



REPORT

Chronicle of a Death Foretold:

The Jamal Khashoggi Affair and
Turkish-Saudi Relations

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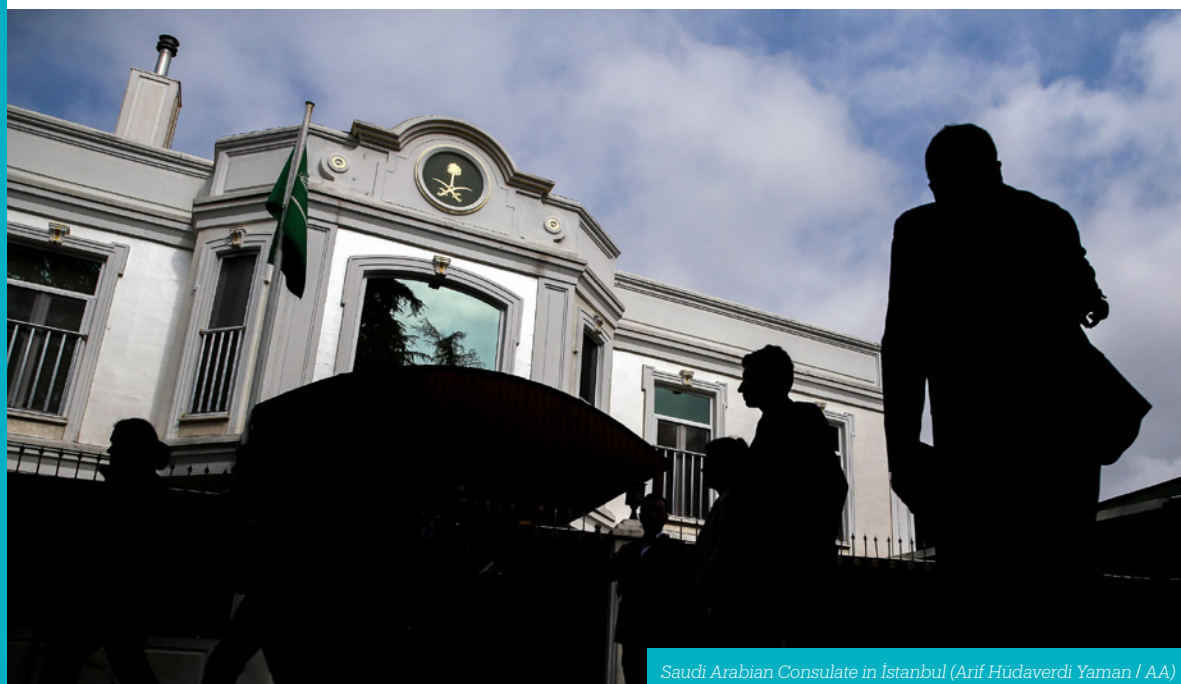
Introduction

When veteran Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi entered the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2nd 2018, no one would have imagined the ordeal that ensued, ending with the Saudi journalist's disappearance and murder. The details that continue to emerge build a sinister picture about the Saudis' heavy-handed approach to dissent and critique, including the frequent resort to repression against moderate intellectuals and journalists, even against those who do not consider themselves as diehard opponents to the regime but do occasionally express concerns about Riyadh's policies.

After almost three weeks of denials, obfuscation, and blame deflection, the Saudi authorities finally backtracked on October 19th, announcing that Khashoggi had indeed been killed during a "brawl" inside the consulate on October 2nd and

that 18 Saudis have been arrested in connection with the case. Additionally, two top aides of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), as well as three Saudi intelligence agents, have been sacked. The mounting evidence, in addition to pressure from the Turkish government, which vowed to reveal all the details of the inquiry, combined with international pressure from several world powers, multinational companies and international media outlets have forced Riyadh's hand, obliging them to backpedal on their original narrative.

Beyond the immediacy of the Jamal Khashoggi tragedy, this paper explores the multitude of intertwined factors and broader geopolitical issues, which led to the botched operation targeting the renowned Saudi journalist in the heart of Istanbul. It also examines the implications of the related events on the diplomatic and geopolitical fronts at the macro level.



Saudi Arabian Consulate in Istanbul (Arif Hüdaverdi Yaman / AA)

The Saudi Predicament

One cannot discuss the Khashoggi case without looking at the broader context of Saudi governance and policy approaches both at home and abroad. At times, news media tends to deal with events like these as mere episodes. However, this approach is problematic and has often been critiqued in academia. Among the leading detractors of this approach is American political scientist Shanto Iyengar, who criticised the lack of in-depth analysis accompanying the media coverage. He points out that television news reporters usually adopt episodic rather than thematic frames. For him, media tend to focus episodically on specific acts without providing extensive connections with their broader context. Thus, various news events appear entirely unrelated (Iyengar 1991: 2, 14).

Therefore, it is vital to connect the different episodes thematically. One of the most important themes that help to understand the Saudi behaviour is their stance concerning the Arab uprisings (also known as Arab Spring), which began in late 2011. This important chapter in the history of the modern Middle East has been a tectonic and has channelled energies for change within the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). This was by large perceived as a historic moment, comparable in its magnitude to the events that took place in Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War during the early 1990s.

However, as time passed and the internal crises worsened, Arab regimes built internal and external coalitions, who then fought back violently any attempts to bring about change in governance. The Saudi regime and its primary ally in the region, the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E), became deeply involved in fighting the forces that were pushing for change. These regimes managed to deteriorate the situation by using a mix of coup d'états (e.g. Egypt), supporting counter-revolutionary movements such as Tamarod in Egypt (Kirkpatrick 2015) in addition to prolonged repressive means. Such methods managed to turn largely peaceful demonstrations into militarised forms of struggle, in effect triggering several civil wars in the region, such as in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

The heavy involvement of Riyadh in fighting the Arab Spring indicate the regime's intrinsic fear from the democratic progress that was achieved in some Arab countries (e.g. Tunisia). The near obsession of the Saudis to quash the Arab uprisings is not surprising per se, given the autocratic nature of the regime. What is shocking however, is the use of the Arab Spring as a key determinant for Saudi state identity in the twenty-first century.

The construction of a new Saudi state identity and the shift from the austere Wahhabi image that was historically associated with the Saudi regime coincided with a palace coup that took place within Saudi Arabia. Riyadh's new power centres aimed to reshape the Saudi state identity and substitute the ideological dogma of Wahhabism with a new populist and militarised style of Saudi nationalism (al-Rasheed, 2018). In this new situation, the quintessential 'other', or the touchstone against which the state identity is measured, has become so-called political Islam, manifest both in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran.



Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri detained by Saudi Arabia in November 2017 (Arif Hüdaverdi Yaman / AA)

The Trump administration undoubtedly played a leading role in the palace coup that took place within the Saudi Royal Court. This move helped the Deputy Crown Prince, Mohamed Bin Salman (MBS) jump the succession line and establish himself as Crown Prince, i.e. the next king (Hearst, 2017). This state of affairs added another layer of complexity to the already convoluted situation. In an attempt to gain legitimacy internally and establish his leadership externally, MBS has further tied himself with the UAE and embarked on a sequence of highly controversial and counterproductive actions in the region.

The latter ranged from the kidnapping of Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri (later released following international pressure) (Barnard & Abi-Habib, 2017) to the blockade of Qatar (Henderson, 2017) and the protracted war on Yemen. Nevertheless, while these clumsy moves irritated allies like the United States, they did not trigger any significant repercussions for MBS and his acolytes. The Saudi/UAE axis invested vast sums of money in lobbying efforts in Washington D.C. to ensure the continuation of the support from senior tenors of the Trump Administration, legislators, think tanks, PR executives, and journalists (Grim, 2017).



1- Counter Revolution as Policy Axiom in Response to the 'Arab Spring'

The uprisings in the Arab world that began in 2011 have deeply shaken the authoritarian architecture of the region. In this vein, understanding Saudi responses to the so-called 'Arab Spring' requires taking the long view. Historically depicted as largely cautious and even consensual, Saudi foreign policy in the early days of the Arab uprisings maintained its pragmatic approach in order to uphold its primary concern, state and regime survival (Ennis & Momani, 2013). However, as the uprisings continued to spread, counter-revolution and targeting Iranian designs in the region became the defining feature of Saudi regional and international relations (Kamrava, 2013). Saudi approaches under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman, rather than representing a 'new' Saudi Arabia, arguably are simply a doubling down of the tried and tested approaches to modern Saudi statecraft (Bsheer, 2017).

There are two primary elements to consider here. Firstly, regime and state survival. In addition to the propagation of the Saudi regime itself, Saudi Arabia views the preservation of conservative monarchies in its neighbourhood as essential to its own survival. Secondly, a zero tolerance for political opposition. In Saudi Arabia today, the discourse of regional conflagrations is expressed primarily in terms of conspiracy, be it sectarian, with Shiite Iran as the central protagonist in a historically rooted drama for control of the region, or in terms of 'extremism' and the threat of 'political Islam'. It is through the interrelated lenses of regime survival and its regional competition with Iran that Saudi approaches post-Arab Spring should be viewed.

2 – The Iran factor

A major prong of the Saudi counter-revolutionary strategy has been the employment of religious discourse. Premised on a religious legitimacy afforded to the regime through the fact that it controls Islam's two most sacred mosques, Saudi Arabia has deployed a religious discourse in which the Saudi state is upheld as the defenders of Sunni Islam in the face of a 'foreign' Shiite threat emanating from Iran (al-Rasheed, 2017). In a twist of irony, Iran is also invoked in connection to the amorphous threat of 'political Islam', caricatured in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood. As part of his discourse on renewal and modernization, MBS propagates a discourse in which post 1979 revolutionary Iran is the force behind all political incitement in the region. According to the current narrative, after 1979, the Saudis – who root their claims to religious leadership in the fact that they are the 'custodians' of the two holy mosques – resolved to out-do their foes, both Sunni and Shiite, in Islamic piety (The Economist, 2018).

According to Stephane Lacroix of Science-Po University in Paris, in propagating this discourse, the crown prince is in fact engaged in myth building: "Saudi Arabia's religious authorities were extreme before Ayatollah Khomeini ruled over Iran" (The Economist, 2018). Therefore, the crown prince's vow to roll back extremist ideas and re-establish a 'tolerant' Saudi Arabia, while blaming Iran for sparking the turn toward state-sponsored radicalisation of religious thought, fall short of the reality (Bsheer, 2017). In fact, the timeline of the narrative being pushed by MBS is ignorant of Saudi Arabia's own history. The very formation of the Saudi state was premised on an extreme and anti-Shiite reading of Islam, a position consolidated in modern times by the late King Faisal (r. 1964-1975). This consolidation, rather than being a response to the Islamism of the Iranian revolution was designed to counter a coalition of 'progressive' domestic mobilizations that had threatened the Saudi monarchy and US interests in the region (Bsheer, 2017).

Where state-sponsored Salafism had turned violent and 'revolutionary', it was not because of any intrinsic factors, but rather because it had become infected with a cocktail of revolutionary ideas originating with the Iranian revolution and the Muslim brotherhood. Here again, history tells a different story. Saudi relations with the Muslim Brotherhood in the early days were cordial, as the organisation and the ideas it espoused were seen as being useful against the incitement of leftist and nationalist movements in the region (The Economist, 2018). The Brotherhood's lack of support to Saudi Arabia during Saddam's invasion of

Kuwait began to change this relationship, as they were no longer seen as trustworthy political allies. In the post-Arab spring Arab world, the Brotherhood has been given an outsized threat-prioritisation by the Saudi regime and its allies, not for its supposedly extremist ideas, but rather for its perceived potential to challenge state authority and legitimising narratives. As Jamal Khashoggi himself put it, for the Saudis, democracy and political Islam go hand in hand (The Economist, 2018).

The position of Saudi Arabia and its allies post-Arab spring towards Iran and an ill-defined political Islam can thus be chalked up to the following: Fear of being encircled by Iran and its allies who sometimes boast of their control of four Arab capitals (Damascus, Baghdad, Beirut and Sanaa), and the penultimate fear of being abandoned by the United States. The axial centre of Saudi international relations is defined by the transactional relationship with the United States, in which both sides seek benefits from one another through cooperation on areas of mutual interest (Gause III, 2011). As the US disengages from its traditional position in the region, the Gulf States have become more sceptical of America as a reliable protector (The Economist, Insecurity Complex, 2018).

3- Sectarianism on Steroids

Contrary to the claims of its propagators and many commentators in both the Arab world and the West, sectarianism as an eternal and primordial disposition of the societies of the Middle East is anachronistic and deliberately manipulative. Today's virulent sectarianism employed by authoritarian states in the region is primarily rooted in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution of 1979. This is not to say that sectarian discourses did not exist prior to this period. As discussed in the previous section, the very ideological founding of the Saudi state was premised upon a discourse that antagonized religious forms deemed to have strayed from the path of the early Muslim community, including Shiism. Following 1979 however, fearing revolutionary contagion, conservative Arab states deployed sectarian discourses as a means of undermining the political claims and desires of their own people.

Sectarianization of the politics of the region were further amplified in the wake of the 2003 Iraq war, following the assumption of power by the Shiite majority. Following the uprisings in the region beginning in 2011, sectarian political discourses were employed by authoritarian regimes, namely those of Saudi Arabia and Iran in an effort to shape the narrative in a way that would benefit

their respective regional projects. With MBS, the sectarian rhetoric emerging from the kingdom has been taken to a new level.

A particularly sectarian religious discourse, founded on the assumed religious legitimacy of the Saudi state as 'protectors of the two holy mosques', thus became a primary means of countering civil unrest and demands for political change. In order to propagate their narrative, the Saudi regime has mobilised its key religious figures in order to lend credence to its claims. According to Madawi al-Rasheed (2017), this has happened in two ways: the mobilisation of state-backed religious scholars, the resurrection of opinions regarding the obligation of obedience to the ruler from well-known Salafi scholars such as Ibn Baz and Muhammad al-Uthaymin (al-Rasheed, 2006) and the deployment, via official religious scholars, of the narrative of a Safavid-Shiite conspiracy rooted in centuries of communitarian enmity (al-Rasheed, 2017).

Part of Saudi counter-revolutionary strategy also included the deployment of more radical, state-tolerated but not state-sanctioned religious preachers, and -seemingly contradictory - 'liberal' intellectuals writing for Saudi-owned media networks (al-Rasheed, 2016). The former allowed the authorities to raise the sectarian temperature while maintaining the ability to maintain plausible deniability vis-à-vis their connection to more radical elements, while the latter presented a more 'modern' face to both the international community and more liberal-oriented Saudis. More important from a governance perspective was the divisions this sewed within Saudi society itself. In the midst of these divisions, so long as they could be properly managed and controlled, the Saudi regime sought to position itself as the sole mediating and 'moderate' voice, without which the country may enter a "Hobbesian state of nature... possibly inviting foreign military intervention" aimed at gaining control of the kingdom's energy resources (al-Rasheed, 2016, 153).

What is important for the discussion here are two points. Firstly, that sectarianism is best understood in the context of the insecurities authoritarian regimes felt following the uprisings of 2011, and, secondly, that the deployment of sectarian rhetoric is a central part of a counter-revolutionary state identity that has been assumed by the Saudi-Emirati axis in response to the Arab Spring. Although MBS has, at least publicly, sought to curtail some of the social-conservatism of the religious scholars in Saudi Arabia, he has been more than keen on making use of the sectarian rhetoric coming out of both official and unofficial Salafi religious networks.

Why Jamal Khashoggi?

Jamal Khashoggi was not a typical critic. In fact, the label of 'critic' as applied to Khashoggi is somewhat misleading. He did not consider himself to be a dissident, and as a former spokesperson for Prince Turki al-Faisal, a former Saudi intelligence chief and Ambassador to London and Washington, he appears to have maintained his loyalty to the ruling family. A veteran journalist who climbed the ladder of journalism step by step, he started as a correspondent for the Saudi Gazette, becoming the assistant manager for Okaz. From 1987 to 1990, he worked as a reporter for several Arab newspapers and magazines, including Al Sharq Al Awsat, Al Majalla and Al Muslimoon. From 1991 to 1999, he was a foreign correspondent in several countries, including Afghanistan, Algeria, Bosnia, and Sudan. During this period, it is believed that Khashoggi had close ties with the Saudi intelligence services. He then worked as deputy editor-in-chief of Arab News from 1999 to 2003. Next, Khashoggi had a very brief stint (two months) as the editor-in-chief of Al Watan, which led to some disputes with the most reactionary elements of the Saudi government at that time. After a transitory period in voluntary exile in London, he became media adviser to senior officials, namely Prince Turki Al Faisal Al Saud who was appointed as ambassador to the United Kingdom in 2003.

While Khashoggi was long seen as close to the Saudi royal elite, the emergence of MBS in power in 2015 and the ensuing brutal tactics he utilised against the royal family, the business community, intellectuals and opinion leaders, led to Khashoggi's disillusionment with the new circles of power (Haltiwanger, 2018). It has been stated that Saud al Qahtani, adviser to Saudi royal court, ordered him to stop writing for newspapers or even using his Twitter account. Ultimately, this drove Khashoggi to leave Saudi Arabia for the U.S. Since that time, he occasionally expressed disapproval of the government and MBS in particular. However, "for all his criticism of the Saudi regime, Khashoggi was not always opposed to Mohammed's policies. Khashoggi credited the young leader for what he saw as positive changes, including loosening Saudi cultural restrictions" (Harris, 2018).

Following his self-imposed exile to the United States, Khashoggi made it repeatedly clear to those who spoke with him that he loved his country. Even in this critique he remained loyal to the house of Saud (Amor & Sakib, 2018). However, as the Crown Prince consolidated his power with American and Emirati support, Khashoggi became more

critical of the direction he felt his country was heading in and what he termed the 'vanity' projects of MBS (Hearst, 2018).

What then, leads a regime to resort to state terrorism and eliminate a leading journalist even when the latter does not represent any substantial threat? Some essential information needs to be factored into the analysis about this case.

1- The Man Who Knew Too Much

As a war correspondent for Saudi news outlets in Afghanistan, Algeria, and Bosnia, it is evident that Khashoggi knew the nitty-gritty of the Saudi intelligence service's activities in connection with the grooming of terrorist elements and their incorporation into fighting units in Afghanistan and elsewhere. In fact, Khashoggi burnished his journalistic credentials during the height of Operation Cyclone, which was the code name given by the CIA to its program to arm and fund the anti-Soviet fighters in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1993 (Coll, 2004, pp. 42-46; 50-70). It was during this period that the name of the then Saudi intelligence chief, Prince Turki bin Faisal al-Saud became known in intelligence circles, as he was behind the alignment of the Saudi intelligence apparatus with the US designs in Afghanistan. As mentioned, Khashoggi later worked closely with Prince Turki as his spokesperson.

Since the U.S. Congress passed the U.S. federal law entitled, "Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act" (JASTA) in 2016, the Saudi establishment has been very fearful of the potential implications. In effect, this legislation acts like the sword of Damocles hanging over Saudi Arabia, which could well become liable and face U.S. lawsuits over the 11 September 2001 attacks (Stempel, 2018). The Saudi regime would logically be concentrating on tying up loose ends, and it may well be that by shifting to a more oppositional stance – albeit a mild one –, Jamal Khashoggi triggered some serious anxieties in Riyadh.

The fact that Khashoggi was close to Washington DC insiders and had a platform with a prominent American newspaper heightened the anxieties of the Saudi regime, particularly those of Mohammed bin Salman. Ties with the United States have always been the most important bilateral relationship in the Saudi calculation and has

only increased in importance under the direction of MBS. Under the leadership of the Crown Prince, the Saudis have consolidated their close relations with the United States, particularly with the Trump administration, perhaps at the expense of relations with the rest of the world. Recent Saudi reactions to international criticisms of its crackdown on dissent, whether emanating from Canada or Germany, have made this point clear. As long as the Americans remain supportive - specifically those considered as insiders within the Trump administration - the Saudis appear to have calculated that they have an uninhibited freedom of action.

The centrality of ties with the United States to the Saudi project post Arab Spring provide an important context into why Khashoggi was targeted. Saudi dissident voices are present capitals all over the world including important political and financial hubs such as London, Paris and Istanbul. Khashoggi represented a credible voice of nuanced critique in Washington DC, a city the Saudis wish to keep free of any dissenting voices. Being close to power and influence in both Saudi Arabia and Washington DC is what made Khashoggi to be perceived a threat to Saudi Arabia's regional projects. Knowing how members of congress and other power brokers in the United States would react to such a credible voice of reasonable critique, the Saudis, and MBS in particular, were anxious that all of their efforts to garner unquestioned support for their agenda would be put at risk.

Massive public relations efforts undertaken by the Saudis in the United States have been largely successful (see: Middle East Eye, March 8, 2018). American media has consistently praised the Crown Prince as the 'great reformer' that not only Saudi Arabia, but the entire Arab and Muslim world has been waiting for. In a November 2017 article titled 'Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, at Last', New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman wrote: "I never thought I'd live long enough to write this sentence: The most significant reform process underway anywhere in Middle East today is in Saudi Arabia" (Friedman, 2017). Prominent media outlets ranging from the New York Times to Khashoggi's own Washington Post have repeatedly sang the praises of MBS's reformist credentials (Greenwald, 2018). In fact, American media has a long history of describing the Saudi regime as 'reformers' and the best hope for a region in turmoil (al-Arian, 2017). From acquiescing to Saudi rhetoric on fighting extremism and reforming Islam, to the promotion of women's rights, critical voices of the Saudis in mainstream American media have been largely absent.

2- Riyadh's Newly-Adopted State Identity

After witnessing the Arab uprisings, Khashoggi, who was a liberal at heart, understood that the emergence of millions of young activists and protestors at various public places across the MENA region was a sign that the old autocratic era was coming to an end. Consequently, more democracy, transparency, and reform were demanded from Arab regimes. Even though Khashoggi was not known for supporting any opposition forces per se, he was pro-reform and thus he was comfortable debating with representatives of these opposition parties, exchanging views, networking, and building personal ties with them.

However, the authorities in Riyadh have a low tolerance for dissent. For them, anyone supporting more political freedoms is deemed as the "other" as per the Saudi state narratives. By constructing this otherness, they wrote, in the words of academic Annamarie Oliverio, "the script for historical interpretations of national identity" (Oliverio 1998: 6), thereby defining the boundaries of state legitimacy.



King Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud
(Mohamed Farag / AA)

While they do not tolerate substantial dissent, the new rulers of Riyadh are very comfortable with an opposition that fits their mould. They like to see a binary mode in action, whereby opposition forces either use political violence to advance their agendas, or are affiliated with the forces of political Islam (which are then smeared as originators of political violence in a type of 'catch 22' situation). Khashoggi represented neither of these categorisations and thus did not fit this binary pattern. He merely aspired to see more political freedoms and the prevalence of the rule of law, which are anathema to the MBS regime.

On this point, as it relates to Khashoggi's case, it has been reported that he was seeking to make his opposition to the Saudi regime under MBS more official. The American digital publication, the Daily Beast (October 10, 2018) reported that Khashoggi wanted to launch a pro-democracy group called Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN). Given the Saudi state's counter-revolutionary orientation and binary understanding of political opposition, a group such as DAWN led by a credible voice, would potentially represent a critical threat to their regional designs.

As mentioned above, the Saudi state has sought to position itself as the only voice of moderation capable of opposing the excesses of extremism on both the religious and secular-liberal ends of the spectrum, and the only force capable of countering the Iranian-Shiite conspiracy in the region, a narrative they have put great efforts into constructing. A credible voice of critique, such as Khashoggi's, that bypassed the official narrative is not a tolerable option within Riyadh's newly adopted state identity.

3- Disillusionment with the Rule of MBS

Khashoggi's columns were well received by intellectuals and experts who considered him as one of their own. He found numerous audiences and was regularly invited to think tank events, intellectual forums, and television programs. His expert opinions on Saudi Arabia were generally well considered by scholars, journalists, and activists alike.

Steadily over time, Khashoggi became increasingly disillusioned with the Crown Prince, especially after the wave of repression that affected Saudi human rights activists, businessmen, clerics, and opinion leaders. For this reason, over the past year the Saudi regime tried at first to co-opt him, albeit unsuccessfully. According to the Washington Post, "several of Khashoggi's friends said that over the past four months, senior Saudi officials close to the crown prince had called Khashoggi to offer him protection, and even a

high-level job working for the government if he returned to his home country. Khashoggi, however, was sceptical of the offers. He told one friend that the Saudi government would never make good on its promises not to harm him" (Harris, 2010).

Riyadh's high level of intolerance to even mild criticism, combined with Khashoggi's own intellectual evolution, pushed the latter, who was initially in favour of the regime, to move closer to the Saudi opposition. After interviewing Yahia Assiri, a 38-year-old former Saudi air force officer living in exile in London, Journalist Borzou Daraghi wrote for *The Independent*:

"One day late last year, Mr Khashoggi popped up in London and asked to see Mr Assiri. Over tea in the lobby of an upmarket West End hotel, Mr Khashoggi made an astonishing admission: he told Mr Assiri he had been right about the Saudi regime, and that Khashoggi himself now sought to join the opposition. "He said, 'I am exactly like you,'" Mr Assiri recalled. "I want democracy and freedom. I wanted it to be done more smoothly. I wanted to do it from the inside. But it is not possible" (Daraghi, 2018).

It is believed that Khashoggi's had slowly deepened his line of criticism against the Saudi regime, particularly after the wave of arrests that took place in the Ritz Carlton Riyadh in November 2017. This episode saw MBS order the swift confinement of at least 11 royal family members and dozens of others, including government ministers and ex-ministers, as well as key figures in the business community. This event was framed as part of a sweeping crackdown on corruption. However, after almost a year, the opacity surrounding this chapter was such that very little was made public regarding its outcomes. Most detainees were released after paying hefty sums, whose amounts vary in different statements given by MBS.

Speaking to Al Jazeera English flagship programme "Up Front" back in March 2018, Khashoggi said:

"As we speak today, there [are] Saudi intellectuals and journalists jailed. Now, nobody will dare to speak and criticise the reforms [initiated by the crown prince]," he said, adding that "it would be much better for him to allow a breathing space for critics, for Saudi intellectuals, Saudi writers, and Saudi media to debate" (Al Jazeera, 2018)

Asked whether Saudi Arabia could ever become democratic under MBS, Khashoggi said:

"Not on his watch. I haven't heard him make even the slightest inference that he would open the country for power-sharing, for democracy" (ibid, 2018)



4- A High Profile Intellectual that Irked Many Regime Insiders

One of the staggering observations about the current generation of people in power in Riyadh is their abyssal lack of experience. The quasi-majority of them have not built any meaningful education credentials or significant career paths. A closer look at the people advising the Crown Prince confirms this fact, ranging from close confident Turki

Al-Sheikh, who was an entertainer and song composer, to MBS' media enforcer Saud Al Qahtani, who was a small-time propagandist without real exposure to the West (El-Ghobashy, 2018). In contrast, Jamal Khashoggi was an intellectual who was well versed in politics, international relations, and history. He was also regularly invited to leading think tanks' events and academic forums. His columns in *The Washington Post* represented a constant reminder to the MBS pseudo advisers that they should not have been in their positions in the first place.

5- This Operation is Part of a Wider Saudi Plan to Eliminate Critics

There is a long history of kidnapping of opponents initiated by the Saudis. Luring dissidents to meetings to "disappear" them appears to be a commonly used plot. For instance, Naser al-Sa'id, one of the first opposition leaders against the Saudi royal family, disappeared in Beirut in 1979. In addition, Prince Sultan bin Turki was abducted in Geneva and put on a plane destined for Saudi Arabia in 2003 after calling for reforms in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Prince Turki bin Bandar Al Saud, a former police chief, was also seemingly abducted in Morocco in 2015 and rendered to Saudi Arabia.

This trend seems to have accelerated since MBS became Crown Prince. According to *The Independent*, Saudi authorities planned a similar kidnapping ploy against Khaled bin Farhan al-Saud, a Saudi prince living in exile in Germany, just 10 days before Mr Khashoggi went missing (Trew, 2018). Similarly, Ghanem al-Dosari, a Saudi satirist living in London, affirmed "[the authorities] have a history of trying to lure people into embassies, they asked me to go inside the embassy in 2010 and I refused" (ibid.).

Why Turkey?

1- The Arab Spring has Placed the Turkish-Saudi Relations on a Collision Course

Understanding the current trajectory of Turkish-Saudi relations necessitates a familiarity with history. The centrality of history was recently made apparent in relation to a dispute over the legacy of Fakhreddine Pasha, the Ottoman Governor of Medina during the First World War. In 2017, the foreign Minister of the UAE Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahayan shared a tweet that accused Ottoman troops of looting the holy city of Medina a century ago. The point is that, not only does this history represents a turning point for the modern Middle East, it continues to impact contemporary political calculations and should be dealt with accordingly if we are to have a better understanding of the current trajectory of relations between Turkey and formerly Ottoman controlled territories, including Saudi Arabia.

Beginning in the 18th century, in the face of increasingly rapid social, political and economic transformations, the Ottoman Empire began to face a number of movements within its borders. In the central Arabian territories of the empire, a region revered for its religious significance but otherwise a cultural and political backwater, a movement arose claiming restoration of 'true Islam' (Hourani, 1962). Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1787), the eponym of the dominant school of religious thought in Saudi Arabia until today, made a puritanical call for Muslims to return to the Islam practiced by the first generation, al-Salaf al-Salih. In the circumstances of his time, his call was not only theological in nature, it also represented a clear challenge to the dominant social and political forces of the day, namely the Ottoman Empire, which represented the inheritance of Sunni Islamic orthodoxy as it had come to be defined over the centuries (Hourani, 1962).

Ibn al-Wahhab's message effectively meant that the Islam protected and patronized by the Sultan and the Ottoman political and scholarly elites was not the 'true' Islam, implying therefore that the Sultan was not a legitimate leader. Because his doctrinal challenge was simultaneously a challenge of power, he aligned himself with a small Bedouin dynasty from central Arabia, that of Ibn Saud. Together they would go on to form the first



Saudi state, which by the end of the 18th century would control central Arabia and the Persian Gulf. The Wahhabi state would go on to sack Karbala, occupy the Hejaz and threaten Damascus. The first Saudi state continued to grow in size and strength until it was defeated by Ottoman armies from Egypt in 1812.

Following the defeat, the Ottoman armies withdrew to the Hejaz to guard the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and protect the pilgrim routes. In the midst of ongoing reforms emanating out of Istanbul, the second Saudi state, known as the Emirate of Nejd, was formed in 1824, and would last until 1891. Throughout this period, further moves were made against Ottoman suzerainty of the holy sites in the Hejaz, justified in part on the perception that the Ottoman reforms, known as the Tanzimat reforms, had gone too far.

In the period following the establishment of the Turkish Republic, negative perceptions based on historical memory led to bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Turkey being distant (Ataman, 2012). Economic relations based on mutual needs did not develop until the 1970s (Rawabet Center for Research and Strategic Studies, 2015). Turkey required Saudi oil while the Saudi's needed Turkey's large construction sector to help build its newly emerging

modern cities (Altunisik, 2012). Bilateral relations remained relatively distant, with instances of close cooperation on particular issues, until the rise to power of the AK Party to power in 2002. Under the AK Party, relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, then under King Abdullah, witnessed remarkable improvement in both political and economic affairs (Ataman, 2012). 2006 and 2007 witnessed two visits by then Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz al-Saud, the first by a Saudi monarch to Turkey in decades. By 2011, on the eve of the so-called 'Arab Spring', bilateral trade between Turkey and Saudi Arabia had reached approximately \$5 billion annually (Altunisik, 2012).

From January 2011 onwards, mass protests - first in Tunisia, then in Egypt and other Arab nations, such as Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria - confronted repressive regimes and military juntas. These demonstrations called for an end to nepotism and corruption, improving economic conditions, democratic representation, and the protection of human rights. Turkey positioned itself with the forces for change in the Arab World. In contrast, the Saudis played an integral role in the crashing of these forces.

Following the coup in Egypt, led by General El-Sisi, and the subsequent civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, Turkey has pursued an open-door policy towards the representatives of the Arab Spring forces and provided them with the opportunity to engage in political and media activities. This has infuriated the Saudi / UAE axis and their allies in Egypt. The fact that Turkey stood later with Qatar after the blockade imposed by a Saudi-led coalition only intensified their exasperation vis-à-vis the growing role of Ankara in the region. In the aftermath of this chapter, the relationship between Ankara and Riyadh has never entirely recovered. The deterioration in relations continued in March 2018 after MBS referenced Turkey as being part of a "triangle of evil" alongside Iran and a vague reference to 'Islamic extremists' (Middle East Institute, 2018).

The Saudis are also reportedly frustrated with Turkey's expanding military influence in both the Middle East and Africa. Ankara now has three military bases in the region neighbouring Saudi Arabia—in Qatar, Somalia, and a naval base in Sudan. The latter stands across the straits from Jeddah and is considered as a Turkish attempt to protect Sudan from any destabilisation attempts. On the other hand, the Saudis have become fearful of having a strong regional military power at its doorsteps, especially considering that their own armed forces have been ridiculed by the Houthis in Yemen.

2- The Conflict with Iran

Among the main determinants of Turkish-Saudi relations is Iran. The rise of Iranian proxies in countries like Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Syria has triggered what amounts to a cold war between Riyadh and Tehran. The tense political environment has been further complicated by these two regimes' religious and ideological competition, as both aspire to impose their brands of Islam on the Muslim world. As a result, the Saudis consider Iran as their archenemy and have been trying unsuccessfully to impede the Iranian threat in the region.

While Ankara also has reservations about the policies pursued by the Islamic Republic of Iran, it has, nonetheless, chosen the path of active diplomacy and constructive dialogue. The Saudis do not appreciate Turkey's stance vis-à-vis Iran and would like to see Ankara join the international chorus orchestrated by Riyadh regarding the Iranian nuclear program, particularly after the withdrawal of the U.S. from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, known commonly as the Iran nuclear deal.

Following the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the so-called 'Shiite Crescent', which includes Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, in addition to parts of northern Yemen, started making headlines. The Saudis came to see that Iranian activities in these countries, in addition to its nuclear program and its support of Hamas and Hezbollah, were clear indications of Iranian ambitions for regional hegemony (Altunisik, 2012). In response, Riyadh sought to build a network of like-minded Sunni states to counter this so-called 'Shiite Arc'. In addition to Jordan and Egypt, the Saudis also sought to enlist Turkey as a regional power, a NATO member, and a predominantly Sunni state, hoping they would provide an important bulwark against Iranian expansionism (Altunisik, 2012).

However, Turkish and Saudi interests vis-à-vis Iran aligned only superficially. Turkey was indeed concerned about the fate of the Sunni community in Iraq after 2003, however, Turkey was even more concerned with the potential fragmentation of Iraq along ethnic lines, leading to the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in the North. Turkey's approach in Iraq was largely driven by its desire to maintain Iraq's integrity. A similar concern is also influencing Turkey's evolving approach to the Syrian conflict (Stein, 2018).

With regards to Syria, here again we see only a superficial alignment of Saudi-Turkish interests. While both states eventually arrived a shared position regarding their desire for the fall of the Syrian regime, the Saudi's interest lies in its

view that the toppling of the Syrian regime would result in a curtailment of Iran's ability to project power in the region (Altunisik, 2012). While Turkey may share this concern, the primary determinant of the Turkish approach in Syria, has been to neutralize terrorist threats, such as daesh and the PKK/YPG terrorist organizations, and the prevention of an autonomous enclave in northern Syria run by the latter. (Stein, 2018). In order to advance its objectives in Syria, Turkey has had to compromise and work with Iran (who also share a concern regarding Kurdish autonomy), as demonstrated by the Astana process initiated in 2015. Saudi concerns with Iran, as discussed above, are expressed in existential and sectarian terms, while for Turkey, increasing Iranian influence in Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut is seen as a manageable issue.

3- The Saudis are Wary of Turkey's Steps to Reconcile with its History

Turkey's strategic vision in the 21st century has arguably come to terms with its past and its multicultural heritage, both past and present (Taspinar, 2012). Part of Turkey's effort to reconcile with its history includes seeking to re-establish itself in its historical sphere of influence and to re-enforce cultural ties that stretch back to the Ottoman period (Taspinar, 2012). Saudi Arabia on the other hand is seeking to consolidate its leadership position in both the Arab and wider Sunni Muslim world (Crystal & Momani, 2013).

Although the regional policy of Turkey is not informed or shaped by any religious or sectarian concern, some observers have pointed to the fact that certain developments - such as Turkey's recent assumption of the presidency of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation - reflect a historically rooted rivalry between the two countries and a challenge to the perception of Saudi Arabia as the leader of the Sunni Muslim world (Aykol, 2018). Regardless of Ankara's policy stances, on the socio-cultural level it is clear that distinct Sunni identities have emerged within very different historical trajectories and have contributed to contrasting visions of the region and of the wider Muslim world (Aykol, 2018). Various projects, including building mosques overseas (VOA, March 10, 2015), patronizing Arabic and Islamic book fairs in Istanbul, and establishing new centres of learning promoted as alternatives and rivals to established centres of higher learning, such as the Islamic University of Medina, have served to increase this perception.

This is problematic for the Saudis because, as mentioned, they consider their state as the servant of the two holy sites of Islam and the guardians of the Muslim pilgrimage.

Thus, Riyadh feels entitled to provide religious leadership for the Muslims, and it intends to monopolise this function. In an example of the outsized vision of its leadership in the Muslim world, one Saudi official was quoted as saying: "where Saudi Arabia goes, the GCC follows. Where the GCC goes, the Arab world follows. Where the Arab world goes, the Muslim world follows" (The Economist, Cold War in the Heat, 2018). In fact, as discussed above, this represents a pillar of legitimization of Saudi rhetoric post-2011 that it is the defender of the Sunnis against Iranian led Shiite plots. Any challenge to the perception of Saudi religious primacy represents a threat to the Saudi political project because it undermines one of the core pillars of the state's legitimacy. The promotion of Turkey as a leader of the Muslim world in terms of politics, culture and religion and the increasingly popularity of Turkey's president in the Middle East, contrasts strikingly with the unprecedented unpopularity of the Saudi Crown Prince and his policies. This has prompted MBS to declare that Turkey was part of a "triangle of evil" alongside Iran and Islamic extremists (Reuters, 2018).

The Khashoggi operation arguably aimed at striking a blow to Turkey's brand image in the region. Turkey's popular policies in the Middle East and Ankara's strong regional power image were indirectly targeted in this operation. Had the Saudi plan succeeded, whereby a high profile Saudi journalist disappeared in Istanbul without anyone noticing, this could have dealt a significant blow to the brand image of Turkey in the region. If the plot against Khashoggi had worked to perfection, public opinion in the MENA region would have built a negative image of Turkey's security apparatus, which contrasts with Ankara's current powerful image projected throughout the region.

Part of Turkey's effort to reconcile with its history includes seeking to re-establish itself in its historical sphere of influence and to re-establish cultural ties that stretch back to the Ottoman period.

International Reactions and Implications for the Regional Order

1- The Image of MBS as a 'Reformer' has been Tarnished

After spending millions of dollars on lobbying firms and public relations companies, MBS managed for a while to convince public opinion in the U.S. that he is the face of reform in Saudi Arabia. The messaging that he managed to disseminate across the news media is that he is determined to enact reforms, create the foundations for a free society, and bring prosperity to Saudi society. However, the murder of Khashoggi has dealt significant damage to the reformist image of MBS. As academic Kristian Ulrichsen asserts:

Indeed, it seems like only yesterday that the young Saudi leader was being feted in America's op-ed pages and foreign-policy salons as a visionary reformer who just wanted to drag his hidebound country into the 21st century. All that now may change if it is proved beyond reasonable doubt that Khashoggi was killed while visiting the Saudi consulate on October 3[...] If the Saudis indeed killed Khashoggi and thought they could get away with it, they have made a grave miscalculation. Not only was he a contributing writer for the influential Washington Post op-ed page — which has been thundering in its demands for accountability — but Khashoggi was well-known on Capitol Hill as a leading Saudi reformer (Ulrichsen, 2018).

The international pressure on Riyadh is growing. In the United States, legislators issued statements indicating the possibility of imposing sanctions against the Saudi leadership. Similarly, Britain, France and Germany have issued a joint statement expressing their concern about the Khashoggi case. Regardless of these pressures' outcome, there is no doubt that Western decision-makers will be at arms-length from the Saudi Government in the coming months.

Within his own realm, the liberalising rhetoric of MBS has reportedly been increasingly seen as merely a cloak for more sinister motives (Bsheer, 2017). Even his anti-Iran and conspiracy laden rhetoric is being unmasked as a means of shoring up international support after having failed to rally support of the Saudi elite (Bsheer, 2017). The Khashoggi affair is only likely to increase the sense among Western leaders and Saudi economic and political elites alike, that MBS is someone who is hiding behind his rhetoric.

2- Turkey's Leverage Increased Significantly

The Saudis seem to have dreadfully miscalculated by targeting Khashoggi in Turkey. They probably thought that "Turkey is too weak to reply, with about \$700bn in public and private debts that have to be repaid by a falling lira" (Hearst, 2018). However, the Khashoggi affair has offered a substantial international political card to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has the final say on how to handle this situation. President Erdogan is in his right to use his nation's sovereign privileges and connect MBS, who has strong connections with the Trump Administration, to the gruesome crime that likely took place in the Saudi consulate. Alternatively, Turkey's president can also find ways to diffuse this situation diplomatically and find a compromise acceptable to all parties, while still allocating legal liabilities on a lower level of conspirators.

The release of an American pastor, who was imprisoned in Turkey for nearly two years, has given more goodwill to President Erdogan in the U.S. President Trump tweeted that the pastor's release "will lead to good, perhaps great relations between the U.S. and Turkey!" So, a reset of the U.S.-Turkey relations is on the table, as the Trump Administration is cognisant of the fact that the Turkish leadership has acted sensibly by not escalating the situation with the Saudis to the point of no return. It should also be noted that the number one client of American armaments in the Middle East is Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, the Saudis have escalated their war of words against Washington. The head of Saudi-owned Al Arabiya television published a column on Sunday warning of the consequences of U.S. penalties. Turki Aldakhil wrote:

"If U.S. sanctions are imposed on Saudi Arabia, we will be facing an economic disaster that would rock the entire world," adding, "if the price of oil reaching \$80 angered President Trump, no one should rule out the price jumping to \$100, or \$200, or even double that figure"

(Harvey & Kandemir, 2018)

By denying their involvement, failing to provide any satisfactory explanation, and resorting to threats, the Saudis are making matters worse and inadvertently



A member of the Organization 'Justice for Jamal Khashoggi' holds news conference for disappearance of Saudi journalist in front of The Washington Post headquarters in Washington D.C. (Umar Farooq / AA)

assisting in creating an image of their leadership as cruel and bloody. The mounting public outcry in the U.S. among journalists and intellectuals – if sustained – could well trigger a reconsideration of the traditional U.S. stance, which has given the Saudis a blank check on many levels for a long time.

3- Riyadh will Limit its Participation to Negative Designs Targeting Turkey

In the midst of the Arab Spring, the Saudi media adopted a negative editorial line against the Turkish government. This took many forms such as in the anti-government Gezi protests in May 2013. Moreover, the Saudi media described Turkey's stance against the coup in Egypt as interference in domestic affairs of Arab countries. Since the start of the Arab uprisings, the Saudis have used virtually every opportunity to harm Turkey politically, economically and in security terms. For example, Riyadh has lately intensified its support for the Syrian wing of the internationally-recognised terror group PKK (Yeni Şafak, 2018). It is also rumoured that the Saudis readily participated in the economic war waged on the Turkish currency. Such tactics will most likely be discarded moving forward. The Turkish side has now a powerful bargaining chip and can inflict considerable harm on MBS.

4- The Economic Vision of MBS has been Hard Hit by This Case

Soon after it became clear that the Saudis are hiding something regarding the disappearance of Khashoggi, Saudi equities collapsed on concern the nation's relationship with the U.S. may suffer. As a result, the Tadawul All-Share Index sank as much as 7 per cent, the most since 2016. This state of affairs was heightened in the light of the escalating rhetoric emanating from Riyadh.

The negative perceptions about the Saudi leadership are believed to have hit the economic vision promoted by MBS. As part of the miscalculations surrounding this case, the operation against Khashoggi was conducted few days before a very important meeting, the so-called "Davos in the Desert", to which many prominent business personalities and firms were invited, and which was supposed to reflect the determination of MBS to have a prominent role on the world stage. However, many firms have announced their withdrawal from the conference, ranging from Uber to the lobbying firm Harbour Group and the Brookings Institution.

Conclusion

All things considered, the Khashoggi affair underlines the series of complex and multi-layered factors that culminated in this particular situation, where a prominent Saudi journalist and former regime insider was kidnapped and murdered. Fighting the forces unleashed on the region by the Arab Spring and leading the counter-revolutions developed into such a fixation for Saudi power circles to the extent that it became a key determinant for the rise of a newly emerging Saudi state identity in addition to the ever-heated competition with Iran across the Middle East. The subsequent repressive steps undertaken internally, combined with an aggressive posture externally became the defining features for the Saudi grand strategy under the rule of Mohammad bin Salman.

However, the amateurish and botched operation against Khashoggi may yet prove to be a fatal mistake for MBS. Ill advised by poorly qualified confidants, the Saudi Crown Prince seems to have calculated that he could eliminate a critic of his regime with total impunity. This proved to be a terrible miscalculation as it has not only tarnished his reputation, but the reputation of his government in general. After spending millions of dollars hiring lobbying firms and public relations companies to persuade world public opinion that MBS is the face of reform in Saudi Arabia, a series of disastrous initiatives has increased the likelihood that his 'reform' program will be seen as nothing more than an illusion. In addition, this affair provided serious leverage to the Turkish government, which had been pressured by the Saudis and their allies over many issues in the past decade.

One of the most significant messages emerging from this affair is that – despite consolidating his control – there is currently no reliable leadership in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, it further deteriorates US standing in the world in general, and the region in particular, through the implication that, despite the level of political capital invested in MBS, they have little to no leverage over his behaviour. Strong defenders of Saudi Arabia in the US Congress have already made it clear that they feel used, and have implied that sanctions may be in order. Unless there are significant changes in both the structure and the approach of Saudi leadership, this is a trend that is likely to continue.

Finally, the Jamal Khashoggi affair highlights, once more, the power of the media in shaping the global information space. Turkey's consistent and coherent narrative, which was gradually delivered to international media outlets over the days and weeks that followed Khashoggi's disappearance, has proven detrimental to the Saudi narrative. Turkey's careful management of the communication process and adherence to the norms of both international and Turkish law struck heavy blows to the narrative circulated by the Saudis. In any case, the image of the Saudis in general, and MBS in particular, has been tarnished for a long time to come.

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