Alleged Khashoggi killers received training in US – report

01/04/2019

At least some Saudi agents involved in the grisly murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi were trained in the US as part of Washington's broader plan to 'modernize' Saudi intelligence, a new report by the Washington Post says.

Members of the 'Saudi Rapid Intervention Group', which was allegedly sent to the Istanbul Consulate in October 2018 to deal with the self-exiled journalist and critic of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, underwent training in America as part of a program launched under a State Department license, Washington Post columnist David Ignatius wrote, citing Saudi and US sources.

The CIA reportedly warned other government agencies that the special-operations training the Saudis might have received was conducted by Tier 1 Group, an Arkansas-based company as part of ongoing liaison with the Saudis.

The hit-team's alleged leader, Colonel Maher Mutreb, is said to be the one who received the training. Mutreb reportedly served in London as deputy chief of station between 2002 and 2007, and was later repeatedly sent to the US and elsewhere for training, Ignatius said.

Mutreb himself reportedly told his friends in Saudi Arabia that he had gone to several training programs in the US over the past decade. Washington also planned to launch a broader training program for Saudis, which was developed by a private firm called Culpeper National Security Solutions with help from some former CIA officials.

One of the Saudi contacts who was involved in the program's development was Major General Ahmed al-Assiri, Riyadh's deputy intelligence chief, who is now also under investigation over possible involvement in the Khashoggi killing.

The Culpeper board was led by Michael Morell, the former acting director of the CIA who, it is claimed, quit the project following the high-profile murder, according to Ignatius.

Khashoggi's murder apparently disrupted Washington's and Riyadh's plans as the broad training program was put on hold, pending State Department approval of a license. The US-Saudi exchange programs which the hit team members participated in were also said to have been stopped in the wake of the incident.

The Riyadh critic was killed and dismembered in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul on October 2, 2018 by a team consisting of 15 agents, Turkish officials claim. His remains have never been found. The incident sparked an international uproar, which eventually forced the Saudi authorities, who initially denied the journalist's death, to admit that he was killed.

Saudi Arabia has since indicted 11 unnamed suspects for what it called a "heinous crime" and an "unfortunate incident." Saudi prosecutors are seeking the death penalty for the suspects, while Riyadh rejects calls for an international investigation into the case, saying it is capable of dealing with the issue itself.

Khashoggi's murder has arguably become the source of the biggest test in relations between the US and Saudi Arabia. The US Senate passed a resolution that blamed the crown prince for the murder of the journalist.

As the world was reeling with anger over his murder, the White House rushed to Riyadh's defense. President Donald Trump repeatedly said that Saudi Arabia was a "great ally" which "funded a lot of things." The Pentagon also argued that Riyadh is too important to whip, as it rolled out another arms deal for the Saudis worth billions of dollars.