

# U.S. IN DELICATE BALANCING ACT AS SAUDI PRINCE SPARED SANCTIONS

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U.S. President Joe Biden's decision not to sanction Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince over journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder has frustrated campaigners, underscoring Washington's delicate balancing act as it seeks to avoid a diplomatic rupture.

Washington on Friday released a long-delayed intelligence report that accused Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of approving Khashoggi's 2018 murder in Istanbul, drawing a rebuke from Riyadh, which strongly rejected the assessment.

The public censure of the Prince and a slew of U.S. sanctions on dozens of Saudi officials marks a sharp departure from the policy of former President Donald Trump, who sought to shield the kingdom's de facto ruler.

But Washington did not slap any direct sanctions on Prince Mohammed, known by his initials MBS, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken explaining that Mr. Biden wants to "recalibrate" but not "rupture" its relations with Riyadh, a longstanding Middle East partner.

"This is not the Saudi smack-down that many hoped for," said Varsha Koduvayur, a research analyst at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a Washington think-tank.

The Washington-based campaign group Freedom House said it was "disappointing and frustrating that the U.S. is yet unwilling to act on its own intelligence" and impose sanctions on the Saudi Prince.

## Call for sanctions

"We expect nothing less than justice for Jamal Khashoggi and all of Saudi Arabia's brave dissidents," said the New York-based Human Rights Foundation. "The U.S. and the European Union must urgently place sanctions on MBS himself."

The report — which had been withheld after being completed under Mr. Trump — said it was "highly unlikely" that Khashoggi's murder could have taken place without his green light.

The killing of Khashoggi, a *Washington Post* columnist and critic of Prince Mohammed, also fits a pattern of "the crown prince's support for using violent measures to silence dissidents abroad", it added.

But Saudi observers dismissed the highly anticipated report, with Ali Shihabi, a government adviser close to the kingdom's royal court, saying the "thin" assessment lacked a "smoking gun".

Mr. Biden had pledged during his campaign to make the kingdom a "pariah" after it got a free pass under Mr. Trump, but observers say he is instead adopting a middle path.

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