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**The Murder of Jamal Khashoggi: A Case Study of the Strategic
Communication Response of Saudi Arabia and the United States**

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Report

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to those who possess the courage to raise their voices to speak truth to power across the globe. To my quarantine partner Mira, thanks for endless doggie snuggles. Thank you to my friends, family, friends that are family, and to those no longer with us - Till Valhalla!

Abstract

The Murder of Jamal Khashoggi: A Case Study of the Strategic Communication Response of Saudi Arabia and the United States

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2020

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The report examines the strategic communications of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States in the aftermath of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Khashoggi, a Saudi citizen and U.S. permanent resident, worked as a journalist for *The Washington Post*. He was killed and his body dismembered on October 2, 2018 at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. This case study analyzes the series of public statements, press releases and digital diplomacy efforts from the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to control the narrative and influence reactions to the killing. Harold Laswell's communication model is the basis for a strategic communication analysis of the response of the two governments in October and November of 2018. Ultimately, the United States sanctioned 17 individuals thought to be associated with the murder but pledged solidarity with the Kingdom, absolving the Crown Prince of any culpability. Saudi Arabia indicted eleven individuals and sentenced five to the death penalty in a secret trial. Top Saudi officials were exonerated due to insufficient evidence and three individuals were sentenced to prison terms. Saudi Arabia implemented a strategic

communications strategy that denied any knowledge of the murder and adjusted to react to evidence revealed to the contrary. The initial narrative, in which Khashoggi left the consulate, shifted to their acknowledgement of the murder. They communicated a necessity to seek justice while distancing top-level officials from any responsibility. The United States pursued a narrative strategy of investigation, delay, and ambiguity. The administration emphasized the value of the U.S.–Saudi partnership in strategic communications and cast doubt on evidence of high-level Saudi involvement. The American administration’s worldview of America first framed the strategic communication campaign.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist for *The Washington Post* from Saudi Arabia, was killed on October 2, 2018 at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. He fell out of favor with the Saudi monarchy due to his criticisms of the regime focused on Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS.) He visited the Saudi consulate in Istanbul to secure a marriage license and never emerged. This case study analyzes the series of public statements, press releases and digital diplomacy efforts from the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to control the narrative and influence reactions to the killing.

The Kingdom denied, in public messaging, any knowledge of Khashoggi's fate until October 19, 2018, when they admitted he died inside the consulate. Turkish media published information from official government sources that indicated they possessed evidence of a premeditated murder. Turkish officials released evidence, including closed circuit television (CCTV) security video showing that Khashoggi did not leave the consulate. In fact, the video shows a decoy disguised as Khashoggi leaving the consulate out of the back door wearing his clothes. The Turkish government released an audiotape of the incident inside the consulate to a limited audience including the intelligence apparatus of the United States, Britain, France, Germany, and Saudi Arabia, to counter the Saudi denial of the killing.

The American administration pursued a strategy in which condemnation of Saudi Arabia was absent and doubt was cast on the evidence that emerged during October and November of 2018. Inconsistent messaging, stressing the need for an investigation and

transparency, dominated the American narrative. The U.S. administration insisted an evaluation of the evidence was necessary before assigning blame.

On November 20, 2018, President Trump issued an unusual statement standing in solidarity with Saudi Arabia. The message began with a condemnation of Iran, and a discussion of Yemen. The President outlined \$450 million dollars in spending and investment pledged by the Kingdom to invigorate economic growth in the United States. Then, in paragraph four of seven, the President addresses the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a U.S. permanent resident.

Ultimately, the United States sanctioned 17 individuals thought to be associated with the murder but pledged solidarity with the Kingdom, absolving the Crown Prince of any culpability. The President said of Prince Salman's potential knowledge of the murder, "Our intelligence agencies continue to assess all information, but it could very well be that the Crown Prince had knowledge of this tragic event – maybe he did and maybe he didn't!"¹ The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) concluded, in their assessment with high confidence, that the Crown Prince ordered the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi.²

¹ Donald Trump, "Statement from President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia," *Whitehouse.gov*, November 20, 2018, Accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-standing-saudi-arabia/>.

² Shane Harris, Greg Miller and Josh Dawsey, "CIA concludes Saudi crown prince ordered Jamal Khashoggi's assassination," *The Washington Post*, November 16, 2018, Accessed October 2, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-concludes-saudi-crown-prince-ordered-jamal-khashoggis-assassination/2018/11/16/98c89fe6-e9b2-11e8-a939-9469f1166f9d_story.html.

According to Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms, two historians who analyzed President Trump's statements in the media since the 1980's, his worldview is remarkably consistent. In 2017, they commented on President Trump's worldview:

He stands for the protection of American jobs at home, and therefore for a restrictive trade policy abroad. He wants to get tough on terrorism, including a recourse to torture, in both the United States and the rest of the world. He wants to increase military spending. He wants to "put America First," increase investment in schools and infrastructure in the United States and therefore eschews "nation-building" abroad.³

The U.S. values the relationship with Saudi Arabia due to their agreement on a number of strategic interests. In short, the administration chose to prioritize the relationship between the two countries instead of lay blame at the foot of the Kingdom, or the Crown Prince, despite bipartisan pressure from Congress.

This is a study of the foreign policy developments and strategic communications that occurred in the immediate aftermath of Khashoggi's disappearance, and the longer-term public relations strategy that emerged as details surfaced regarding the circumstances of his murder. A strategic communication framework is used to analyze the public messaging of the United States and Saudi Arabia in particular. Additionally, the analysis explores the implications of the policies that were enacted by the American administration to address the murder, and the long-term consequences of the strategy.

³ Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms, *Donald Trump The Making of a World View* (London: Endeavour Press Ltd, 2017). 13.

Chapter 2: Theory and Methodology

Primary documents from the White House and State Department, such as press releases, official remarks, press conferences, and digital messaging, are utilized for the communication analysis. *The Washington Post* serves as a primary source for detailed developments of the case. Digital diplomacy messaging is examined via Twitter. Strategic communication is analyzed for audience, message, narrative, and frame. The paper is primarily organized via a timeline strategy due to the interaction of the messaging as the narratives and events unfold. Additionally, English language communication from the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Washington D.C., the foreign ministry, and the Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman are used to track the Kingdom's narrative. Existing literature in public diplomacy grounds the analysis. I apply lessons and a crisis mode communication framework where applicable in the context of a foreign policy challenge.

It is necessary to outline communication theory when analyzing the public statements of the U.S. The definition of communication theory is:

Communication theory studies the scientific process of sending and receiving information. There are many principles, methods, and components that can affect a message, and communication theory explains it all.⁴

Strategic Communication is defined as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission.”⁵ As such, when a government, foreign ministry,

⁴ Mary Clare Novak, "Everything You Need to Know About Communication Theory," *G2 Learning Hub*, April 8, 2019, Accessed April 29, 2020, <https://learn.g2.com/communication-theory>.

⁵ Kirk Hallahan, Derina Holtzhausen, Betteke van Ruler, Dejan Vercic and Krishnamurthy Sriramesh, "Defining Strategic Communication," *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, (2007): 3-35.

president, secretary, prince, or crown prince is communicating on behalf of their country or interests, it is considered strategic communication.

A basic communication model, from the American political scientist Harold D. Lasswell, describes the act of communication. Lasswell's communication model tracks the flow of communication in a multicultural society with multiple audiences and various channels for the message. Lasswell's model is useful because it considers the concept of the effect of the communication, not just the delivery of the message. The strategic communication framework takes the functions of the communications model and applies it to practice and analysis of strategic communication. The strategic communications model includes the following framework;

- Who – messenger analysis
- Says what – content analysis, to include the message, narrative, and frame
- In which channel – media analysis, to include distribution platform and how the message reaches the audience
- To whom – audience analysis, targeted publics
- With what effect? – effect analysis, to include behavior change, attitude change, and whether the audience agrees, believes, and/or accepts the message⁶

It may be useful to outline crisis management communications. A crisis is a “significant threat to operations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly.” Crisis management is a “process designed to prevent or lessen the damage a

⁶ "Lasswell's model," *Communication Theory*, June 23, 2016, <https://www.communicationtheory.org/lasswells-model/>.

crisis can inflict on an organization and its stakeholders.” Public relations play a critical role in crisis response to help develop the messages that are sent to the public. Once a crisis occurs there are best practices to deal with the communication aspects. Initial crisis response guidelines instruct the organization to be quick, be accurate, and be consistent. The second phase of crisis response communication is focused on reputational repair and outlining behavioral intentions for the organization which can be achieved using a number of strategies. There are a set of best practices for the post-crisis phase that encourage information sharing as soon as it is known, give updates on corrective measures or progress of investigations, and then analysis of the crisis management response in order to glean and improve best practices or lessons learned.⁷

⁷ "Crisis Management and Communications," *Institute for Public Relations*, October 30, 2007, Accessed March 26, 2019, <https://instituteforpr.org/crisis-management-and-communications/>.

Chapter 3: Statements from The United States of America

On October 8, 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a press statement that said the following:

We have seen conflicting reports on the safety and whereabouts of prominent Saudi journalist and Washington Post contributor Jamal Khashoggi. As the President has conveyed, the United States is concerned by his disappearance. State Department senior officials have spoken with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia through diplomatic channels about this matter. We call on the government of Saudi Arabia to support a thorough investigation of Mr. Khashoggi's disappearance and to be transparent about the results of that investigation.⁸

The message of concern over Khashoggi's disappearance is framed with a request to Saudi Arabia for a thorough and transparent investigation. At this point, the Secretary is not taking a stance regarding the disappearance.

On October 15, 2018, at 7:37 am EST, President Trump communicates the following by tweet:

Just spoke to the King of Saudi Arabia who denies any knowledge of whatever may have happened "to our Saudi Arabian citizen." He said that they are working closely with Turkey to find answer. I am immediately sending our Secretary of State to meet with King!⁹

The President's message is one of action, in conducting a phone conversation and in dispatching his secretary of state to discuss the matter in person, with an exclamation point for emphasis. The message is conveyed with a truth-seeking frame yet adheres to and amplifies the Saudi narrative. Trump acts as a messenger, for the Saudi narrative emphasizing a denial of knowledge, which amplifies the impact of the message. By

⁸ Michael R. Pompeo, "Journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Press Statement," *State.gov*, October 8, 2018, Accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/journalist-jamal-khashoggi/>.

⁹ Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump), "Just spoke to the King of Saudi Arabia who denies any knowledge of whatever may have happened "to our Saudi Arabian citizen." He said that they are working closely..." Twitter, October 15, 2018, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1051814214212485120>.

quoting the King, “to our Saudi Arabian citizen,” the President adheres to the Saudi narrative of denial and conveys a degree of sympathy on behalf of the King. It is worth mentioning that President Trump does not refer to Khashoggi as a U.S. permanent resident or green card holder, but defers to his Saudi citizenship. It is unclear if this reference is a purposeful amplification of the King’s concern for a citizen or if it is Trump deemphasizing Khashoggi's U.S. ties, by reminding the audience that Khashoggi is a Saudi citizen, despite his legal status in the U.S.

Later the same day, on October 15th, the President reiterated that the King of Saudi Arabia firmly denied any knowledge of what happened to Khashoggi. President Trump commented about the investigation into Khashoggi’s disappearance:

With that being said, the king firmly denies any knowledge of it. He didn’t really know, maybe, I don’t want to get into his mind, but it sounded to me like maybe it could have been rogue killers, who knows? We’re going to try get to the bottom of it very soon, but his was a flat denial.¹⁰

The fact-finding frame wraps the message to convey that the Saudi King does not know what happened, yet Trump acts as a messenger to repeat this claim. Trump goes above and beyond the Saudi narrative by offering another plausible narrative – rogue killers. This is the first mention of this possibility in either country’s narrative or messaging. It is difficult to discern if President Trump planned to introduce the alternative narrative that rogue killers could have been responsible for the killing of Jamal Khashoggi or if he was speaking off the cuff. Regardless of the intent, the effect on the audience and the media

¹⁰ Philip Bump, “Trump’s ‘rogue killers’ line is a reminder of his consistent bad faith in demanding proof,” *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2018, Accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/10/15/trumps-rogue-killers-line-is-reminder-his-consistent-bad-faith-demanding-proof/>.

was to sow a degree of doubt that high-ranking Saudi officials had any knowledge of the killing.

On October 16, 2018, at 1:40 pm EST, President Trump issued a series of two tweets from his personal account to provide an update on the Khashoggi incident. The tweets read:

Just spoke with the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia who totally denied any knowledge of what took place in their Turkish Consulate. He was with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo...
...during the call, and told me that he has already started, and will rapidly expand, a full and complete investigation into this matter. Answers will be forthcoming shortly.¹¹

The message amplifies the Saudi narrative, by re-stating the denial of any knowledge of what took place in their Saudi Consulate in Istanbul by the Crown Prince. He mentions the Crown Prince was with Secretary Pompeo, a detail that conveys a degree of trust in what MBS said, where a degree of belief is implied due to the in-person delivery of the message. Trump's message is delivered within the frame of an investigation but then goes further. President Trump assures his audience that there will be answers. The president does not hedge his statement, but leans in to convey a degree of trust in what the Crown Prince has told him. The trust and belief conveyed by the President could have an effect to extend the trust and belief in the Crown Prince's statements to the audience, thus achieving a degree of acceptance of the Saudi narrative. In this series of tweets, President Trump perpetuates the Saudi narrative of denial, lends credibility to the narrative due to

¹¹ Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump), "Just spoke with the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia who totally denied any knowledge of what took place in their Turkish Consulate. He was with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, ..." Twitter, October 16, 2018, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1052268011900555265>.

the choice of messenger, and conveys a full throated belief that the investigation conducted by the Saudis will reveal ‘answers.’ These tweets clearly represent a departure from a neutral stance on the matter.

Additionally on October 16, 2018, Secretary Pompeo issued a press statement outlining his trip to Saudi Arabia, at the behest of the President, to convey the importance of a thorough, transparent, and timely investigation. The Crown Prince told President Trump that a credible investigation was underway and pledged “the Saudi public prosecutor would produce a full and complete conclusion with full transparency for the world to see.” Pompeo relayed that the Saudi leadership “strongly denied any knowledge of what took place in their consulate in Istanbul.” He assessed there was “a serious commitment to determine all the facts and ensure accountability,” including for senior leaders and officials.¹² With this statement, Secretary Pompeo delivers a message demanding accountability, yet packages the message in the frame of his assessment. The framing of the message, with an acknowledgment of their denial and touting their serious commitment to determining the facts, gives Saudi Arabia the benefit of the doubt. The Kingdom’s narrative is denial of knowledge and seeking the truth, which is perpetuated by Secretary Pompeo.

The same day, in an amplification message, the official Department of State Twitter account issued the following tweet:

Today, @SecPompeo met with Saudi Arabia's King Salman to discuss regional and bilateral issues. He also thanked the King for his commitment to supporting a

¹² Michael R. Pompeo, "Meetings With Saudi Leadership, Press Statement," *State.gov*, October 16, 2018, Accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/meetings-with-saudi-leadership/>.

thorough, transparent, and timely investigation of Jamal Khashoggi's disappearance. Read more: <https://go.usa.gov/xPND9>¹³

The tweet conveys the same message from Secretary Pompeo's press release from the same day.

The issue of giving Saudi Arabia the benefit of the doubt, is addressed directly by a journalist on October 17, 2018, during remarks with the traveling press. Pompeo responded, "Yeah, I keep hearing that we're giving them some benefit of the doubt. They're going to do an investigation, and when the investigation is done we'll evaluate it. It's not about benefit of the doubt." He emphasizes the necessity to give the Saudis a chance to complete their investigation before levying an evaluation.¹⁴ During these same remarks, Pompeo characterizes the relationships between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia:

We have lots of important relationships – financial relationships between U.S. and Saudi companies, governmental relationships, things we work on together all across the world – efforts to reduce the risk to the United States of America from the world's largest state sponsor of terror, Iran.¹⁵

Secretary Pompeo presents a frame emphasizing the value of the relationship, in this case in the form of the Iran threat and financial investment in his remarks to the traveling press. His emphasis demonstrates his commitment to the value of the relationship and willingness to believe the Saudi narrative.

¹³ State Department, (@StateDept), "Today, @SecPompeo met with Saudi Arabia's King Salman to discuss regional and bilateral issues. He also thanked the King for his commitment to support..." Twitter, October 16, 2018, <https://twitter.com/StateDept/status/1052309083490009093>.

¹⁴ Michael R. Pompeo, "Remarks to Traveling Press," State.gov, October 17, 2018, Accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/remarks-to-traveling-press-3/>.

¹⁵ Pompeo, "Remarks to Traveling Press."

On October 18, 2018, at 10:40 am EST President Trump took to Twitter, in a series of two tweets, to provide an update on his personal account, @realDonaldTrump.

The tweets read:

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo returned last night from Saudi Arabia and Turkey. I met with him this morning wherein the Saudi situation was discussed in great detail, including his meeting with...
...the Crown Prince. He is waiting for the results of the investigations being done by the Saudis and Turkey, and just gave a news conference to that effect.¹⁶

The president conveys a simple update on events without pushing a narrative. There is an emphasis on the need to wait for the investigations conducted by Saudi Arabia and Turkey to conclude, which is in line with the ongoing frame to await investigations. At this point, over two weeks later, the President does not appear to take a stance on the incident.

Later that same day, on October 18th at 3:45 pm EST, President Trump took questions and made remarks before an Air Force One departure. The first question posed to the President asks if he believes Jamal Khashoggi is dead. His reply delivers a message within the frame of acceptance, “It certainly looks that way to me. It’s very sad. Certainly looks that way.” President Trump remarked that he was awaiting the results of further investigations when a journalist asked what he was considering for possible consequences against Saudi Arabia. Trump said, “Well, it’ll have to be very severe. I mean, it’s bad, bad stuff. But we’ll see what happens. Okay?” This continuation of the frame of acceptance, within unprepared remarks, demonstrates Trump’s pledge to react to

¹⁶ Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump), “Secretary of State Mike Pompeo returned last night from Saudi Arabia and Turkey. I met with him this morning wherein the Saudi situation was discussed in great detail, including his meeting...” Twitter, October 18, 2018, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1052947507238658049>.

the latest factual developments and express a commitment to very severe consequences. The way he phrases “it’ll *have to be* very severe,” shows this acceptance of reality, acknowledgement of the severity of the incident, and necessity to dole out consequences to satisfy a domestic public.¹⁷ The President’s strategy could be to buy time while his administration is able to explain the value of the relationship and influence the American people. It is unclear if he believes that an alternative narrative to explain the mounting evidence against Saudi Arabia may emerge.

On October 19, 2018, at 12:26 pm EST, President Trump tweeted from his personal account to provide a reaction to media reports. The tweet says, “Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was never given or shown a Transcript or Video of the Saudi Consulate event. FAKE NEWS!”¹⁸ The statement is a reaction to a report by the media, which President Trump is wholeheartedly countering, that Pompeo had seen a video or read a transcript of the murder in the consulate. This does not appear to be a scheduled communication, but a knee-jerk reaction to press reporting. The reactionary nature of the tweet may be why the message does not adhere to any established frame or narrative that had been used previously by the president when addressing the Khashoggi murder. The president’s choice to call what happened in the Saudi Consulate an event instead of a murder or some other comparable word choice has the effect of dehumanizing the murder for the audience. The message is a direct rebuke of media reports within the frame of his

¹⁷ Donald Trump, "Remarks by President Trump Before Air Force One Departure," *Whitehouse.gov*, October 2018, 2018, Accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-air-force-one-departure-3/>.

¹⁸ Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump), “Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was never given or shown a Transcript or Video of the Saudi Consulate event. FAKE NEWS!” Twitter, October 19, 2018, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1053336553391452161>.

consistent narrative against the media, by calling their reporting fake news. The emphasis, with all capital letters and an exclamation point, has the effect of fostering distrust in the media and vehemently countering the story that Pompeo had access to damning evidence of the murder.

On October 22, 2018, President Trump made remarks to journalists before departing on Marine One. He said he had spoken with the Crown Prince and he declared, “we have people in Saudi Arabia now,” and “top intelligence people in Turkey” that were scheduled to return on October 23rd. A journalist asked, “Do you believe what the Saudis have said about Khashoggi now? Are they telling the truth now?” Trump stated that, “We will know very soon . . . And I am not satisfied with what I’ve heard.” This message comes in the frame of doubt for the narrative coming out of Saudi Arabia while asserting that U.S. officials will uncover the truth.¹⁹

However, with the next question, Trump shifts the frame of his message significantly to one of financial investment from the Kingdom. He plainly states:

I don’t want to lose all of that investment that’s being made in our country. I don’t want to lose a million jobs. I don’t want to lose a \$110 billion in terms of investment. But it’s really \$450 billion if you include other than military. So that’s very important. But we’re going to get to the bottom of it.²⁰

Trump vacillates between truth seeking and a frame emphasizing the value of the relationship, in this case in the form of financial investment, for his messaging. These are

¹⁹ Donald Trump, "Remarks by President Trump Before Marine One Departure," *Whitehouse.gov*, October 22, 2018, Accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-marine-one-departure-18/>.

²⁰ Trump, “Remarks by President Trump Before Air Force One Departure.”

not prepared remarks, and as such, the message and frame choices are a reaction to specific journalist questions.

A subsequent exchange reveals that President Trump may not be aware of the nature of Khashoggi's dissidence. A journalist asks if Trump thinks Khashoggi is an activist associated with the Muslim Brotherhood or a journalist. Trump does not declare an opinion, instead opting to say that, "we will find out." Further, he says "We're going to know a lot over the next two days about the Saudi situation. It's a very sad thing." These remarks reveal that President Trump avoids taking any public stance against Saudi Arabia, in favor of awaiting a debrief from U.S. officials who have been on the ground in Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Yet, he is willing to express sadness.²¹

On October 23, 2018, Secretary Pompeo announced penalties against some of the individuals identified as responsible for Khashoggi's death. Twenty-one Saudi individuals, including personnel from the intelligence services, the Royal Court, the foreign ministry, and other Saudi ministries, were identified for their suspected involvement in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. The Department of State revoked U.S. visas, entered visa lookouts, and took "other measures" against the 21 individuals. Pompeo warned the measures would not be the last word on the matter.²² These U.S. actions would be the first concrete consequences doled out against Saudis involved in the murder of Khashoggi.

²¹ Trump, "Remarks by President Trump Before Air Force One Departure."

²² Michael R. Pompeo, "Remarks to the Press," *State.gov*, October 23, 2018, Accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/remarks-to-the-press/>.

The State Department took this action the day after President Trump assured reporters that over the next two days U.S. officials would return with information on the progress of the investigation. It is reasonable to infer that President Trump and Secretary Pompeo apparently were relatively confident in details that had emerged during the fact-finding mission conducted by U.S. officials and chose to act swiftly. The ability for Secretary Pompeo to call out 21 individuals by name indicates a degree of confidence in their assessment of the facts. Just 21 days after Jamal Khashoggi went missing, the U.S. Administration made a rational choice to punish a number of Saudi Arabian officials for their involvement in the killing. President Trump and Secretary Pompeo delivered on their claim that once the truth was known, there would be severe consequences for those involved. However, the American administration was hesitant to lay any kind of blame beyond the names individuals, and avoided any condemnation of the Saudi Kingdom or monarchs. It is here that the American narrative shifts a bit to individual responsibility for the murder.

On November 15, 2018 the U.S. Department of the Treasury issued a press release to announce sanctions against 17 individuals for their roles in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. The individuals were designated pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13818, “Blocking the Property of Persons Involved in Serious Human Rights Abuse or Corruption,” signed on December 20, 2017. E.O. 13818 is an authority designated under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. The sanction designations block any property or interests in property within or transiting U.S. jurisdiction. U.S.

persons are prohibited in engaging in transactions with the blocked individuals and entities 50 percent or more owned by the individuals.²³

The Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) designated three prominent Saudi officials by name in the press release and referred to 14 “other members of an operations team for having a role in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi,” which are named in the third paragraph. “All of these individuals are designated for being responsible for, or complicit in, or having directly or indirectly engaged in serious human rights abuse.” Saud al-Qahtani is described as, “a senior official of Saudi Arabia who was part of the planning and execution of the operation that led to the killing of Mr. Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey on October 2, 2018.” Maher Mutreb, his subordinate, is designated for the coordination and execution of the operation. Consul General Mohammed Alotaibi oversaw the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul where the operation took place.²⁴

The Treasury Secretary, Steven Mnuchin, used the frame of justice and accountability for his message. He called the murder a “killing,” citing the “individuals who targeted and brutally killed a journalist who resided and worked in the United States must face consequences for their actions.” Secretary Mnuchin commits to a search for facts, accountability, and justice for Khashoggi’s family. The intended audience is wide, targeting domestic and international publics, as well as the Saudi government. Secretary Mnuchin implores and warns, “The Government of Saudi Arabia must take appropriate

²³ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions 17 Individuals for Their Roles in the Killing of Jamal Khashoggi," *Treasury.gov*, November 15, 2018, Accessed October 2, 2019, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm547>.

²⁴ "Treasury Sanctions 17 Individuals for Their Roles in the Killing of Jamal Khashoggi," *Treasury.gov*.

steps to end any targeting of political dissidents or journalists.” The press release concludes with a commitment to fighting corruption and human rights abuses around the globe, touting the 101 individuals sanctioned under E.O. 13818, and another 460 individuals that Treasury has taken action against during the Trump administration. Concluding with the frame of accomplishment, and a commitment to take action against human rights abuse and corruption, showers accolades on the U.S. administration.²⁵

On November 16, 2018, there was a video update titled “This Week at State” published on the Department of State Twitter feed. The video addresses a chronological series of events, concluding with a portion that addresses the Khashoggi killing and U.S. sanctions against 17 Saudi Arabian officials for “serious human rights abuses resulting from their roles in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi.” The video explains, with words typed onto the screen, that the action was taken under the authority of E.O. 13818, the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. The State Department spokeswoman is shown giving a press briefing statement, where she touts the actions as an “important step in responding to Jamal Khashoggi’s killing.” The video ends with her pledge “to continue to seek all relevant facts . . . and continue to consult Congress and work with other nations to hold accountable those involved in his killing.”²⁶ This communication is a consistent aspect of the strategic communications campaign of the State Department. The message is an amplification of the action taken by the U.S. to sanction Saudi individuals,

²⁵ "Treasury Sanctions 17 Individuals for Their Roles in the Killing of Jamal Khashoggi," *Treasury.gov*.

²⁶ Department of State, (@StateDept), “This Week at State: @SecPompeo travels to #France for #Armistace100, updates on #Syria and #Iran, U.S. sanctions Saudi individuals in #Khashoggi killing, U.S. & #Netherlands launch...” Twitter, November 16, 2018, <https://twitter.com/StateDept/status/1063637863718211585>.

which is an assertion of a degree of accountability. It is typical for the U.S. government's strategic communication campaign to amplify sanctions actions across multiple platforms and agencies to serve as an advertisement of action and a deterrent to nefarious activities. Her mention of consultation with Congress and working with other nations indicates that her intended audience is broad, the domestic American public, U.S. lawmakers, and the international community to include Saudi Arabia.

Additionally, on November 16th, Secretary Pompeo tweeted the following statement:

The U.S. has imposed sanctions on 17 Saudi Arabian individuals for serious human rights abuse in the killing of Jamal #Khashoggi. @StateDept will continue to seek all relevant facts, consult Congress, and work with other nations to hold accountable those involved in this killing.²⁷

This message is identical to the message in the "This Week at State" video released the same day. The narrative is U.S. action, via sanction, to punish 17 Saudi Arabian individuals for their role in the Khashoggi killing. The word choice, of "killing," instead of a less evocative or more inflammatory word, is an acknowledgement of the severity of the crime, without inciting an intentionally inflated dramatic effect on the audience.

There is a clear indication that the U.S. will continue to investigate the matter and will involve Congress and other nations in the outcome, which echoes the intended audience is the same as the video.

²⁷ Michael Pompeo, (@SecPompeo), "The U.S. has imposed sanctions on 17 Saudi Arabian individuals for serious human rights abuse in the killing of Jalam #Khashoggi. @StateDept will continue to seek all relevant facts, ...", Twitter, November 16, 2018, <https://twitter.com/SecPompeo/status/1063407780227416064>.

On November 20, 2018, President Trump released a formal statement on “Standing with Saudi Arabia.” The statement starts with the words “America First!” centered on the first line, then continues with the opening line, “The world is a very dangerous place!” What follows is a seven-paragraph statement buttressed by the final thought, “As President of the United States I intend to ensure that, in a very dangerous world, America is pursuing its national interests and vigorously contesting countries that wish to do us harm. Very simply it is called America First!” Trump uses the America First frame to justify the contents of his statement, making a clear indication for his intended message to prioritize U.S. interests within the context of the Khashoggi murder.²⁸

The intent of the statement, revealed in the title of the statement to stand with Saudi Arabia, is addressed without mention of Khashoggi until the fourth paragraph. The first paragraph frames the threat – Iran. The proxy war in Yemen, attempts to destabilize Iraqi democracy, support of Hizballah terrorists in Lebanon, and propping up the dictator Bashar Assad in Syria are listed as regional threats from Iran in addition to killing Americans, inciting death to America, death to Israel, and the “world’s leading sponsor of terror.”²⁹

The second paragraph ushers in praise for Saudi Arabia, their willingness to withdraw from Yemen if the Iranians would leave, and cites they would provide humanitarian assistance immediately. The frame of financial commitment is repeated

²⁸ Trump, "Statement from President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia."

²⁹ Ibid.

with a declaration of Saudi Arabia's commitment to "spend billions of dollars in leading the fight against Radical Islamic Terrorism."³⁰ The Washington Post dedicated an entire article to Trump's preference to say "Radical Islamic terrorism" in March 2017, labeling the phrase a departure from previous Presidents and other world leaders, a distinction that terrorism scholar Bruce Hoffman recognizes as devoid of distinction.³¹

Trump continues to use the financial frame for the third paragraph of his statement. He touts his ability to negotiate an agreement for the Kingdom to spend and invest a record \$450 billion in the United States. Trump specifies that \$110 billion is earmarked for military spending with U.S. defense contractors. The President doubles down on the transaction as he sees it; "If we foolishly cancel these contracts, Russia and China would be the enormous beneficiaries." It is with this paragraph that the frame of financial gain is explicitly prioritized, lest America be considered foolish, underscoring the reluctance to leverage more severe consequences on Saudi Arabia for the killing of Khashoggi.³²

Paragraphs four, five, and six deliver the heart of Trump's message concerning Jamal Khashoggi. He does not condone the crime he refers to as terrible, horrible, unacceptable, and tragic. He identifies the crime as murder when he outlines the strong action taken against the 17 individuals involved in the murder and dismemberment, in the form of sanctions. Trump's indictment of the individuals responsible for the murder

³⁰ Trump, "Statement from President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia."

³¹ Peter Holley, "'Radical Islamic terrorism': Three words that separate Trump from most of Washington," *The Washington Post*, March 1, 2017, Accessed March 12, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/28/radical-islamic-terrorism-three-words-that-separate-trump-from-most-of-washington/>.

³² Trump, "Statement from President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia."

stops short of accusing the country of Saudi Arabia or its leaders and monarchy of involvement. The President casts doubt on the Saudi assertion that Jamal Khashoggi was an “enemy of the state” and member of the Muslim Brotherhood. This is the first time that the President counters the Saudi narrative that Khashoggi was an Islamist troublemaker.

He acknowledges that King Salman and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman deny “any knowledge of the planning or execution of the murder.” Subsequently, Trump states, “it could very well be that the Crown Prince had knowledge of this tragic event – maybe he did and maybe he didn’t!” The conflicting messages indicate an avoidance of laying blame or responsibility, but retaining the ability to amend the determination after intelligence agencies assess all information. In the same vein, the President admits, “we may *never* know all the facts.”³³ The President perpetuates the message that the evidence is unclear and therefore delays a judgment to hold the monarchy accountable. He has demonstrated his belief in the value in the bilateral relationship.

The frame of the message absolves the Kingdom and its leaders of culpability, yet wavers on the point that the Crown Prince may have had knowledge of the murder.³⁴ Once again, the American relationship with Saudi Arabia and its value is emphasized using the Iran threat frame to highlight the Kingdom as a “great ally.” The praise goes

³³ Trump, “Statement from President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia.”

³⁴ Ibid.

further, as he refers to a “steadfast partner” to ensure American, Israeli, and partner interests in the region.³⁵

In the final paragraph, Trump shifts to a frame of oil production, praising Saudi Arabia for being responsive to his requests to keep prices reasonable. The president does mention he will entertain any ideas to deal with the Khashoggi incident that congress presents so long as American safety and security remain paramount.³⁶ Here President Trump acknowledges the long-standing alliance with Saudi Arabia in regards to oil supply and energy cooperation. It would be difficult for any American President to sever ties to Saudi Arabian oil. The statement achieves its purpose, of standing with Saudi Arabia, and touting all of the positive aspects of the foreign policy relationships that entangle the U.S. and the Kingdom. The audience for the statement is wide, including domestic and international publics, U.S. lawmakers, and the international community of nations. This public display of strong support for Saudi Arabia makes the intention for America to continue their strong relationship with the Kingdom clear, despite the nefarious actions of some of its citizens. The contradictory and vague reference to any culpability by MBS for the murder, creates ambiguity, which is useful for the American administration to move forward with their agenda in the Middle East region.

On November 27, 2018, *The Wall Street Journal* published an op-ed written by Secretary Pompeo with the headline; *We don't condone Jamal Khashoggi's murder. But the kingdom is a powerful force for Mideast stability.* With that headline alone, the frame

³⁵ Trump, "Statement from President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia."

³⁶ Ibid.

and the message is clear, that the American relationship with Saudi Arabia is more important than the human rights violation of Khashoggi's murder. The op-ed is considered a "work of the United States Government" for copyright purposes and is also published on the Department of State official website as a statement from Secretary Pompeo.³⁷

The op-ed reads like a rallying cry to support Saudi Arabia, despite the Khashoggi murder, and uses political language to frame the issue in a historical context. Pompeo begins by addressing the politicians on Capitol Hill, from both parties, that support downgrading the alliance. This unambiguous choice of words ensures the message reaches his intended audience, of U.S. lawmakers and domestic critics. He states, "But degrading U.S.-Saudi ties would be a grave mistake for the national security of the U.S. and its allies. The kingdom is a powerful force for stability in the Middle East." Pompeo goes on to tout the kingdom for its action within the region. He highlights Saudi Arabia's work to "secure Iraq's fragile democracy" and keep it tethered to Western interests and away from Iran. Pompeo mentions the kingdom's help to manage the flow of refugees from Syria, establishing stronger ties with Israel, their contribution of "millions of dollars to the U.S.-led effort to fight Islamic State and other terrorists," as well as the role of Saudi Arabia in "oil production and economic stability" as keys to regional prosperity and global energy security.³⁸

³⁷ Michael R. Pompeo, "The U.S.-Saudi Partnership is Vital," *State.gov*, November 27, 2018, Accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/the-u-s-saudi-partnership-is-vital/>.

³⁸ Pompeo, "The U.S.-Saudi Partnership is Vital."

Pompeo places the opposition to President Trump’s policy with Saudi Arabia within the context of support for Obama era rapprochement with Iran and President Carter’s liberal idealism supporting autocrats counter to American interests in the region. In reference to Iran he states, “Where was this echo chamber, where were these avatars of human rights, when Mr. Obama gave the mullahs pallets of cash to carry out their work as the world’s largest state sponsor of terrorism?” Pompeo further attacks critics, “Saudi Arabia, like the U.S.—and unlike these critics—recognizes the immense threat the Islamic Republic of Iran poses to the world.” Throughout the op-ed Pompeo delivers his message within the frame of the Iran threat, which he also highlights in the context of Yemen, where the Saudi war against the Iranian back Houthis, rages on. In a pivot to an investment frame, Pompeo cites, “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has invested billions to relieve suffering in Yemen. Iran has invested zero.” He emphasizes the efforts of Saudi Arabia to root out terrorists in Yemen in beyond, as a counter to critics in Congress who are pushing for decreased financial and material support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen.³⁹ The op-ed is a reaction to a political push to downgrade the American-Saudi alliance and reduce support for the war in Yemen, and as such Pompeo vehemently defends President Trump’s policies in the region and relationship with the kingdom.

As Secretary Pompeo grounds the op-ed, he states:

The U.S. doesn’t condone the Khashoggi killing, which is fundamentally inconsistent with American values—something I have told the Saudi leadership privately as well as publicly. President Trump has taken action in response. Twenty-one Saudi suspects in the murder have been deemed ineligible to enter the U.S. and had any visas revoked. On Nov. 15, the administration imposed

³⁹ Pompeo, "The U.S.-Saudi Partnership is Vital."

sanctions on 17 Saudis under Executive Order 13818, which builds on the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. We've worked to strengthen support for this response, and several countries, including France and Germany, have followed suit. The Trump administration will consider further punitive measures if more facts about Khashoggi's murder come to light.⁴⁰

The message, of decisive action by the U.S. to hold those responsible for the murder in Saudi Arabia, and a commitment to the alliance, seeks to deter critics and settle the debate. The commitment to consider further punitive measures as facts come to light satisfies the investigative frame and the pursuit of truth. Including the Iran threat frame and financial investment demonstrate the priorities of the Trump administration, and Secretary Pompeo, in carrying out Trump's foreign policy priorities with Saudi Arabia.

⁴⁰ Pompeo, "The U.S.-Saudi Partnership is Vital."

Chapter 4: Statements from The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

On October 3, 2018, Saudi Arabia sent a statement to the Associated Press that said:

Mr. Khashoggi visited the consulate to request paperwork related to his marital status and exited shortly thereafter. The government of Saudi Arabia follows up diligently on any reports related to the safety of any of its citizens and will continue to follow up on these reports.⁴¹

This is an indication that a message of denial and distraction was the first instinct for Saudi Arabia in their strategic communications strategy. The distraction, that Jamal Khashoggi exited the consulate after his visit, was incorrect. It is difficult to discern if this was intentional disinformation or their part or if those making statements were under the impression he had left the Consulate. Saudi Arabia decided to release the statement, where they imply they were aware of the facts, instead of saying they would investigate to discover the details of Khashoggi's visit to the consulate. Turkish President Erdogan's spokesman, Ibrahim Kalin, contradicted the Saudi statement, "According to the information we have, this person who is a Saudi citizen is still at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. We don't have information to the contrary."⁴²

On October 4, 2018, the Saudi Press Agency issued a statement that said:

The Consulate General of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Istanbul said that it was following up on the media reports of the disappearance of Saudi citizen Jamal Khashoggi after he left the building of the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The consulate confirmed that it is carrying out follow-up procedures and coordination with the Turkish local authorities to uncover the circumstances of the disappearance of Jamal Khashoggi after he left the consulate building.⁴³

⁴¹ Associated Press, "Prominent Saudi journalist goes missing during visit to consulate in Turkey," *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 2018, Accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-saudi-journalist-20181003-story.html>.

⁴² Associated Press, "Prominent Saudi journalist goes missing during visit to consulate in Turkey."

⁴³ Saudi Press Agency, "Consulate General of the Kingdom in Istanbul says that it is following up what was reported in the media about the disappearance of citizen Jamal Khashoggi after leaving the consulate

In this communication the frame of the message is one of investigation, however, the narrative clings to the idea that Jamal Khashoggi left the consulate building while expressing a message of concern for the disappearance of their citizen. The messenger, the Consulate General, conveys a degree of hierarchy that denotes an official Saudi government narrative. It would later be revealed that the Consul General was implicated in the killing.

On the same day, October 4th, the Saudi Ambassador to Turkey was summoned to Ankara by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss the disappearance of Jamal Khashoggi. “The Ambassador denied knowing anything about Mr. Khashoggi's disappearance and promised to inform the Turkish authorities once he obtained further information.”⁴⁴ The ambassador, as the representative of the Saudi Arabian government in Turkey, is supposed to be an official messenger for the kingdom. In this case, the ambassador perpetuated the narrative that Saudi Arabia did not know anything about Khashoggi's whereabouts, referring to his disappearance.

On October 5, 2018, Bloomberg interviewed Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman,, where he made his first statement regarding Jamal Khashoggi. According to the United Nations (UN) report:

building .. and confirms that it is carrying out follow-up and coordination with the Turkish authorities to disclose the circumstances of his disappearance," *Saudi Press Agency*, October 4, 2018, Accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewstory.php?lang=en&newsid=1822222>.

⁴⁴ Agnes Callamard, *Annex to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions: Investigation into the unlawful death of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi*, Annex to the report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions (Geneva: United Nations Human Rights Council, 2019), 24.

The Crown Prince insisted that Mr. Khashoggi had left the Consulate and that the Saudi authorities were working with their Turkish counterparts to identify what happened. “We hear the rumors about what happened. He’s a Saudi citizen and we are very keen to know what happened to him. And we will continue our dialogue with the Turkish government to see what happened to Jamal there.” Pressed on whether Mr. Khashoggi faced charges in Saudi Arabia, the Crown Prince responded “Actually, we need to know where Jamal is first.” Asked again, he said “If he’s in Saudi Arabia I would know that.”⁴⁵

The official Saudi narrative, that Jamal Khashoggi is missing and they intend to investigate the details of his disappearance, is now delivered by their most credible messenger for the international community. The Crown Prince spoke in English, therefore the audience was international and not domestic. Not only does MBS say he is interested in finding Jamal, calling him by his first name with a degree of familiarity, he claims that if he were in Saudi Arabia that he would know that. This is an admission that MBS would be aware if Khashoggi were in his country, that he would know such a detail, personally. This assertion will complicate his later claims that he was unaware of any plot to render or repatriate Khashoggi to Saudi Arabia. The Crown Prince dodges the journalists question about if Khashoggi faces legal issues in the Kingdom. At this point there is no discussion or denial of a kidnapping or killing.

On October 6, 2018 the Saudi Consul General invited reporters into the Consulate, “in an effort to show that prominent Saudi writer Jamal Khashoggi, who vanished four days ago, was not on the premises and said that talk of his kidnapping was baseless.” They quote the Consul General, ““I would like to confirm that...Jamal is not at

⁴⁵ Callamard, *Annex to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions: Investigation into the unlawful death of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi*, 24-25.

the consulate nor in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the consulate and the embassy are working to search for him. We are worried about this case.” He continues:

“If those who say he was kidnapped are focusing on his being in the mission, these are just rumors that have no proof. And we unfortunately regret some of the statements that have been made by Turkish officials who insist that (Khashoggi is) in the consulate ... without it being built on facts.”⁴⁶

The Saudi narrative, that they have no idea about Khashoggi’s whereabouts but insist he left the Consulate, is delivered via an official Saudi messenger. The message is assumed to be credible based on the messenger, yet the frame is disingenuous as the Consular General expresses worry for Khashoggi. The narrative and frame of denial of knowledge and wrongdoing remains the communication strategy of the Kingdom.

On the evening of October 6, 2018, Turkish officials communicated to the press that “The initial assessment of the Turkish police is that Mr. Khashoggi has been killed at the consulate of Saudi Arabia in Istanbul. We believe that the murder was premeditated, and the body was subsequently moved out of the consulate.”⁴⁷ The statements of Saudi Arabia do not change in response to this media report.

On October 7, 2018, the Saudi Press Agency published an article citing comments from an official at Consulate General of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Istanbul. The official dismissed the report by Reuters, “that Saudi citizen Jamal Khashoggi was killed in the Consulate in Istanbul.” Further, “the official strongly denounced these baseless

⁴⁶ Dominic Evans, "Saudi Arabia opens up consulate after journalist vanishes," *Reuters*, October 6, 2018, Accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-politics-dissident-consulate/saudi-arabia-opens-up-consulate-after-journalist-vanishes-idUSKCN1MG0RC>.

⁴⁷ Orhan Coskun, "Exclusive: Turkish police believe Saudi journalist Khashoggi was killed in consulate - sources," *Reuters*, October 6, 2018, Accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-politics-dissident-idUSKCN1MG0HU>.

allegations, and expressed his doubt that they came from Turkish officials that are informed of the investigation or are authorized to comment on the issue.” A security delegation of Saudi investigators arrived in Istanbul on October 6, 2018, “to assist in the investigations regarding the disappearance of the Saudi citizen Jamal Khashoggi.”⁴⁸ This narrative continues in the denial frame and attempts to shift the narrative to expose the alleged wrongdoings and illegitimate statements of Turkish officials. Saudi Arabia continues to avoid responsibility in all their official messaging and tries to pivot to shine a light on Turkish authorities. At this point, it is unclear if Saudi officials are aware of all the evidence that Turkish officials possess to implicate them in the murder of Khashoggi. Their communications strategy remains unchanged.

On October 8, 2018, an Axios reporter received an unsolicited message via WhatsApp from the Saudi Ambassador to the United States, and younger brother of MBS, Prince Khalid bin Salman. There are two narratives that are worth examining in the message. The first narrative and frame are in direct response to the details coming from Turkish officials in the media:

There are many facts regarding his whereabouts that will hopefully be revealed through the ongoing investigation. Despite that, we have seen over the last few days various malicious leaks and grim rumors flying around about Jamal's whereabouts and fate.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Saudi Press Agency, "Official at Saudi consulate in Istanbul dismisses report that Saudi citizen Jamal Khashoggi was killed in consulate in Istanbul," *Saudi Press Agency*, October 7, 2018, Accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=en&newsid=1823102#1823102>.

⁴⁹ Jonathan Swan, "Khashoggi intrigue: A text from the Saudi ambassador, then silence," *Axios*, October 12, 2018, Accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/jamal-khashoggi-saudi-ambassador-text-denial-silence-4273c2c3-a73d-4dca-920e-50762ee080d3.html>.

Throughout the five-paragraph statement, the Ambassador attempts to blame the Turks for false statements while maintaining an air of outrage at the accusations. He also expresses great concern for Khashoggi while reiterating the sentiment would be the same for any Saudi citizen. The goal is to convey that the Kingdom's emphatic concern while acknowledging that although Khashoggi was in self-imposed exile in the United States, his safety was paramount.

The second narrative, is an unequivocal denial of the accusation of Khashoggi's murder. The Saudi Ambassador states:

I assure you that the reports that suggest that Jamal Khashoggi went missing in the Consulate in Istanbul or that the Kingdom's authorities have detained him or killed him are absolutely false, and baseless.⁵⁰

The message is conveyed by a credible Saudi official, via private message to a journalist in America. The audience is the American public and the U.S. government. The narrative shifts from denial of any knowledge to a rebuke of allegations of detention or murder.

This is where the Saudi narrative finally shifts to directly address the Turkish allegations. Perhaps, this is an indication that the Kingdom realizes the Turkish authorities have evidence, yet the strategy remains to deny the truth. The acknowledgement of the murder accusation is met with vehement denial and counteraccusations against the Turkish officials. International pressure is mounting against Saudi Arabia and the American administration has remained largely silent until this point.

On October 10, 2018, the Turkish newspaper, *Daily Sabah*, released the names, photos, names, video, and other specific identifying information for fifteen Saudi officials

⁵⁰ Swan, "Khashoggi intrigue: A text from the Saudi ambassador, then silence."

that were suspected to be involved in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. The article referred to the team as, “a 15-member "assassination squad" allegedly sent to target Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.”⁵¹ Saudi Arabia did not immediately respond to the reports.

On October 11, 2018, *al-Arabiyah*, a Saudi-owned, pan-Arab media company, issued a report that claimed the 15 Saudi officials identified in the *Daily Sabah* report were “tourists falsely accused of killing Mr. Khashoggi.”⁵² It is likely the reporting is meant to be a part of the strategic communication campaign by the Kingdom to counter the allegations against their officials. The Saudi Arabian narrative attempts to shift responsibility by accusing others of misconduct and lies, while denying any culpability in the murder of Khashoggi.

On October 13, 2018, the Saudi Interior Minister was quoted in an article released by the Saudi Press Agency where he, “stressed that what has been circulating about orders to kill him [Khashoggi] are lies and baseless allegations against the government of the Kingdom.” He also condemns false accusations circulated by the media.⁵³ This remains in line with the Saudi narrative to deny the allegations and accuse the media of false reporting. The frame of the message is a concern for the wellbeing of Khashoggi and a commitment to cooperate and investigate the issue.

⁵¹ Daily Sabah with AP, "15-member Saudi 'intel squad' sent to target WP's Khashoggi identified," *Daily Sabah*, October 10, 2018, Accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/investigations/2018/10/10/15-member-saudi-intel-squad-sent-to-target-wps-khashoggi-identified>.

⁵² Callamard, *Annex to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions: Investigation into the unlawful death of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi*, 27.

⁵³ Saudi Press Agency, "Interior Minister Confirms KSA's Condemnation of Some Media's False Accusations Against Kingdom Against Background of Disappearance of Citizen Jamal Khashoggi," *Saudi Press Agency*, October 13, 2018, Accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=en&newsid=1827596#1827596>.

The Saudi Arabian strategic communication campaign experienced a pause as Secretary Pompeo went to the Kingdom for a visit. President Trump commented and issued tweets regarding his phone conversations with Saudi's top leaders. Finally, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia issued significant official statements on October 19, 2018.

As the *Washington Post* reported on October 19, 2018, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official statement, which it published on Twitter on their English language account.⁵⁴ The Saudi government acknowledged that journalist Jamal Khashoggi was killed inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. They stated, "that an initial investigation by the government's general prosecutor found that the Saudi journalist had been in discussions with people inside the consulate when a quarrel broke out and escalated to a fatal fistfight."⁵⁵ The Saudi government fired, "five top officials and arrested 18 other Saudis as a result of the initial investigation. Those fired included Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's adviser Saud al-Qahtani and deputy intelligence chief Maj. Gen. Ahmed al-Assiri."⁵⁶ According to the statement:

The suspects had attempted to convince Mr. Khashoggi to return to Riyadh; this conversation took place in the presence of the Consul General Alotaibi; the situation escalated with a fight taking place between Mr. Khashoggi and the suspects; this led to Mr. Khashoggi's death; the suspects then attempted to conceal Mr. Khashoggi's death.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, (@KSAmofaEN), "#STATEMENT | On the case of the disappearance of the Saudi citizen Jamal bin Ahmed Khashoggi" Twitter, October 19, 2018, <https://twitter.com/KSAmofaEN/status/1053428352164548609/photo/1>.

⁵⁵ Kevin Sullivan, Loveday Morris and Tamer El-Ghobashy, "Saudi Arabia fires 5 top officials, arrests 18 Saudis, saying Khashoggi was killed in fight at consulate," *Washington Post*, October 19, 2018, Accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/10/19/saudi-government-acknowledges-journalist-jamal-khashaoggi-died-while-in-that-countrys-consulate-in-istanbul/>.

⁵⁶ Sullivan, Morris and El-Ghobashy, "Saudi Arabia fires 5 top officials, arrests 18 Saudis, saying Khashoggi was killed in fight at consulate."

⁵⁷ Callamard, *Annex to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions: Investigation into the unlawful death of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi*, 29.

In a major shift of their strategic communication campaign, the Kingdom changes their narrative and accepts responsibility for the death of Jamal Khashoggi within their Consulate in Istanbul. The statement claimed they cooperated with Turkish authorities in order to investigate the matter and arrived at their new position.

The statement implicates the Consul General, who had earlier stated that Khashoggi left the Consulate, and exposes a web of falsehoods from Saudi officials. However, the government insisted that the death was an accident arising from a fistfight, which denies any pre-meditation or intent to kill Khashoggi. The Saudi government included punishment for several individual officials to hold them responsible for the death. The consequences were announced in concert with the admission of Khashoggi's death to demonstrate accountability. The Kingdom was able to deliver on their promise to investigate and hold suspects accountable although their narrative on what transpired was widely doubted by the international community and media. The frame of accountability packaged the new narrative of an accidental death.

On October 21, 2018 the Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel al Jubeir, a credible and official messenger, sat for an interview with *Fox News*. He explained that it took eighteen days to confirm Mr. Khashoggi's death because the Saudi authorities had reports indicating that he left the Consulate. Eventually an investigating team in Turkey had

found discrepancies. He dismissed claims that the Crown Prince knew about the killing, calling it a “rogue operation”.⁵⁸ Minister al Jubeir added:

Even the senior leadership for the intelligence services was not aware of this. This was a rogue operation. This was an operation where individuals ended up exceeding the authorities and responsibilities they had. They made a mistake when they killed Khashoggi in the consulate and they tried to cover up for it.⁵⁹

This admission of responsibility is framed in a way that absolves the senior leadership of the government. Yet the message asserts that they killed Khashoggi in the Consulate and then tried to cover it up. The minister is pushing a narrative that the Crown Prince was unaware of the killing while calling it a “rogue operation.” This is a considerable effort on behalf of the strategic communications strategy to distance the Crown Prince and top officials from any culpability. Floating the rogue operation narrative marries with similar comments made by President Trump days earlier. The repetition and amplification of the chosen rogue operation narrative can influence the audience to more readily accept the message.

On October 24, 2018, the Saudi Crown Prince made a statement about the Khashoggi killing. He spoke at the Future Investment Initiative in Riyadh calling the killing a "heinous crime that cannot be justified." He continued to warn the international community that critics would not be able to drive a wedge between Saudi Arabia and Turkey.⁶⁰ Within the frame of a strong bilateral relationship, MBS, who is the most

⁵⁸ Callamard, *Annex to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions: Investigation into the unlawful death of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi*, 30.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 30.

⁶⁰ "Saudi crown prince promises justice in Khashoggi murder case," *Al Jazeera*, October 24, 2018, Accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/saudi-crown-prince-promises-justice-khashoggi-murder-case-181024153317417.html>.

credible messenger to convey a statement, characterized the murder as a heinous crime. This narrative of outrage is in line with the new Saudi narrative to hold the individuals responsible for the murder accountable for their actions.

On October 25, 2018, the Saudi Press Agency reported that the Saudi Public Prosecutor determined that, “the suspects in the incident had committed their act with a premeditated intention.”⁶¹ With this statement, the Saudi government admits that the murder of Jamal Khashoggi was a premeditated by the suspect that carried out the killing. The Public Prosecutor mentioned the determination was made with cooperation and investigation assistance from the Turkish authorities. This stunning admission counters the narrative of a fistfight gone awry that Saudi officials pushed just days earlier. At this point, the Saudi narrative shifted once again in response to international pressure. The blame on a select number of Saudi officials is a frame that will perpetuate throughout the remaining duration of the crisis.

On November 15, 2018, the *Washington Post* reported the Kingdom was pushing a narrative that distanced the Crown Prince from the Khashoggi killing. The Saudi Public Prosecutor said that, “a team of Saudi agents dispatched to Istanbul with orders to bring him [Khashoggi] home alive had instead killed the journalist and dismembered his body.” During a press conference for the announcement the spokesman was sure to assert that the Saudi Crown Prince had no knowledge of the operation. He announced the indictment of eleven individuals, and said authorities were pursuing the death penalty for five

⁶¹ Saudi Press Agency, "Public Prosecution: Information from Turkish Side Indicates that Suspects in Khashoggi Case have Committed their Act with Premeditated Intention," *Saudi Press Agency*, October 25, 2018, Accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewstory.php?lang=en&newsid=1833775>.

people. The spokesman also clarified that the order to kill Khashoggi came from one of the Saudi team leaders on the ground in Istanbul.⁶² The narrative is meant primarily to distance the monarchy from any guilt in the matter. The frame of accountability and consequences for those responsible is repeated. This is the first time that Saudi officials admit that Jamal Khashoggi's body was dismembered after his murder inside the Consulate.

⁶² Kareem Fahim and Zakaria Zakaria, "Saudi Arabia distances crown prince from killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi," *Washington Post*, November 15, 2018, Accessed February 10, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/saudi-arabia-seeks-death-penalty-for-five-suspects-in-killing-of-journalist-jamal-khashoggi/2018/11/15/32c9e778-e8bc-11e8-bd89-eecf3b178206_story.html.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The Saudi strategic communication campaign went through several shifts as evidence surfaced and made its way to the press. The media and international pressure had a direct effect to compel Saudi Arabia to change their narrative of the events that culminated in the premeditated murder and dismemberment of Jamal Khashoggi. Once the Saudis were backed into a corner, and a strong counter-narrative, which included mountains of physical, audio, and video evidence was presented, they shifted their communication from denial of any knowledge to acceptance of the fact of the killing. Although they attempted to push a story that the murder was an accident, the Kingdom eventually shifted to accept the premeditated nature of the operation to kill Jamal Khashoggi. With the shift in narrative, the frame and message to hold those rogue individuals accountable and bring justice to Khashoggi's family became the focus of the Saudi's strategic communication strategy.

Saudi Arabia indicted eleven individuals and sentenced five to the death penalty in a secret trial. Top Saudi officials were exonerated due to insufficient evidence and three individuals were sentenced to prison terms. Saudi Arabia implemented a strategic communications strategy that denied any knowledge of the murder and adjusted to react to evidence revealed to the contrary. The initial narrative, in which Khashoggi left the consulate, shifted to their acknowledgement of the murder. They communicated a necessity to seek justice while distancing top-level officials from any culpability.

In the first two months after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Arabian Consulate in Turkey, the U.S. engaged in a roller coaster of strategic communication in

response. At the beginning, the Trump administration did frame most of their messaging within a fact finding and investigation transparency frame. The message was consistent, that the U.S. was interested in uncovering the truth of what happened in the consulate and supported a full investigation. However, some of the messaging amplified the denial narrative that Saudi Arabia was pushing, instead of choosing a purely American-driven narrative. President Trump and the administration repeated and amplified the Saudi message, of denial and investigation. By repeating the claims, President Trump became a messenger for the Saudi narrative, and his assertion of trust in the monarchy lent credibility to their message.

The American administration maintained a message and frame of accountability and transparency within a set of frames that elucidated their priorities, the threat of Iran, Saudi investment in the region and America, in terrorism cooperation, and the necessity for a strong alliance between the Kingdom and the U.S. It is difficult to discern if the strategic communication by the Trump administration was a well thought-out process, by balancing priorities and nuance, or if the statements were just reactionary to the unfolding news of the details of the murder. President Trump's answers to media questions are often contradictory, or at least seem to deviate, from his prepared remarks on the subject. It is clear that the Trump administration prioritized their strong alliance with Saudi Arabia over human rights concerns, at least in their messaging.

The American administration did restrict visas and sanction Saudi individuals thought to be responsible for the murder in the Saudi Arabian consulate. This decisive action was taken, and the message of the action amplified, through many channels of

government communication, and through credible messengers. Other than these actions, there is little evidence that the Trump administration will hold the upper echelons of the Kingdom's officials responsible for the murder. President Trump was unconvinced by CIA reports that the Saudi Crown Prince ordered the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi. The CIA assessment was issued with high confidence yet President Trump did not accept the intelligence assessment, or the notion that MBS was at the very least aware or involved in the planning of or killing of Khashoggi.⁶³

The United States pursued a narrative strategy of investigation, delay, and ambiguity. The administration emphasized the value of the U.S.–Saudi partnership in strategic communications and cast doubt on evidence of high-level Saudi involvement. The administration's worldview of America first framed the strategic communication campaign. For now, America has let the Saudi leadership off the hook for the gruesome pre-meditated murder of one of its citizens in their diplomatic facility in Turkey. In practice, foreign relations will continue with business as usual for the U.S. – Saudi Arabian alliance. President Trump has adhered to his overall national security strategy of America first.

⁶³ Harris, Miller and Dawsey, "CIA concludes Saudi crown prince ordered Jamal Khashoggi's assassination."

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