some social reforms, not at all political reforms.

ROBBINS: Political reforms, yeah.

COOK: But I think Vision 2030 and its kind of transformational project, it is inherently destabilizing. Let's think at a level of abstraction what in fact this is about. This is about changing the way business and politics have been done in Saudi Arabia over a long period of time. Mohammed bin Salman has accumulated power in a way that no Saudi king really has since his grandfather, the founder of Saudi Arabia, and that is to break vested interests that have been built up over many years that are analogous to the way in which Saudi Arabia has been run, which is getting critical constituencies certain personal fiefdoms that make sense political, keeps the peace within the royal family, keeps the peace with the religious establishment, it keeps the peace with nonroyal elites, keeps the oil flowing, but while it make sense politically to do that, it has made a mess of the Saudi economy where it can't evolve, it can't innovate, it can't transform. And so this Vision 2030 thing, it's supposed to break all of that and that creates enemies. And so I think it's rather destabilizing.

If you look at it this way, with the crown prince greatly weakened by this scandal and the way the Saudis have handled this terrible crime, I think it makes it much harder to undermine the vested interests that he's wanted to. So I don't think that they can stop it, but he certainly doesn't have the same kind of prestige that he had beforehand. I think it would be much, much harder for him to do some of the domestic things that he has done previously post the Khashoggi affair.

ROBBINS: So, Martin, I want to—

INDYK: I think that's right, but it's also—yeah.

ROBBINS: I'm sorry. I guess—I did want to ask you about President Trump and

what you were saying, just following up on that, is that it seems that President Trump is willing to overlook pretty much anything that any authoritarian does out there, in some ways very happily embracing authoritarians. And, you know, he called this the worst coverup ever as if somehow he would be happier with a better coverup. That said—(laughter)—yeah, like, what would be a good coverup?

That said, this administration seems to have put Saudi Arabia at the very center of their counterterrorism strategy, he keeps emphasizing how important this is for oil sales, for how important this is for arms sales and for the U.S. economy and Jared Kushner's Middle East—secret Middle East strategy. You know, how important is Saudi Arabia really for America's Middle East policy in reality versus in the perception of the Trump administration? And, you know, what's your assessment of, you know, what the stakes here are in the way that President Trump has been handling it?

And can you do that in about twenty seconds? No, I'm kidding. (Laughter.) Any and all of that would be great, Martin, to hear from you on.

INDYK: Yeah. Look, that's why I think it's important, when you look at the kind of geostrategic context in the Middle East, to bear in mind that Saudi Arabia is, in many ways, the last regional power standing in the Arab world. Egypt is totally preoccupied with its own problems and can no longer play, at least in the next decade I would say, the kind of leading role that it used to play under Nasser and Sadat. Iraq is out. Syria is out. And that really just leaves Saudi Arabia.

Now, Saudi Arabia is an oil power and its economic strength is a result of that. But as we can see in Yemen, it's a pathetic military power. And its ability to play the role of leader of the Arab world is questionable. They much prefer to follow on behind, to act discreetly—that's their traditional role—than to get out front and be the leader. However, Mohammed bin Salman, breaking with all Saudi traditions and also broken with this one, has advanced his kingdom under his leadership as, you know, a leader of the Arab world that's going to, first of all, lead them into Yemen and get stuck there, lead them into a siege against Qatar and break up the Gulf Cooperation Council as a result, and will lead the Arab world to peace with Israel by, in effect, almost quoting him, telling the Palestinians that their time is past and we should just get on with it.

And so the consequences of putting Saudi Arabia in this role is highly

problematic. But it is precisely the role that Jared Kushner and Donald Trump have decided they want Saudi Arabia to play. And so their Middle East strategy starts with a desire to get out. It's a continuation of the retrenchment policy of Barack Obama. Trump wants to get out of Syria, he wants to get out of Iraq, he wants to get out of Afghanistan, but he wants to subcontract America's Middle East strategy to the two powers: Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Now, Israel has tremendous capacity, can play an important role, but it's somewhat limited because of its inability to function in the Arab world, although it's improving in the way that we would want it to be able to do. The Saudis are the other partner in this process and they've gone wobbly on it, they're—under Mohammed bin Salman, they're getting us into all sorts of problems, not least of which is the Khashoggi issue. So we're just kind of bouncing from one problem or one crisis to another under MBS's leadership.

There are deal things that Trump could do in this situation, would be to recognize now that Mohammed bin Salman is weakened by the outrage of the murder of Khashoggi, that his—Trump's leverage over him, that Mohammed bin Salman, as I said before, needs Trump, that his very survival could depend on Trump working with him. And so we have the opportunity, if we decide we're not going to ask the king to remove him discreetly, to sit down with him—and Pompeo is the right person to do this, not Jared Kushner—and say, listen, we can't go on like this. If you go—if you're going to be our partner, you have to be a reliable partner and that starts with getting out of Yemen. We need to work together to get Saudi Arabia out of Yemen because that's just a quagmire that's benefiting Iran.

So it's that, kind of, we need to restructure our relationship with Mohammed bin Salman. If we decide that we can't get rid of him and therefore we should work with him, it's going to have to be a reformed Mohammed bin Salman. But I don't think Trump has any concept of the need to do that, let alone how to do that. And therefore, I fear that Mohammed bin Salman will survive, but he will continue on the path that only advantages Iran and gets the United States continuously into trouble.

ROBBINS: Thank you. So at this point we'd like to open the question-and-answer session to the members. So a reminder that this conference is on the record. And please limit yourself to one question, identify yourself, and keep it concise to allow as many members as possible to speak. And the operator will pick it up from

here.

OPERATOR: Thank you. At this time we will open the floor for questions.

(Gives queuing instructions.)

Our first question comes from Charles Duelfer.

Q: Yes, hi. No one has said anything about the role of Abu Dhabi, and in particular MBZ, who to my understanding plays a bit of a mentoring role with MBS. And I'm wondering, you know, they're subject to blowback from the Saudi case, but they also might have a role in shaping the direction.

INDYK: Well, I think it's a good point that Mohammed bin Zayed certainly played a role in promoting Mohammed bin Salman, both in Washington and more broadly in the West. But he is the junior not the senior partner, even though MBS is his junior and much less experienced, just because the UAE is small and unable to wield the resources that Saudi Arabia can. So they are essentially trying to shape Mohammed bin Salman, trying to get Saudi Arabia to move in the right direction.

They are confounded by what has happened. I believe that they feel that their work is really jeopardized now by the behavior of Mohammed bin Salman. And they really worry about the consequences for themselves because, (let me say ?), they tried with Egypt. They put a lot of money into Egypt, and they have essentially come to the conclusion that doesn't work. In Yemen they have basically reached the decision that they need to get out, and they are trying to convince the Saudis of the wisdom of getting out of Yemen but they're not succeeding, at least not so far. They may have an opportunity now if Trump were to insist as well, as I've suggested.

But I think that they now are very worried about how this is developing, and my sense is that they don't know how to engage with MBS at this point. They don't want to be associated with him. They don't want the connection that he may—(inaudible)—come to being his (prop now ?). I think they're keeping a very low profile at the moment and trying to figure out what they can do in these circumstances. I don't think they've given up on him, but they're very concerned about what this could mean for them in very negative terms.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from William Nash.

Q: Good morning, and thank you for your time today.

I want to push back a little bit, with trepidation, about the complete control of the security forces within Saudi Arabia. I saw something that was incomplete a week or so ago that there is some tremors within the Saudi Arabian National Guard. I know a couple of the senior leaders have been in and are out of arrest with some of the family members still there. Do you see any signs at all of low-level pushback that may be—that may build over time? Thank you.

ROBBINS: Steve?

COOK: Thanks. Hi, Bill. How are you doing?

It's a great question. And as you well know, the Saudi Arabian National Guard had long been in the hands of King—of the late King Abdullah's branch of the family, and one of the first things that King Salman did after coming to power upon Abdullah's death was to remove Abdullah's son from command of the Saudi Arabian National Guard. And so—but for all of those years, that one branch really did control. So it stands to reason that there's unhappiness—there's unhappiness there.

However, I think we have to be honest that it's extraordinarily hard to see at lower levels what is happening. And we do know that Mohammed bin Salman has essentially had the place wired so that they've been able to remove people who they've—who they've suspected of not being entirely loyal to the crown prince.

But, of course, you know, I think we, again, have to look at this with a certain amount of humility because there are all kinds of things that have happened in the Middle East over the course of the last seven or eight years that were never supposed to happen. So your point is well taken that there is always a possibility that some—there could be some rumbling that's going on at lower levels.

But everything that we can see suggests that Mohammed bin Salman has established—has established control. But I don't think—I think we should keep it within our realm—the realm of possibility that there are very unhappy men in uniform as a—as a result of what's happened.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from Peter Cowhey.

Q: Hi. Do you think that MBS might try to appease the U.S. by producing a lot

more oil?

INDYK: The oil question is an interesting one, and very important in the coming days because the United States is about to impose oil sanctions on Iran. Now, these of course have been announced some time ago, but they actually come into effect on November the 4th, literally a couple of weeks from now. And when that happens, it's anticipated that a million barrels a day of Iranian oil is going to be taken off the market in the sense that it's not going—nobody's going to be able to buy it because of the sanctions. And the market is fairly tight at the moment because of the problems with Venezuelan oil production, and the oil price has gone up I think to around $80 now. And there's a danger that if the Saudis don't come in and produce more oil to make up for the shortfall that could come from imposing sanctions on Iran the price of oil could continue to rise, creating some serious challenges for the global economy and, of course, creating a circumstance in which Iran could offer pretty steep discounts from the high price of oil to be able to sell its oil surreptitiously and avoid the sanctions.

So we do need Saudi Arabia to play that role. And I—you know, we haven't heard Trump say anything about oil. He's always talking about their arms deals, which are very dubious. But, in fact, we need them to play their traditional role of swing producer in these coming circumstances. And it's a reason why I suspect others in the administration, who understand this very well, are soft-pedaling the idea of getting into a confrontation with MBS over the murder of Khashoggi.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from Lee Cullum.

Q: Thank you very much for an enlightening presentation. I am wondering what this situation in Saudi Arabia means for the quasi-balance of power that we think we see between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East. Will it move things in some direction that we did not anticipate two weeks ago?

COOK: I guess I'll take that. I think it's a great question, Lee, because it is—this is one of those events that we could not have really imagined. And when we think about the balance of power in the region, you have to give it—all things, you know, aside, you have to give it to the Iranians. They are influential in Iraq. They are influential in Lebanon, obviously Syria, now in Yemen. Iranian influence around the region. And now, with a weakened crown prince, a weakened Saudi Arabia, it certainly redounds to the benefit of the Iranians.

So there may be some good to come out of it. It may now be a time when the United States can—as Martin was implying, where the United States can have greater influence with Mohammed bin Salman and the Saudis in terms of their blockade of Qatar, which, you know, divides the region and only helps the Iranians, and of course getting the Saudis out of Yemen. They went into Yemen to prevent what they called the Hezbollahization of Yemen and to counter what they perceived to be as Iranian influence in Yemen. And they, by dint of their intervention, have produced those two—those two outcomes. So certainly the balance of power is in favor of the Iranians in the region. This episode contributes to that. But there may, in fact, be an opportunity now.

Strikingly, in late August in conversation with senior Saudis, they were ready to continue to fight in Yemen, to increase and redouble their efforts given what they saw as Houthi obstructionism and recalcitrance. But now there may be a real opportunity for Mohammed bin Zayed, as well as—as well as the United States, to convince the Saudis that now it would be better for them to start thinking about how to get out of these conflicts.

INDYK: I'll just add, if I could, Carla, that this is a windfall for Iran, make no mistake. The fact that, as I said before, one of the pillars of American strategy in the region is going wobbly on us is a real problem, particularly at this moment when we're about to impose the oil sanctions, as I explained. And the Iranians have already, I think, decided to lower their profile and to kind of wait Trump out. And so we don't see them pushing hard in Syria anymore. They're just biding their time.

And the argument that they have been making is the United States has made a big mistake betting on Saudi Arabia. It's Saudi Arabia that just gets the United States into trouble. So this has really underscored their message and advantaged them across the region in all the positions that Steven described, particularly in Yemen, which is a low-cost, high-gain issue for the Iranians and the opposite for the Saudis. And so, in the end, Mohammed bin Salman has really helped the Iranians rather than helping us in containing them.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from David Skorton.

Q: First of all, thanks, everyone, for a very engaging conversation.

I'm from the Smithsonian, and I wanted to change gears and talk about whether

you can give any advice to tell us about the cultural institutions. The Smithsonian interacts in research, or public programs in 145 countries, including basically almost all the countries that have been mentioned today—not all, but almost all. Yet cultural institutions, as you know, have been struggling with what to do in the current situation. On the one hand, those of us who lead cultural institutions, I certainly firmly believe that institution-to-institution or people-to-people exchanges are incredibly important, especially when governmental relations are not easy. On the other hand, this is a very difficult situation, and we have stepped back from some activities in the last couple of weeks. I and my colleagues would sure value any advice or thoughts you might have.

ROBBINS: Good question.

COOK: It's a great question. It's an interesting one.

Just as an aside, I was in Saudi Arabia for a few weeks around this time last year and visited a world—UNESCO site near Ullah (ph). And Riyadh actually has a very interesting national museum, which is—it's kind of jarring because you kind of see the history of the world from the Saudi perspective. We've been looking at it from, you know—when I go to the Smithsonian and take my children there, we see it from a different perspective.

My view is exactly the one that you're articulating. It's very, very important for—at an institution-to-institution level to continue contacts, that professionals from the West continue to deal with professionals of all, you know, disciplines in Saudi Arabia and the region. I suspect that now is probably not the best moment to do it, and I would be extraordinarily careful, if I was the head of the Smithsonian or some other museum and traveling to Saudi Arabia, to ensure that my hosts do not put me in a situation where I have to spend any time with the crown prince or be photographed with the crown prince or be on television with the—with the crown prince. But I do think it's—I do think it's very important.

And I think that, you know, for all of the criticism that the crown prince had gotten, some of the things, some of the ideas that have been part of this transformation—about opening up the country, about providing social reform—is good for Saudi Arabia and is good for—is good for the world. You know, in walking around these places that are World Heritage Sites in Saudi Arabia, it was astonishing because I was basically there with six other people. And so I sort of

lamented the fact that in the years coming, you know, there will be huge numbers of tourists there. But I think that people-to-people and institution-to-institution contacts is actually rather important, although I might wait some time before I really engage in a serious way again.

OPERATOR: Our next question—

ROBBINS: Martin—before we go to the next one, Martin, as U.S. ambassador, what advice would you—would you give on something like that? I mean, obviously Track II is incredibly important. You know, people-to-people exchanges, they're really important. On the other hand, you know that anybody who comes right now to Saudi Arabia is going to be photographed the second they get off the—off the plane as a, oh, look, we're not—we're not being isolated by the world. I mean, what advice would you be giving?

INDYK: I think Steve's advice is right, that the relationship is with Saudi Arabia not just with MBS, and there's value in maintaining that relationship if it can be done at this point in a low-profile way. But we're not out of the woods yet. The crisis it not over by any means.

Just to give you an example, the director of the CIA, Gina Haspel, is in Turkey. When she returns, she will have to brief the congressional intelligence committees, particularly the Senate Intelligence Committee. And she will have to tell them what she knows not only from what she got from the Turks, but what we have from our own independent sources. We've put something like $50 billion into this exercise. We have our own means of knowing what happened there and who ordered it, and she's going to have to testify to that. And the Senate is talking about sanctioning Saudi Arabia. And if we go down that route, you know, we will be in a real crisis with the Saudis and cultural relations will become roadkill in that process.

So I think it's a time to basically lower the profile. I would suspend rather than cancel, to the extent that's necessary, and just wait and see how this plays itself out.

ROBBINS: Thanks.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from Mazie Minovi (ph). (Pause.) Your line is live.

OK. Our next question comes from Paul Shankman (sp).

Q: Yeah, thanks for doing the call. I'd be interested to ask a couple questions based off of what you know of MBS's history, the way that he's responded to this most recent crisis, and then anybody in particular who's been punished so far as a result of it. Do you have any indication, first off, how much MBS knew about this—about this operation, whatever happened to Khashoggi while he was in the Saudi consulate? And how important—secondly, how important do you think that's going to be in terms of how Saudi reconciles itself in the future and how the U.S. reacts?

COOK: A couple things on this. Just broadly speaking about the way in which Saudi Arabia is run, I don't think it's too much of an exaggeration—and, obviously, Martin has a much closer view of this, given his past government service—but I don't think it's too much of an exaggeration to suggest that this is a country that's run by about five people—(laughter)—and so it's kind of—the kind of things that we're talking about doesn't seem to me that it's likely that Mohammed bin Salman was in the dark.

There has been some reporting, mostly from the Turkish press but it showed up in the—in the Western press—and I caution everybody to keep everything that they do in the Turkish press, especially the pro-government Turkish press, which is most of the press in Turkey, to treat it carefully—but that actually that Mohammed bin Salman communicated with Khashoggi in the consulate, trying to convince him to return home, and when he refused that is when—it was after that he was killed and mutilated, as they say.

So that's why, when other Saudi officials returned to Riyadh after going—their initial, you know, delegation to allegedly get to the bottom of this—they were (telling us ?) that it's going to be very, very hard for Saudi Arabia to get out of this one. And I think that, as Martin indicated before, the president of the United States very much wants the Saudis to tell a story that is credible enough for him to believe so he can move on with his larger goals of—his larger goals in countering Islam. The—

ROBBINS: He wants—he wants a better—he wants a better cover-up?

COOK: He wants a better cover-up, and once this—but that's going to be much harder that the Saudis came up with a cover-up that—initial cover-up that was

hard to believe—by, you know, a country mile it's hard to believe. So what—and, of course, the Congress is in an entirely different place than the administration on this. You have bipartisan support for holding the Saudis accountable, not just for the killing of Jamal Khashoggi but using this brutal murder as a way of holding them accountable on Yemen as well.

So this is a—it's a significant—it's going to be a significant problem for the administration which wants to carry on perhaps not as business as usual but to kind of make this issue go away so that they can get on with the business of countering the Iranians. It's going to be very, very hard for them to reconcile these two things.

INDYK: I'd just say—

ROBBINS: Can I ask a—

INDYK: —two points.

ROBBINS: Martin, can I ask a follow-up question and then—Martin, because I think it may expand into what you're saying. And, Martin, you said before and you mentioned the Congress and the pressure that was going to be coming from them, particularly after Gina Haspel was called up to the intel committees—the Saudis have said that if they were—if they were punished that they would—they would whack back even harder, although it's unclear what they would do.

I mean, what do you think the Saudis would do if the Congress were to impose really serious sanctions? I mean, so far all the administration has done is said that the twenty-one people who are suspected of being involved in this can't travel to the United States. I mean, if there were serious sanctions put on by the Congress, what could the Saudis do, do you believe, given the limitations of their own economy and their own political system and how dependent they really are on the United States?

INDYK: Yeah. So just—the first point is that we won't know for sure whether MBS ordered the execution of Jamal Khashoggi unless the Turks have him on tape the way that Steve just suggested. Short of that, it's circumstantial. But the circumstances are important. Number one, he is an authoritarian leader. Everything gets decided by him. I've had several personal experiences in this regard, and it all goes up to him and he decides. So therefore, circumstantially,

it's hard to believe that the order didn't come from him, given the consequential nature of this decision to send a team over there—(inaudible).

Secondly, the people who have now been fired and blamed are some of his closest advisors, and Saud al-Qahtani tweeted some time ago that he takes his orders directly from Mohammed bin Salman.

So I operate on the assumption that he ordered it, but can I prove it? No. Will we get the proof? Maybe. It may be that we have other information of our own that gives us the proof, and if there is the proof—and I believe that one way or the other it will come out, either from the Turks or from our own intelligence agencies because we can't cover it up once we know it.

So that's the first thing. Now—excuse me—just remind me again, Carla, where you wanted me to go with this.

ROBBINS: I'm sorry. My question was if the Congress were to put real sanctions on Saudi Arabia—

INDYK: Right, that was my response.

ROBBINS: —what—yes.

INDYK: Yes, so the most likely sanctions that the Senate would try to introduce—and Rand Paul has already talked about this, and Rand Paul actually tried to do this—was to stop supplies to the war in Yemen, so there is particularly an order for precision-guided munitions that the Congress could cut off, and that would be a relatively quick action.

Bear in mind that the Saudis have very little support across the spectrum in the Senate, and Rand Paul was only four short—four votes short of the attempt to stop these arms sales the month before Khashoggi was murdered. When the Congress wanted to pass legislation that would allow American citizens to sue the Saudi government in American courts for their potential involvement in 9/11, that legislation—which was strongly opposed by the Obama administration; President Obama vetoed it—it was overridden, and I think that the Saudis only managed to get two votes in the Senate despite a major lobbying effort on their part.

So they are already well behind when it comes to congressional opinion, and even—you know, I don't think in Donald Trump's base there is any particular love

or admiration for Saudi Arabia. So once the Congress gets involved, I do think there are a number of things that they can do. There's a lot more than the nine visas to people already in jail.

The question then is, how will the Saudis respond, and I think MBS has got to calculate this carefully. If he decides to respond by, for instance, refusing to pump oil, and therefore, as a result, the oil prices spike, as I said before, the major beneficiary of that is Iran, and so he's got to be careful there. And his own position of power, as I've said before, may well depend on how Donald Trump acts towards him.

So I'm—you know, I'm not sure how he'll calibrate the response; whether he'll suck it up or decide to retaliate. It's hard to know what his calculus is at the moment in terms of all of the pressures on him. But bottom line is I don't think he can afford a confrontation with the United States.

ROBBINS: Thanks.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from Edward Muller.

Q: Thank you. Could you—you've alluded to or discussed a bit about what's going on with the Turks. Could you talk about what you think the tactics and strategy of Erdogan are?

COOK: Sure. It has been a great show by the Turks, I should say. I think that the Turks are genuinely outraged that something like this happened in Istanbul. Jamal Khashoggi was quite friendly with one of Erdogan's close political advisors, and quite frankly, one of Erdogan's hatchet men.

But I think that what the Turks are really after here are a couple of things. One, Erdogan, who has taken a tremendous amount of heat in the West for his own reckless actions over the course of the last two, three, five years, can now portray himself as a—as a responsible statesman, especially in comparison to the Saudis.

Erdogan is aligned with the Qataris in the ongoing conflict between Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, and three other countries in the region. The way in which Erdogan has presented the situation reinforces the Qatari narrative that Mohammed bin Salman is reckless, and heedless, and was trying to engage in regime change by imposing a blockade on Qatar.

I think the third thing that is important is that this is not just a negotiation between the Turks and the Saudis; that the United States figures prominently here. And I think what the Turks are after is a rehabilitation of Turkey in the United States and in the West more generally, and a partnership between Turkey and the United States.

One can imagine that the secretary of state, and perhaps even the director of the CIA, told President Erdogan and other Turkish officials that it would not be a good idea for anybody if they were to burn down the House of Saud and destabilize Saudi Arabia. The Turks, not above extracting their own pound of flesh, have likely turned around and said, OK, what are you going to give us in order for us to relieve this pressure on the Saudis. And I think the number one issue for the Turks will be changing Washington's relationship with its Syrian-Kurdish fighting force called the People's Protection Units, known by its acronym, the YCG, that has been so helpful to the United States in fighting the Islamic State, but that the Turkish consider to be a terrorist organization and that the Turks feel will try to set up their own state in northern Syria and be essentially a terrorist state on Turkey's border.

And then of course there is the conjecture that the Turks are confronting very, very serious economic problems; that the Turks are looking for some sort of payoff. I think that that conjecture really comes from the way in which the Saudis have pursued their own foreign policy for many, many years, and that is—it looks better in print, but the Saudis' mode of operating has really been Realpolitik; that is, to write checks and spread around cash in order to make problems go away or to prevent problems from coming into the kingdom.

It's very unclear. There is some reporting that senior Saudi officials offered the Turks money and Erdogan refused it. But that, of course, is coming from the Turkish side.

But by and large the Turks are looking to capitalize on this situation to rehabilitate themselves, to support their allies in Qatar, and to bring Mohammed bin Salman down a notch. It's no secret that President Erdogan believes himself to be the leader of the Muslim world and sees Turkey as the natural leader of the Muslim world. I suspect there are a lot of Saudi leaders, and especially the king, who is the keeper—the custodian of the two holy mosques who would disagree with that. Now the Turks have leverage over the Saudis and can bring them down

and proclaim themselves genuinely a responsible leader in the region and in the Muslim world writ large.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from Bettye Musham.

Q: Thank you very much for this interesting talk.

Should we expel the Saudi ambassador, and would that help give us leverage at negotiating Yemen, Qatar, and other issues with the Saudis?

INDYK: Well, the Saudi ambassador isn't in Washington.

COOK: Ever.

INDYK: He left, and that's what Saudi ambassadors do when the balloon goes up. In my experience over many years, that whenever the going gets tough, the Saudi ambassador gets going. He disappears, and he has disappeared.

He is the brother of MBS—Mohammed bin Salman. He's younger, he's a fighter pilot, so some suggest that maybe he could replace Mohammed bin Salman if the king decides to remove him. That will be no better in my view. He is young and inexperienced, and definitely not ready for prime time now.

But even if he's not here—so expulsion isn't possible—the idea behind that would be to kind of break diplomatic relations, recall our ambassador and send him home. Well, there's an odd problem there, too, because we don't have an ambassador—(laughter)—

ROBBINS: We don't have one.

INDYK: —in Saudi Arabia.

And it's 22 months since President Trump came into office. He hasn't even nominated an ambassador to Saudi Arabia. That is because the relationship was handled by Jared Kushner, his son-in-law. This was the two princelings working together, and the attitude of the White House was we don't need an ambassador. Well, you do need an ambassador; not to recall him when you want to make a point, but to be on the ground, to be talking to the leadership there, constantly engaged, and reporting back on what the hell is going on in a country where we have very little of visibility because decision making is always so opaque there.

So it's a travesty. It's highly irresponsible that we don't have an ambassador there and have made no effort to have an ambassador there. So, you know, as a tool for expressing our displeasure, it doesn't exist at the moment. I think it's much more likely that sanctions from the Congress is the way that displeasure will be expressed.

Q: Thanks.

ROBBINS: And actually we have three minutes left. Do you—Steve and Martin, do you want to do sum-ups, or shall we go to one more question? How do you want to handle it?

COOK: I'm happy to answer—

INDYK: Well, I—

ROBBINS: OK, go—

INDYK: I wanted to get something in because I'm not sure that it's going to be asked—

ROBBINS: OK. OK.

INDYK: —so I'll do that in one minute and then go to the last question—

ROBBINS: OK. OK.

INDYK: —which is nobody asked what does this mean for the peace process.

ROBBINS: Martin. Martin. Martin, what does it mean for the peace process? (Laughter.)

COOK: Yeah, it's shocking to me that Martin wants to talk about the peace process. Hold on.

ROBBINS: Me, too. I'm shocked. (Laughs.)

INDYK: You're wasting my time, gentlemen—ladies and gentlemen. (Laughter.)

No, here's the thing. Jared Kushner, who is, you know, in charge of the deal of the century, based his strategic bent when it came to the peace process on Mohammed bin Salman. He was going to deliver the Palestinians, and that was

the way in which the plan was supposed to unfold. They put the plan out, then Mohammed bin Salman would press Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader, offer him billions of dollars, and that's the way they would move the Palestinians forward.

Before the murder of Khashoggi, that strategy had already gone out the window because the decision to move the embassy—U.S. embassy to Jerusalem had created a circumstance in which the king—and this is interesting as an example of where the king has intervened against his son—the king intervened, told Mohammed bin Salman, said pull back, that Saudi Arabia was not going to deliver the Palestinians in these circumstances, organized an Arab League summit, and condemned the Trump decision to move the embassy. And since then, Jared Kushner has been saying in private, before the murder of Khashoggi, that we cannot expect Mohammed bin Salman to play the role that I had originally defined for him; he's got to focus on domestic circumstances, his domestic situation. It's more important that he do that. So that was before.

Now the chances that Mohammed bin Salman is going to play this role are even less than they were before, and they're already close to zero because the king wasn't prepared to cooperate with the Trump plan—(inaudible). So as a consequence, the strategy—the broader strategy of relying on Saudi Arabia to counter Iran is gone for the time being, and the more particular strategy of relying on Saudi Arabia to deliver the Palestinians was already gone and is not coming back.

ROBBINS: So on that optimistic note, I want to thank Dr. Steven Cook and Ambassador Martin Indyk for what has been truly an enlightening and—if depressing—conversation, and I would really like to thank the members who called in.

And I apologize because I know there were many more questions. And we will be doing more of these in the future, so thank you all for participating in this.

COOK: Thanks everybody.

ROBBINS: And we'll be doing this again.

COOK: Thanks, Carla.

ROBBINS: Thanks so much.

COOK: Thanks, Martin. Take care, everybody.

ROBBINS: Thanks, Martin.

INDYK: Thank you.

ROBBINS: Thanks, Steven.

INDYK: Thank you.

ROBBINS: Bye.

(END)
