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CIA warns Arab activist of potential threat from Saudi Arabia

Pro-democracy campaigner İyad el-Baghdadi has been vocal critic of Saudi crown prince

Stephanie Kirchgaessner in Washington and **Nick Hopkins** in London

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The CIA has warned Norway that a prominent Arab activist who is living in the country under asylum protection is facing a potential threat from Saudi Arabia, the Guardian has learned.

The pro-democracy activist, İyad el-Baghdadi, is a vocal critic of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

El-Baghdadi was alerted to the threat on 25 April, when Norwegian authorities arrived at his doorstep, took him to a secure location, and warned him he was in possible danger from an unspecified threat emanating from the kingdom.

The activist was told the threat had been passed on to Norwegian authorities by a foreign intelligence agency, which the Guardian has confirmed was the CIA.

“The way I understood it was, the Saudis have a crosshairs on me, but there is no idea of what they are going to do,” El-Baghdadi said in a phone interview with the Guardian.



Ayad El-Baghdadi at a panel discussion on Islam and Liberty at the Oslo Freedom Forum in 2017. Photograph: NurPhoto/Getty Images

“They assured me that they are taking it very seriously. They came prepared,” he said, noting that authorities had arrived with two squads: one to whisk him away, and another to ensure they were not being followed.

The Guardian contacted the Saudi embassy in Washington for comment on Monday but did not receive a reply before publication.

El-Baghdadi is a Palestinian-born writer who is active on Twitter and gained prominence during the Arab spring, when he began tweeting about the Egyptian uprising.

His English translations of Arabic tweets, and sarcastic takedowns of autocratic leaders, gained him tens of thousands of Twitter followers. He was granted political asylum in Norway in 2015, after his arrest and expulsion from the UAE, which forced him to leave without any formal charges or trial.

Since then, the Saudi crown prince has been a frequent subject of criticism for the writer.

Last year, after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist and US resident working for the Washington Post who was killed inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, El-Baghdadi warned on Twitter that Prince Mohammed would become more dangerous if he was not held to account by western allies. “If they get away with kidnapping the next step will be assassinations in your capitals, and I’m not joking even a little bit,” he tweeted.

He said the apparent threat meant he was effective: “If they don’t want to kill me then I am not doing my job.”

The move by the CIA to alert Norwegian counterparts does not necessarily mean El-Baghdadi is in imminent and definite danger.

Under US policy known as the intelligence community directive 191, the agency has a legal “duty to warn”, which means the CIA must alert a possible victim if the agency collects “credible and specific information indicating an impending threat of intentional killing, serious bodily injury, or kidnapping directed at a person or group of people”.

While there are limited legal exceptions to the policy, it calls on the agency to inform the possible victim of the threat even in close cases.

El-Baghdadi said the possibility that the Saudi government was still seeking to silence or curtail activism outside its border underscored a growing issue facing Prince Mohammed, who is known as MBS: the explosion in the number of educated Saudis who are living outside the kingdom and becoming politically active.

“This is shaping up to be a long-term problem for MBS,” he said.

The CIA declined to comment.

The Norwegian police security service, the country’s equivalent of the UK’s MI5, said it was not in a position to comment “on contact we have with individuals, or assessments we do pertaining to individuals’ security”.

The revelation comes less than a year after the murder of Khashoggi, who was killed inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018.

The murder caused international outrage and provoked condemnation of the 33-year-old crown prince.

In the US, the CIA has reportedly confirmed with a high to medium degree of certainty that Prince Mohammed was behind the murder, and one of his top advisers, Saud al-Qahtani, has been accused publicly by the Trump administration of playing a role in planning the assassination.

Qahtani has been the subject of sanctions by the US. Last November, the US Treasury said he was “part of the planning and execution of the operation that led to the killing of Mr Khashoggi”.

It said Qahtani was one of the Saudi officials involved in “the abhorrent killing” of the journalist in a targeted and brutal operation.

Last month, the state department included Qahtani on a list of 16 individuals who have been barred from entering the US because of their alleged role in the killing.

Critics and activists agree that the Trump administration’s continued support of Prince Mohammed, especially by Trump and his senior adviser and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, has sent a message that he is untouchable and will not be held accountable for the murder.

While banks such as JP Morgan steered clear of the kingdom in the immediate aftermath of the killing, major US and international companies are flooding back into Saudi Arabia with multibillion-dollar deals.

The Saudi government has previously dismissed reports of CIA assessments in relation to the Khashoggi murder, describing them as having “no basis in truth and we categorically reject them”.

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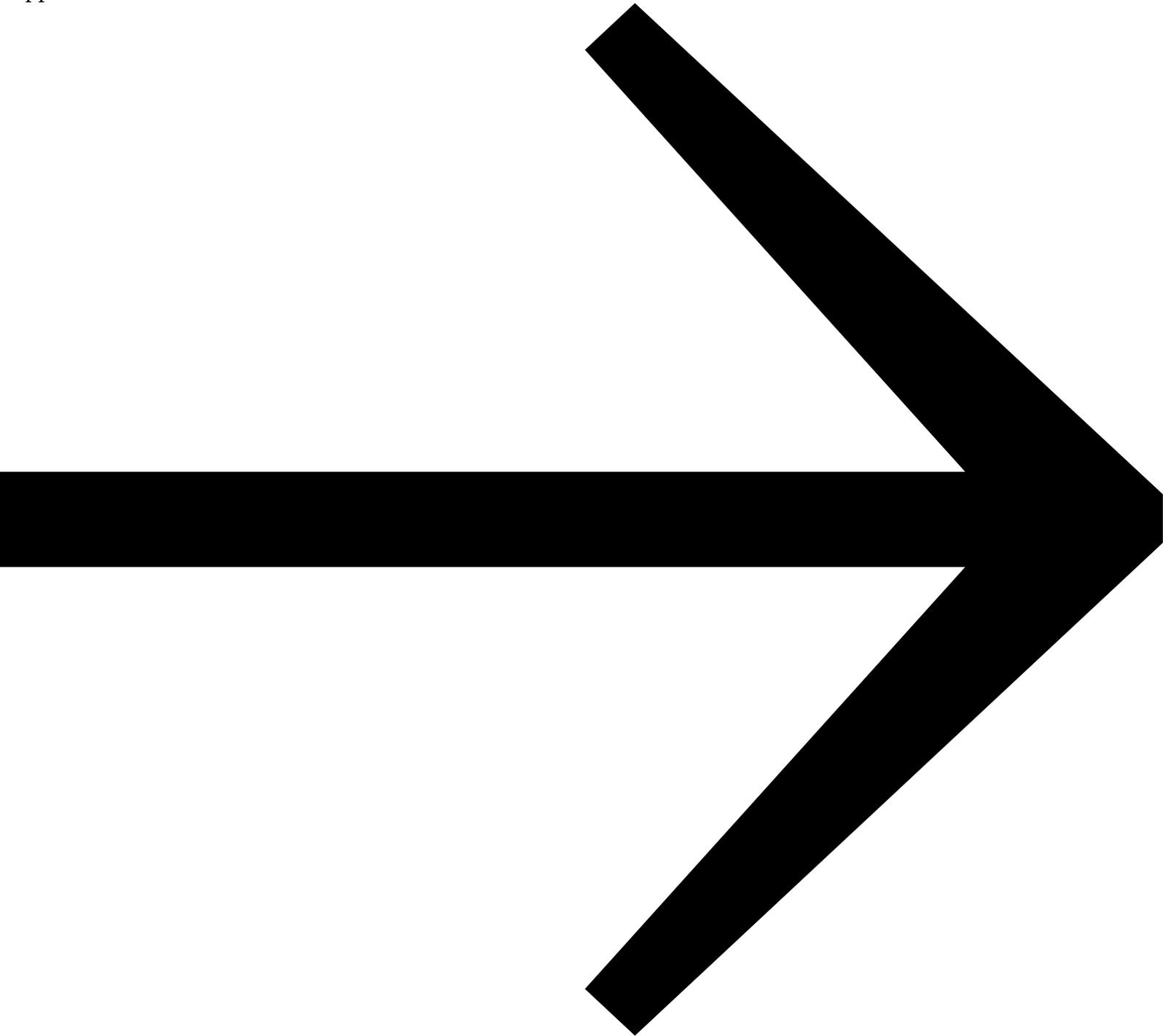
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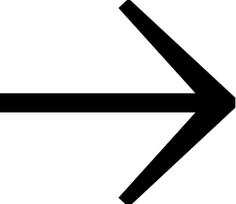


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